

# From Reception to Projection: Reconstructing the English Education System to Serve the Construction of China's International Discourse Power

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As China moves ever closer to the center of the world stage, building international discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national strength has become increasingly urgent. However, as a key pillar and main battleground in this endeavour, the current English education system—constrained by its long-standing drawbacks of one-way input and reception paradigm—is now hindering this process. Based on an in-depth analysis of how the “receptive” model influences and weakens China’s international discourse power, this paper proposes a “projective shift” in the English education paradigm—That is, a transition from passively “receiving” Western discourse and culture to actively “projecting” Chinese thinking and values, thereby better serving the tasks and objectives of national cultural outreach and the construction of international discourse power in the new era.

*Keywords:* international discourse power, English education system, reception paradigm, projective shift, Chinese discourse, critical discourse competence

## Introduction

International discourse power is a core dimension of a nation’s soft power and global influence, manifested in its ability to set agendas, define concepts, establish standards, narrate stories, and shape international public opinion. For a long time, the Western world has leveraged its linguistic advantages and global communication platforms to control the authority to define and interpret core terminology in the international public arena (such as “Third World,” “human rights,” and “rule of law”). Although China has contributed numerous “Chinese wisdom” and “Chinese solutions” in areas, such as global governance in recent years, it remains, on the whole, marginalized, described, and even distorted and stigmatized within the international discourse system. Many factors account for this predicament, but China’s English education system—a critical domain for training the main force of external communication and exchanges—bears significant responsibility due to its inherent “receptive paradigm.”

For an extended period, English education in China has generally followed a one-way input model aimed at acquiring Western knowledge, technology, and culture, with instruction centered on cultivating students’ ability to understand, imitate, and apply standard Western English. The direct impact and result of this paradigm is that students excel at “accepting” and even “internalizing” the Western discourse system, unconsciously developing

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a mindset of “the West defines, China responds.” Yet, they are not skilled at engaging in independent thinking, critical judgment, and innovative application atop this system to forge a discursive framework with Chinese characteristics. Consequently, in international exchanges and cross-cultural dialogues, they are unable to use internationally accepted English to “project” China’s own perspectives, narratives, and values.

In fact, as a globally shared linguistic tool, English has long transcended its historical role as an exclusive vessel of Western civilization. Drawing on their own social and historical contexts and practical needs, different countries and regions have employed English in innovative ways, greatly expanding and enriching its cultural connotations. In the new era, establishing a national English discourse system with Chinese characteristics—one that aligns with China’s national status and interests—has become an urgent strategic imperative. On this basis, this paper proposes a paradigm shift in Chinese English education—from “reception” to “projection”—upgrading its core mission from “cultivating decoders and interpreters of Western culture” to “nurturing generators and disseminators of Chinese discourse.” This shift is not meant to overturn the basic rules of language or negate the laws of language learning, but rather to endow language proficiency with a national mission of strategic communication.

### **The Reception Paradigm: The Current Shortcomings in Discourse Power in English Education**

The current English education system has inadvertently weakened China’s international discourse power, primarily manifested in the following three aspects:

#### **The Western-Centric Nature of the Teaching System**

English language instruction in China, both at the domestic and international levels, exhibits distinct Western-centric characteristics—from textbooks and teaching methods to evaluation systems. Regarding textbooks, whether general English materials (such as the Cambridge International English Course and New Concept English) or standard university English textbooks (including College English, Professional English, and Academic English), Western culture and content hold an almost absolute monopoly. Chapters and content reflecting Chinese culture are negligible. Although recent revised editions of these textbooks have shown modest improvements, the centrality of Western culture remains unchanged. In terms of teaching methodologies, from translation-based approaches to communicative approaches, and on to the task-based approach popular in recent years, all originate from the West. Regarding assessment systems, both in form and content, a Western-centric bias is evident. Formally, the focus is on the standardization and correctness of linguistic forms, with insufficient attention paid to cultural translation and output capabilities, and a neglect of the cultivation of cross-cultural communication skills. In terms of content—from exam question design to reading and listening materials—Western culture holds an absolute dominance.

