

Research on Integrating Chinese Cultural Elements into Online HSK Instruction

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Abstract: The extensive infusion of Chinese cultural elements into the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) poses significant pedagogical and assessment challenges. However, existing HSK-oriented courses predominantly emphasize linguistic competence training while neglecting systematic cultural instruction. Although online HSK courses have improved instructional accessibility, they have concurrently exacerbated the complexities of effectively transmitting Chinese cultural knowledge. This study examines the HSK preparatory curriculum for international students at Y University, extracting prominent Chinese cultural markers from historical HSK test materials. Through a three-dimensional framework—teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence—the study identifies critical deficiencies in current online HSK course delivery. To address these gaps, three targeted recommendations are proposed: (1) a structured taxonomy of cultural elements to refine pedagogical design; (2) the development of modular cultural micro-lectures to augment digital learning resources; and (3) a hybrid AI-instructor model to foster learner autonomy.

Keywords: HSK; Online instruction; Chinese cultural elements; Pedagogical research

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1. Introduction

Considering the cross-regional and developmental issues of international Chinese education, online teaching has been widely used in international Chinese education in recent years, and has become the foundation of smart education development with a wealth of accumulated experience. With the introduction of the Online Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), it has become inevitable to construct an online Chinese teaching system that serves online exams. However, it is difficult to achieve a balance between online Chinese language teaching guided by exam evaluation and the imparting of rich Chinese cultural knowledge contained in the Chinese language. Taking Y University as an example, the university collaborates closely with some Thai universities to jointly train Chinese language and literature majors, and has offered multiple HSK coaching courses. These international students bear the academic pressure of passing the Level 5 Chinese Proficiency Test and have an academic need to master

Chinese culture. How to balance the improvement of Chinese language skills, sufficient training, cultural literacy, and cultivation of Chinese thinking within a limited time is a problem that must be paid attention to.

2. The analysis of Chinese cultural factors in the HSK curriculum

2.1. The analysis of cultural elements in past test papers

The Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) originally consisted of six levels, with additional levels 7–9 later introduced for advanced learners. Notably, HSK 7–9 explicitly incorporates content related to Chinese culture and general knowledge of China. Even in levels 3–6, a substantial presence of cultural elements can be observed in official mock tests, past exam papers, vocabulary outlines, and related textbooks. This study examines the HSK past papers collection, analyzing five sets each of HSK Level 5 and Level 6 exam papers to extract culturally significant vocabulary (excluding conceptual cultural terms) ^[1–2]. Drawing upon Chinese cultural item taxonomy, these cultural elements are categorized into four primary dimensions: National Conditions, Achievements, Daily Life, and Social Interactions, with further subdivisions into secondary and tertiary indicators as outlined in **Table 1** ^[3].

Table 1. HSK level 5–6 exam list of Chinese culture projects

Category		Level 5 exam paper		Level 6 exam paper
National Conditions	Historical dynasties	The Spring and Autumn Period, Qin, Sui, Tang, The Eastern Jin Dynasty, Ming, Qing		The Yao and Shun Era, Pre-Qin, Qin, Han, Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties, Northern Wei, Tang, Southern Tang, Song, Southern Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing
	The people	Cultural celebrities	Yi Qiu, Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of Qin), Meng Tian, Dai Kui, Emperor Taizong of Tang, Fang Xuanling, Du Ruhui, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, Xu Xiake, Tan Yunxian, Cao Xueqin, Zuo Zongtang, Shen Yinmo, Liu Bannong, Liang Shiqiu	Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of Qin), Wang Xizhi, Gu Kaizhi, Zhang Sengyao, Chen Zi'ang, Wu Daozi, Shen Kuo, Zhu Xi, Emperor Qianlong, Zhang Nanyang, Qiao Zhiyong, Qi Baishi, Li Shutong, Lu Xun, Lu Feikui, Tao Xingzhi, Gu Jiegang, Run Run Shaw, Lin Qingxuan
			Ethnicity	Tibetan, Dai, Dai bamboo house, Han, Jing, Li, Li boat-shaped house, Miao, Miao stilt house, Miao silver ornaments, Zhuang house, Zhuang, Zhuang Huashan rock paintings
	Cultural heritage	Metering		Coin, Zodiac Chronology, Ten thousand taels of silver
		Utensils	Ming-style furniture, Silk, Chess, Bottle	Porcelain, Cizhou kiln, Yellow Rosewood, Stilt, Gilding, Gong, Lacquer wood ware, Bronze Ware, Stone carving, Pottery, Tapestry, Rosewood furniture
	Geography	Region	Beijing, Northern China, Dali, Fujian, Heilongjiang, Huangshan Mountain, Jiangsu, Southern China, the Qinling Mountains-Huai River Line, Shanxi, the Silk Road, Suzhou, Taihu Lake, Yunnan	Anhui, Changqing Oilfield, Chengdu, Chongqing, Western Yunnan, Fujian, Guangzhou, Guangxi, Hainan, Hebei, Kaifeng (Henan), Hunan, Jingdezhen, Kunming, Qingdao, Qinling Mountains, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Shanghai, Sichuan, The Silk Road, Xi'an, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Yunnan
		Organism	Ginkgo tree	Panda, Dove flower, Rhodiola rosea, Saffron
		Landscape	Butterfly Spring, "China Snow Town"	Furong Cave, Flame Mountain, Jin Si Gorge, Longting Lake, Antler beam, Lop Nur, Qiantang River tide

