

English language education in China is being challenged as against Chinese culture

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During China's [annual parliamentary meetings last year](#) involving the two key political bodies in China—the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—a [CPPCC representative](#) proposed removing English as a core subject in primary and secondary schools.

This is not the first proposal to downgrade the teaching of English in Chinese schools, but it was reported on the central government's official media outlet [China Youth Daily](#) and triggered heated discussion. Some regard English language education as the linguistic corollary of the rise of deep-seated cultural nationalism and xenophobia; others emphasise the on-going instrumentalist ideology of English language education in China since revolution in 1949.

There are two main arguments for removing English as a core subject. The first is that English language learning poses the threat of cultural colonisation (*wenhua zhimin* 文化殖民). As a prominent Shanghai-based blogger on [zhihu](#) (China's largest 'online question and answer' platform), argues: placing too much emphasis on learning English results in students being subliminally influenced by Western culture, and even culturally worshipping anything foreign, exceeding the level of cultural influence (*wenhua shentou* 文化渗透) the Chinese Community Party tries to exert on its own people. This view holds that English represents the discursive

power of the West and China should not accept English-dominated discourse.

The second argument regards English language learning as an obstacle to creative thinking which has negatively impacted China's urgent need for innovative technology to better compete with the US. Those holding this view argue that learning English requires students to spend too much time rote-learning to pass university entrance examinations (*gaokao* 高考). As a result, according to this logic, students do not have sufficient time to cultivate their creativity in mathematics and physics to enhance China's technological capabilities. In this context, English is even seen as hinderance to students' wellbeing (*xingfu gan* 幸福感). In line with the CPPCC representative's view, proponents of omitting English as a core subject believe that the advancement of artificial intelligence and digital translation can well serve the communicative purposes of English and it should, therefore, only be an elective. According to an online [survey](#), when it was proposed in 2017 that English testing be removed from the National College Entrance Examination, *gaokao*, the proposal received over 80 percent support. The argument at the time centred on English adding to the academic burden on the students.

The increasing cultural colonisation argument echoes an age-old Chinese endogenous idea of culture, *wenhua* 文化, that is intrinsically linked to politics and the conquest of states. The Chinese term for culture, *wenhua*, was originally the abbreviation of the verb phrase *yi wen hua ren* 以文化人: *wen* refers to *wende* (文德), that is, decorum, rituals and education; and *hua ren* means changing and transforming the subjects. The phrase *yi wen hua ren* therefore means transforming subjects through decorum, rituals and education. Historian, poet and politician Liu Xiang 刘向 (77-6 BCE) of the Western Han Dynasty explains the importance of *wenhua* to ruling a conquered nation, in a chapter '[On the Military \(Zhi Wu 指武\)](#)' of his seminal text *The Garden Stories* (*Shuo Yuan* 说苑):

圣人之治天下也，先文德而后武力。凡武之兴，为不服也，文化不改，然后加诛。

'The Saints rule the world by moral transformation prior to the act of aggression.'

People rebel where aggression is prevalent. Eliminate those who are unable to be transformed through the teaching of language, decorum and rituals.'

The meaning of *wenhua* has evolved over time. In [The Draft History of Qing](#) (1928) *wenhua* is linked to education and schooling, and such usage continues today. If someone wants to say they are illiterate, they may say in Chinese 'wo mei wenhua', which literally means 'I have no culture', meaning 'I don't know how to read or write', or 'I've never been to school'. The original word *wenhua* in Chinese therefore has an intrinsic meaning of cultivation, education, and moulding/transforming the people in a conquered land. *Wenhua* became the Chinese translation of the English word 'culture' in the 19th to the 20th century. In Wilhelm Lobscheid's [English and Chinese Dictionary](#) (1883), culture is translated into *xiu de zhe* 修德者, *xiu li zhe* 修理者, *xiu wen zhe* 修文者 (those of virtue, righteous principles and letters). In Hui-Ch'ing Yen's [English and Chinese Standard Dictionary](#) (1908) *wenhua* is listed as one of the translations of 'culture' and the phrase 'a man of culture' is translated into 'wenhua zhi ren 文化之人'.