These teaching models and systems subtly transmit Western values, worldviews, and narrative logic, while neglecting the systematic cultivation and training of the ability to translate Chinese discourse for international audiences. The direct consequence is that students completely lose their sense of self in international communication practices, tacitly accepting Western frameworks and definitions as the standard norm. When providing examples or arguments, they are more accustomed to citing Western concepts and phenomena, while when it comes to cultural concepts and symbols related to their own culture, they are either at a loss or, disregarding differences in connotation and sacrificing all or part of the cultural information, simply substitute

them with a random, approximate term in the target language. They forcefully embed unique cultural concepts—which possess local cultural characteristics, independence, and exclusivity—into Western discursive systems, actively ceding the right to define and interpret their own cultural information to the other party, and objectively laying the groundwork for the Western world’s misreadings, misunderstandings, arrogance, prejudice, and even disregard. This deficiency in cross-cultural expression is particularly glaring against the backdrop of the nation’s efforts to promote and establish a discourse that befits its international status. Students generally lack the ability to systematically and confidently convey China’s voice and cultural values; they are even less capable of setting and leading the agenda in the international public sphere according to their own needs, and consequently, of gaining the initiative in international affairs.

### **Subjective and Objective Neglect and Loss of Discourse Power**

Traditional language teaching views language as a value-neutral symbolic system, focusing solely on its superficial grammatical rules and communicative functions while neglecting its essence as a vehicle for ideology and a tool for power struggles. The loss of linguistic sovereignty in English education manifests as an uncritical adherence to the norms of the target language (English), leading to the misinterpretation, dilution, or even stigmatization of China’s unique political and cultural concepts within international translation and communication systems. In addition, the teaching process often focuses solely on content and grammar, failing to give due attention to the attitudes, stances, and overtones of the text and its author. This inadvertently leads to a loss of self-awareness and a relinquishment of agency. For example, when foreign media reported on China’s September 3 military parade, they translated the phrase “不畏强暴” (fear no oppression or force) from the press release as “fear no one” (implying arrogance, defiance, or a haughty attitude), a phrasing that completely deviates from the original meaning of “不畏强暴” (which emphasizes maintaining an indomitable spirit in the face of tyranny and violent oppression, corresponding to “fear no oppression or force”), with the two carrying distinct connotations. Another example is the translation of “不惹事，也不怕事” as “Don’t cause trouble, but don’t fear trouble,” where the word “trouble” carries a strong negative connotation of “causing trouble or stirring up trouble.” In reality, the term “事” here specifically refers to unjust provocations or disputes imposed from the outside. The original meaning is “not to provoke others, but to resolutely defend one’s own interests when faced with provocation”—a defensive stance. The entire sentence should therefore be rendered as: We will not provoke, but we will not back down in the face of provocation. In addition to identifying Western media’s misunderstandings regarding the history and origins of unique Chinese political terminology, we must also recognize their ideological filters. Western media habitually interpret Chinese affairs through their own ideological frameworks, imposing preconceived negative or strategic connotations on these terms. In teaching, teachers must not only help students proactively identify and correct these linguistic errors and establish a clear understanding of the core meanings of these terms, but also guide them to discern the subjective attitudes, intentions, and biases of media outlets or translators. Only on this basis can students determine the best translations and responses, and thus regain discursive agency.

### **Lack of Critical Discourse and Narrative Structure Awareness**

Traditional language teaching emphasizes the normativity and integrity of discourse and narrative structures, but lacks a critical observation, examination, analysis, and judgment of texts from the perspective of discursive power. Taking English-language news as an example, mainstream Western media uses English to set the narrative structure for global news. Whether in word choice, reporting angles, or the selection of interviewees, specific

ideologies and values are embedded, thereby profoundly influencing and shaping global perceptions of certain events and countries. A typical example is the employment of presuppositions. As a common pragmatic phenomenon, presupposition frequently appears in the discourse and news reports of Western media. The presupposed content is often presented as implicit “facts,” which tends to be overlooked by listeners and readers, causing them to unknowingly fall into the topic traps set by the authors. For example, in a Western media report on China’s internet policies, the following terms recur: “Great Firewall” (Golden Shield), rather than the neutral “internet regulatory system;” “censorship” rather than “content governance” or “public opinion guidance;” and “authoritarian control,” among others, which directly impose ideological labels. If students cannot effectively identify the entire set of presuppositions (filled with prejudice, and even smears and rumors) underlying the text during reading and dialogue, they will unconsciously fall into the “discourse traps” set by others, leading them to passively “debunk rumors” and “deny” claims, unable to break free from the rules and frameworks set by the other side to redefine and retell the story, thereby completely losing the initiative in the discourse. Therefore, in teaching, a discourse-pragmatic analysis framework should be introduced to guide students in identifying the information presupposed by authors, distinguishing which are facts and which are distortions and biases.