Table 1 (Continued)

Category		Level 5 exam paper		Level 6 exam paper
Achievements	Science and technology	“Sayings of a Female Doctor”		“Qi Min Yao Shu”, “Compendium of Materia Medica”
	Art	Calligraphy, Painting, Carving, Embroidery	Landscape painting	Bian Embroidery, A rubbing from a stone Inscription, Duan inkstone, Woodblock New Year Paintings, Calligraphy, Sugar painting, Wuhu Iron Painting, Yi River Inkstone, “Hell Scene Painting”, “The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting”, “The Three Friends in Winter Painting”, “The Four Friends Painting”, “Painting Manual of Xuanhe Era”
		Dance, Opera, Movie, Music	Peking Opera, Xi’an wind and drum music	Bottle gourd silk, Jiangxi Yiyang Opera, Kunqu Opera, Water Sleeve Dance, The high stage lion dance, Taihu Quzi Opera, “Masters In Forbidden City”, “The Grandmaster”
		Building	Anping Bridge, Ajin Ancient City, “Red Walls and Green Tiles”, Zhidao Roads in Qin Dynasty, The Imperial Palace, Alley, Xi’an Guanyin Temple, “China Zun”	Terra Cotta Warriors, Great Wild Goose Pagoda, Fenghuang Ancient Town, The Imperial Palace, National Museum of Classic Books, Huaqing Hot Spring, Imperial Archives, Lugou Bridge, Mawangdui Han Tomb, Qingdao Zhanqiao Pier, Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor, Study, Wuyin Bridge, Xi’an Datang Xishi Site, The Summer Palace, Moon gate, Yu Garden, Kiss Beast
	Wushu	Shadow Boxing		Wushu
	Literature	“Beijing Evening News”, “A Dream in Red Mansions”		“The Ancient Mirror Story”, “The History of the Han Dynasty”, “Dream Pool Essays”, “The Classic of Mountains and Rivers”, “Three-Body”, “Journey to the West”
	Languages	Character, word	“Xinhua Dictionary”	“Cihai”, Oracle
Daily Life		Idiom	10 idioms	149 idioms
	Etiquette	Wedding		Capping Ceremony, Hair-pinning ceremony, Sacrificial Ceremony, Folding Willow (Farewell), Phoenix Three Noddles (Tea-making Etiquette), Etiquette of giving birth to girls in ancient Jiangnan, Dowry, Funerary object
	Dietary, Taste	Plain boiled water, Tea, Vinegar, Light, Tsingtao Beer, Fresh flavor, Soy sauce		Vinegar, Osmanthus Cake, Chrysanthemum meat, Pu’er tea, Jerky, Tie Guanyin, Noodles, Cantonese cuisine, Zhenjiang Pot Cover Noodles
Category		Level 5 exam paper		Level 6 exam paper
Daily Life	Dress and personal adornment	Blue calico		Purse, Wide and large sleeves
	Festivals and solar terms	Spring Festival, Chinese New Year’s Eve, Winter Solstice, National Day, Cold Food Festival, Labor Day, Celebrate the New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, New Year’s Day		The twenty-four solar terms, Lantern Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival
	Symbol	Dragon, Fish symbol		The Four Gentlemen of Flowers (Plum blossoms, Orchid, Bamboo, and Chrysanthemum), Three Friends of Winter (Pine, Bamboo, Plum), “Immediately enfeoffment”
	Contemporary living	“Beijing Time”, Graduate, Returning to Southern Heaven, “Golden Week”, Express delivery, “Whitewashing”, Weibo, WeChat, Obtain employment, Seek employment		Iron Pak, BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, Dialect, Mandarin, Face recognition, Seckill, “Double Eleven”, QR code, Facial attractiveness
Social Interactions	Designation	Your pupil, A hanger-on of an aristocrat, Overpraise, Family name + Position, Little+ surname		The surname “Mi”, Surname + Occupation/Position, Little/old+ surname, Surname + Gender designation