Although in contemporary usage, *wenhua* indeed means 'culture', the age-old idea of *yi wen hua zhi* has shaped a deep-seated political anxiety which sees education in humanities, including language, as an ideological battlefield where anything foreign or different is perceived to potentially contaminate nationalist orthodoxy. The ancient verb phrase 'yi wen hua ren' is enjoying a revival and is frequently quoted by Chinese Communist [Party official media](#) emphasising the importance of ideology in education to cultivate and transform the young generation.

This political anxiety has led to a [recurring instrumentalist discourse](#) in foreign language education planning in China since 1949, that amounts to 'Chinese learning/values for foundational principles'; Western learning for practical uses' (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* 中学为体, 西学为用), which was proposed by the late Qing reformist, Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909). [A lack of cultural representation](#) in foreign language teaching is not unique to China and has been widely criticised by educators around the world. In the Chinese context, the instrumentalist approach to

foreign language education is overwhelming government driven.

In 1964, the first national foreign language education policy, *Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education* (hereinafter ‘the Plan’), officially designating English as the most important foreign language in Chinese schools. [The Plan](#) states two reasons for promoting foreign language education: pushing forward revolutionary movements around the globe through external work; and catching up with advanced technology in the world. The rationale is that, through foreign language education, China will be able to produce more personnel for external or foreign affairs work to promote ‘the revolutionary mission to the world’. [The Plan](#) stresses that students learning foreign languages are prone to be influenced by capitalist ideas, and therefore need a strong ideological and political education.

In 1979 the Ministry of Education issued a four-year English major syllabus for each of the three types of universities—universities specialising in foreign languages, general universities and teaching colleges. From 1978 to the early 1980s, hundreds of Chinese universities set up English majors called ‘English for Science and Technology’ or ‘English for Special Purposes’. By 2013, [English majors](#) became the most prevalent major across all universities within China—77.4 percent (903) of universities in China offered English majors. They were even more popular than computer science, which was offered by 869 universities within China in 2013.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education issued a policy titled [Opinions on Undergraduate Foreign Language Major Education Reform for the 21st Century](#), stipulating the need for foreign language graduates to have a broader scope of employability, practical skills and inter-disciplinary talent (宽口径、应用型、复合型人才). Twenty years later, the Ministry of Education issued another policy titled [National Standard for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Tertiary Institutions](#) which proposed that English majors be offered with another disciplinary major to produce graduates with more practical and inter-disciplinary skills to better serve economic development.

The instrumentalist approach to English language education has made English as a Second Language (ESL) a large market. It was estimated that in 2013 [the ESL market](#) for children in China alone was worth 20 billion RMB (approximately 4.1 billion Australian dollars). [Motivations](#) for learning English vary from higher social status and more employment opportunities to travelling overseas and attaining good grades.

In the current era of President Xi Jinping, heightened cultural nationalism has encouraged the paradigmatic thinking that places the Party's and national interests first. The anxiety over values influence through English language teaching extends to translating from and into English and other foreign languages. In the field of translation studies, scholars have proposed that translators apply [cultural filtering](#) to remove any part in the source text which violates socialist ideologies. An emerging translation theory in China called [National Translation Program \(NTP\)](#) suggests that patriotism be the fundamental principle of translation; and that translators should refrain from being influenced by other countries' values and ideologies (be they source culture or target culture) during the translation process.

The long-standing dilemma of the instrumental necessity of teaching a foreign language for nation-building while also protecting 'Chinese values' culminates in the increasing concerns regarding cultural colonisation through English language education. So far, the Ministry of Education has not acted on the CPPCC representative's proposal to remove English as a core subject in schools or to exclude English from *gaokao*. However, English language education is getting increasingly political within China. As US-China rivalry intensifies and China's Communist Party identifies education as a site of [ideological security](#), it remains to be seen how the learning and teaching of English will be impacted.

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Image: A middle school class. Credit: [Rex Pe/Flickr](#).