### **Toward a Projection Paradigm: Pathways for Reconstructing English Education**

To serve the development of international discourse power, this paper proposes a systematic reconstruction of the traditional English education system to establish a new paradigm centered on “projection.” Specifically, this includes:

#### **Updating Educational Philosophy: Cultivating Students’ Sense of Cultural Agency and Awareness of Discursive Power**

The 2020 edition of the *Guidelines for University English Teaching* emphasizes the need to “infuse core socialist values into course content.” The 2022 edition of the *National Standards for Teaching Quality in Foreign Languages and Literature* also explicitly calls for cultivating “multidisciplinary foreign language talents with a Chinese perspective and an international outlook.” Foreign language education is not merely about mastering an external “tool,” but also about enhancing internal capabilities and “literacy.” While learners embrace foreign languages and cultures, they must remain conscious of their Chinese cultural identity, maintain clear cultural awareness and a firm cultural stance, and use this as the foundation and starting point for understanding, evaluating, and assimilating foreign cultures. At the same time, learners should cultivate an awareness of discursive power, recognizing that language is not merely a tool for communication, but also a vehicle for power, ideology, and values. By analyzing the discursive strategies employed in Western media, literary works, and film and television productions, they should identify the underlying assumptions, stances, and latent biases. Throughout the learning process, learners must bring a Chinese perspective to bear, developing their own Chinese stance based on in-depth observation, systematic comparison, and critical analysis.

#### **Redefining Objectives: From Language “Imitators” to “Discourse Constructors”**

Language learners are not merely “recipients” of foreign cultures, but also “interpreters” and “disseminators” of Chinese culture, bearing the responsibility and obligation to effectively convey their own ideas and values in English. Based on this, English instruction must not be limited to training in traditional language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation). Rather, it should be elevated to cultivating cross-cultural communication professionals capable of effectively conveying China’s voice, defending the nation’s stance, and

participating in global dialogue through English. Students must not only be able to “understand and comprehend the world,” but also be able to “explain and articulate China to the world.” The purpose of language instruction should be to help students, building on a foundation of basic language rules, understand Western patterns of thinking, cognitive models, and emotional structures, and to use language as a tool to effectively tell China’s stories and convey China’s voice. The goal of talent development should be elevated from cultivating language skills to producing “discourse architects” equipped with cross-cultural strategic communication capabilities. Such professionals will not only be linguistically proficient, but also deeply versed in China’s national conditions and culture, well-versed in the principles of international communication, and capable of proactively creating and translating Chinese discourse. Take the translation of the term “Tibet” as an example: For a long time, people have habitually followed the Western discourse system, translating it into English as “Tibet.” However, in the international context, “Tibet” encompasses not only the Tibet Autonomous Region, but also the Tibetan-inhabited prefectures and counties in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces. This translation has seriously misled the international community regarding the correct geographical scope of Tibet. Consequently, in recent years, the state has typically used “Xizang” in its external reporting on Tibet. This shift reflects the state’s proactive efforts to construct an external discourse system under new historical conditions and within the current international public opinion landscape. It contributes to the reconstruction of Tibet’s media image and enhances China’s international discourse authority regarding Tibet.

### **Content Reconstruction: Incorporating the “Chinese Discourse” Competency Framework Into the Core Curriculum**

Traditional English instruction is entirely rooted in Western culture and neglects local culture, leaving students generally lacking the ability to tell Chinese stories, articulate China’s position, and share Chinese wisdom. Therefore, it is essential to systematically restructure the English curriculum. Building upon existing foundational courses, such as General English, Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, “China Studies” English courses should be introduced. These courses will teach Chinese politics, economics, law, and philosophy in English, guiding students to engage in in-depth discussions of Chinese issues in English to achieve the “internationalization of Chinese concepts and issues.” Examples include: Introduction to Traditional Chinese Culture, Contemporary Chinese Society, China’s Economic Development, and Chinese Law and Politics. This will enable students to systematically master standard English expressions for core terms related to China’s national conditions, history, and culture (such as “targeted poverty alleviation,” “moderately prosperous society,” and “common prosperity”), thereby fundamentally resolving the difficulties students face when “discussing China in English.” At the same time, as a supplement to the curriculum, we will establish a “Database of Key Chinese Concepts”, particularly in areas where Chinese and Western cultures intersect—such as family values, religious beliefs, and philosophical concepts—to create a systematic comparative corpus of linguistic data for teachers to use in classes. For core concepts that are unique to China yet hold global significance, we will either explain them using metaphors and frameworks that Westerners can understand, or strategically create and establish them as part of the international English lexicon.