This table shows that the number and coverage categories of Chinese cultural factors in HSK exam papers increase progressively. Intermediate and advanced Chinese language learners will inevitably face the examination of Chinese cultural knowledge in the Chinese proficiency test, which will affect their understanding and judgment of the exam content. In addition, the sharp increase in the number of idioms in the level 6 exam paper is due to the addition of idiom analysis questions alongside the idiom stories in reading, and a large number of sentences also contain idioms. Idioms pose a major challenge for Chinese learners to learn and use, requiring extensive vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Therefore, the coaching courses for the intermediate and advanced Chinese proficiency exams need to be equipped with a Chinese culture teaching module.

2.2. The analysis of classroom cultural factors

As a second language pedagogy, Chinese language instruction embodies distinct linguistic characteristics and cultural dimensions, rendering the classroom not merely a linguistic training ground but also a vital conduit for cultural transmission. Consequently, cultural elements must extend beyond the analysis of national conditions, daily life, and achievements in testing materials and textbooks to encompass communicative and ideological cultures embedded in pedagogical processes. Taking Y University as a case study, while language skill courses tailored for HSK are incorporated into the curriculum, there is a conspicuous absence of complementary Chinese cultural courses. Consequently, language skill classrooms inadvertently assume the role of cultural instruction. Furthermore, the Chinese pedagogical paradigm imposes stricter temporal and disciplinary norms, coupled with an emphasis on intensive explanation and repetitive practice—a hallmark of Chinese language teaching principles.

China's examination culture also exhibits unique characteristics. As an internationally recognized language proficiency benchmark alongside IELTS and TOEFL, HSK lacks commensurate preparatory infrastructures. Domestically, foreign language testing has cultivated a mature ecosystem of examination-oriented pedagogy and training institutions, whereas HSK preparation remains markedly underdeveloped. An analysis of classroom assessment results reveals that learners initially struggle to adapt to HSK's examination tempo, exhibiting deficient test-taking strategies, misaligned reading and cognitive approaches, and an inability to complete tasks within stipulated timeframes. Moreover, due to the inherent complexity of Chinese character writing, learners demonstrate a pronounced preference for digital examinations and electronic composition, frequently adopting character-avoidance learning strategies.

Notably, extracurricular cultural engagement emerges as a salient learner demand. Y University's cohort—primarily young adults in their twenties—displays keen interest in popular and lifestyle cultures. Their active use of domestic social media platforms facilitates discussions on globally resonant Chinese cultural phenomena, including viral short videos (e.g., Li Ziqi), animated films (Ne Zha), and video games (Black Myth: Wukong). Post-class consultations frequently involve pragmatic concerns such as obtaining Chinese driver's licenses or renting housing. While such quotidian cultural elements receive limited representation in standardized assessments, their alignment with learner interests and practical needs renders them potent motivators for sustained language acquisition.

3. Issues with the online HSK course

3.1. Insufficient cultural awareness among learners

This study collected 107 valid questionnaires from international students with online HSK tutoring course

experience at Y University. The data reveal that 93.46% of respondents (100 students) opted to continue utilizing online learning modalities for Chinese language acquisition, demonstrating that digital instruction either aligns with learners' needs or provides distinct logistical advantages. A significant 72.89% identified "tuition-free access" as a key attraction of online HSK courses. This preference warrants two interpretations: first, these courses constitute non-profit academic collaborations between Y University and partner institutions, with additional free tutoring implemented during the pandemic; second, the virtual format eliminates ancillary costs associated with physical relocation, including transportation and accommodation. When learners can attain HSK certification exclusively through online preparation, the total cost of learning becomes substantially reduced compared to conventional methods. Notably, with Thailand's rapid digital education development—exemplified by established platforms like SkillLine—online Chinese instruction may emerge as the dominant regional learning paradigm. However, this pedagogical shift introduces new challenges: learners deprived of immersive linguistic environments often develop superficial cultural understanding, inhibiting the formation of intrinsic motivation based on genuine interest. Should cost advantages diminish, the program's appeal may consequently decline. Regarding learning motivations, professional and academic requirements predominated, while only 34.58% cited "affinity for Chinese language and culture" as their primary driver. This disparity suggests that while learners recognize the instrumental value of cultural knowledge for examination success, deeper cultural engagement remains limited. The fundamental pedagogical challenge—and concurrent cultural communication opportunity—lies in transforming utilitarian learning objectives into authentic cultural curiosity, thereby fostering autonomous exploration of China's cultural heritage.

3.2. Inadequate integration of cultural pedagogy

Taking the HSK level 5 reading course as an example, the course is a reading skills training course, with the teaching objective of improving learners' HSK reading scores. There is no accompanying vocabulary course or Chinese culture course. This course requires learners to complete a large number of real reading exercises to improve their reading speed and accuracy. With only 3 hours of classroom training per week, the schedule is already quite tight, and the teaching content feels overwhelming. The implicit problem lies in the fact that learners' vocabulary has not reached the level of level 5, and sometimes reading classes may even deviate from the class type and become word classes, thereby shortening the reading training time. This is evidenced by 40.19% of the survey respondents' belief that "the logic of the teaching content is not clear enough." In addition, as mentioned earlier, the real test questions cover a lot of Chinese cultural factors, which may affect learners' understanding. Teachers need to spend classroom time explaining, and unfinished teaching tasks can only be left after class. However, teachers and students also lack interaction time after class. Regarding the question "Teacher's HSK homework tutoring method", 41.12% of the survey respondents received online centralized tutoring, 37.38% of the survey respondents self-corrected answers posted by teachers, and only 16.82% of the survey respondents received one-on-one tutoring, resulting in a lack of traditional offline classroom post class Q&A and Q&A sessions, and cultural knowledge explanations are not suitable to be placed outside of class. This creates a vicious cycle, with learners lacking cultural knowledge and classrooms lacking cultural teaching time.

3.3. Limited cross-cultural engagement in learning contexts

The survey identified the top three reasons for lack of concentration in online HSK classes as: "weak self-control ability" (63.55%), "inability to complete exercises and keep up with teaching pace" (29.91%), and "insufficient

classroom interaction” (28.97%). Analysis reveals that many respondents struggle to maintain focus in online HSK instruction due not only to the confidence-diminishing effects of fast-paced, high-difficulty content, but also to the lack of interactive elements in virtual teaching. Meaningful interaction among online learning community members significantly impacts knowledge construction, yet current online teaching shows inadequate learning monitoring, with low-interactivity models leading to learner fatigue ^[4]. When asked “How would you rate your participation in classroom interactions?”, responses were: “excellent” (14.02%), “good” (30.84%), “average” (52.34%), and “poor” (0.03%), indicating insufficient interaction. Survey data shows the frequency of classroom interaction methods used, in descending order: being called on to answer, attendance check-ins, voluntary participation, online assessments, group discussions, and forum discussions. This suggests two primary reasons for inadequate interaction: first, limited interaction formats, and second, high-frequency interactions being predominantly passive (e.g., being called on, attendance checks), with low student initiative and voluntary participation. 16.82% of respondents reported that online platforms failed to meet learning needs. A key challenge of online versus offline teaching is teacher-student distance — the constrained screen space creates a weak classroom presence. Teaching presence demonstrated through nonverbal behaviors (teacher smiles, expressions, proximity) positively impacts learning outcomes, yet actual online teaching prevents proximity and implementation of certain instructional designs ^[5]. Instructors cannot flexibly adjust teaching based on observing student reactions and expressions as in offline settings, let alone conduct deeper cultural transmission through these nonverbal cues. Current online courses lack sufficient teacher-student and peer interaction, and have failed to establish multimodal Chinese cultural perception systems in teaching. Moreover, survey respondents’ pre-China exposure to Chinese culture came mainly through online channels like TV dramas, variety shows, and reading materials, resulting in symbolic-level cultural understanding, lacking interactive and immersive experiences.