### **Pedagogical Reconstruction: Adopting Critical Comparative Analysis and Project-Based Learning**

Traditional teaching methods focus on language communication itself (grammar rules and vocabulary memorization), while neglecting the cultivation of extralinguistic (non-verbal knowledge and skills) and interlinguistic competencies (cultural sensitivity and critical cultural awareness). Foreign language teaching in

the new era should focus on cultivating students' critical discourse analysis and construction skills. It should guide students, when reading foreign publications and news reports, to not only learn the language, but also—based on familiarity with Western narrative patterns—analyze vocabulary choices, sentence structures, source citations, narrative logic and perspectives, and the shaping of specific images. On this foundation, students should generate discursive narratives that align with their own values and communication needs. Case-based teaching methods can be employed in the classroom, utilizing representative textual examples. For instance, students can conduct comparative analyses of how Chinese and Western media report on the same international event or news story, discussing differences in discursive strategies, framing choices, and effects, thereby developing their abilities in discourse analysis, judgment, identification, and construction. Additionally, teachers can select questions that carry value and stance presuppositions (e.g., “What is your view on the disputes over China’s southern islands and reefs?”—A question that presupposes a dispute over China’s indisputable sovereignty) or articles involving differences in cultural standpoints, and guide students to identify and determine which aspects are cultural differences, which are stereotypes and prejudices, and which are deliberate misinformation and slander. Beyond understanding the information conveyed by the language itself, students should learn to recognize the extra-linguistic and implicit information beyond the words, and on this basis, develop the most effective countermeasures and response strategies.

### **Restructuring the Assessment System: Integrating Chinese Issues and Evaluating “Chinese Narratives”**

Traditional English teaching assessment systems are largely based on the concept of linguistic correctness and standardization. A new assessment system should focus on evaluating competencies in three key areas:

First, critical interpretive ability—examining whether students, on the basis of comprehending the literal meaning of written and spoken texts, can identify logical fallacies, discursive biases, and implied messages beyond the words.

Second, discourse construction ability—assessing whether students can independently build persuasive textual structures and narrative frameworks grounded in a Chinese standpoint, including reasonable presuppositions, argumentation mechanisms, and value orientations.

Third, globalized narrative ability—the capacity to effectively convey Chinese concepts, positions, and experiences in English in ways that foreign audiences can understand and empathize with.

In terms of item design, the traditional emphasis on multiple-choice questions and reading comprehension should be reformed, with greater weight given to output-oriented and application-based assessment. In terms of content, listening and reading materials should systematically incorporate Chinese elements, including outstanding traditional culture, as well as diverse topics related to Chinese-style modernization, such as economic development, social governance, and global responsibilities. This guides students to interpret and transform these “Chinese contents” in English, enhancing their ability to tell China’s story in the new era in a well-substantiated and compelling manner. In the writing and speaking sections, tasks themed “interpreting China” should be designed—for example, asking test-takers to introduce in English the contemporary value of a traditional Chinese cultural concept (such as “harmony between humanity and nature”). In the translation section, passages and texts that represent China’s outstanding culture and carry profound Chinese cultural symbolism should be selected to assess students’ skills in translating and paraphrasing Chinese cultural content. In recent years, although major domestic foreign-language examinations have made some positive adjustments and attempts in the above areas, there remains considerable room for improvement before achieving the overall goal of systematically building a Chinese-style discourse and communication assessment framework.

In summary, by implementing a multi-pronged approach, we can cultivate students' discourse interpretation, analysis and generation skills, enabling them to master the art of telling China's stories in a way that Western audiences can understand and readily accept.

### Conclusion

Building a “Chinese-Style English Discourse System” and enhancing China's international voice is a strategic and systematic undertaking. The Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly states the need to “accelerate the development of the Chinese discourse and narrative systems... to establish international discourse power commensurate with China's comprehensive national strength and international standing.” The 15th Five-Year Plan further calls for “improving the international communication systems and mechanisms, innovating communication channels and methods, and comprehensively enhancing international discourse power.” As the frontline of international communication, foreign language education occupies the upstream link in the capacity-building chain. It determines the quality and effectiveness of discourse output and plays a strategic role in supplying foundational talent for the international communication system. Its core mission is to move beyond traditional instrumental language training and passive reception, shifting the focus of talent cultivation toward discourse generation, narrative construction, and cross-cultural adaptation. This enables language learners—While grounding themselves in local cultural values and positions—to become proactive agents of international communication who can set agendas, interpret China's practices, and participate in global dialogues. This will help China overcome its “speechlessness” on the international stage, seize the initiative in defining itself and interpreting the world, and lay a solid discursive foundation for further participation in global governance and leadership in the dialogue of human civilizations.

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