4. Instructional recommendations for online HSK courses: Systematize cultural elements to enhance pedagogical design

HSK coaching courses can easily become boring, exam-oriented teaching, so the knowledge of Chinese culture in the test questions cannot be avoided. Instead, it is necessary to find ways to adjust the teaching direction appropriately, use cultural factors, tell Chinese stories well, increase the attractiveness to students, and exercise learners’ Chinese cultural thinking and exam thinking. Due to the nature of the course, HSK teaching is closely centered around the course type, with a focus on skill training. Under ideal teaching conditions, it is necessary to offer specialized courses on Chinese culture for learners with HSK level 5 and above. If this cannot be met, teaching design should be supplemented with pre-class and post-class tasks. Hence, it is necessary for teachers to sort out the Chinese cultural factors involved in teaching on the basis of sufficient lesson preparation, design teaching from the perspective of learner knowledge construction, and decompose and reconstruct cultural factors into various stages before, during, and after class. For example, simple language can be used in class to briefly describe its author, content, and literary status of “Dream of the Red Chamber”, which appears in the exam. Assign learning tasks related to the “Four Great Classical Novels of China”, arrange reasonable learning content and task volume, and specify the completion time and task presentation method. Through such cultural knowledge assignments, reverse Chinese language ability training can be carried out. In classroom training, it is also possible to break the original order of questions, split and combine real questions based on cultural factors, maintain continuous Chinese language training instead of high-intensity question sea tactics, adjust the difficulty

of homework in a timely manner, alleviate the tension caused by unclear learning outcomes in the short term, establish students' confidence in achieving learning goals, and actively participate in teaching communication and interaction.

Moreover, while the HSK test format is currently fixed, the timeliness of the language materials can fade over time. The cultural knowledge covered in the questions may not fully meet the learners' needs, necessitating the inclusion of popular culture knowledge in teaching. Popular culture, characterized by its hybridity and multimodality, can enhance learners' motivation to learn, reinforce their language practice, and effectively stimulate their creativity, promoting the development of critical thinking skills^[6]. Therefore, such elements should be integrated into the curriculum, making full use of both pre-class and post-class time. Many students enter online meetings 5–20 minutes early, so playing Chinese songs, videos, or chatting with them to answer homework questions can be beneficial. When selecting topics, start with daily and national cultural elements that are relevant to learners' lives, then gradually delve into achievements, communication, and concepts that interest students. **Table 2** lists the cultural elements that the author believes are suitable for pre-class and in-class activities. The selection criteria include: (1) content that young learners find interesting, (2) themes that match students' abilities, and (3) cultural projects that align with the cultural factors covered in the curriculum. Sensitive topics like “religion” are not suitable for classroom presentation and have been omitted.

Table 2. HSK course cultural project list

Primary indicator	Daily life	National conditions	Achievements	Social interactions	Conception
Secondary indicator	diet	geography	art	daily communication	Simple Confucianism
	habitation	social security	literature	social media	Chinese traditional virtues
	dress and personal adornment	cultural heritage	languages		
	Study and work		science and technology		
	entertainment				
	health				
	festivals and solar terms				

5. Summary

In cross-cultural communication, the cultural elements behind language, such as value concepts, customs, and lifestyles, are crucial for effective communication. Learning Chinese is also learning about Chinese culture. The HSK is not just a test of Chinese language skills; it also includes questions that reflect rich aspects of Chinese culture. However, online teaching has two main drawbacks: first, it does not provide an immersive environment for learning Chinese, and second, it fails to integrate the cultural atmosphere of China. Educators should explore and incorporate relevant cultural elements to enhance the appeal of online classes, tell compelling Chinese stories in both classroom and extracurricular activities, deepen learners' understanding of Chinese culture, and thus improve their Chinese proficiency.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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