

Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through English-Mediated Chinese Governance Narratives: A Case Study of University Students in China

Siyi Gong

Liaoning University of International Business and Economics, Dalian, Liaoning 116052

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a critical objective in higher education. This paper investigates how engaging Chinese university students in English-mediated storytelling of Chinese governance narratives can effectively enhance their ICC. Focusing on key governance themes such as people-centered development, common prosperity, and ecological civilization, the study argues that using English to articulate these concepts not only contributes to international communication and national image-building, but also provides students with a meaningful opportunity to develop both linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); English-Mediated Storytelling; Chinese Governance Narratives

1 Introduction

In an era of increasing global interaction and cultural exchange, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries has become a vital skill for university students worldwide. This skill, often referred to as intercultural communicative competence (ICC), enables individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. For Chinese university students, developing ICC is not only essential for personal and professional growth but also for contributing to China's broader international communication strategies.

In recent years, China has actively promoted the initiative of "telling China's stories well" (jianghao Zhongguo gushi), encouraging its citizens—especially the younger generation—to share narratives that reflect the nation's governance, development model, and values. These governance narratives, which include themes such as people-centered development, ecological civilization, and poverty alleviation, are rich in cultural and political significance. When university students engage with these narratives in English, they are not only learning to express national identity but also practicing how to adapt content for international audiences. This process naturally challenges and strengthens their intercultural awareness, linguistic choices, and communicative strategies.

2 Understanding Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

2.1 Key Components of ICC

As global communication becomes increasingly common in education, business, and diplomacy, the ability to navigate cultural differences is no longer optional—it is essential. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures. It requires more than just language proficiency; it involves attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable individuals to understand and adapt to cultural diversity.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding ICC was proposed by Michael Byram (1997), who identified five key components necessary for effective intercultural communication: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

Attitudes refer to openness and curiosity toward other cultures. Students with positive attitudes are more willing to engage with unfamiliar perspectives and to suspend judgment. For Chinese university students learning to present domestic political ideas to a foreign audience, this openness includes both respect for others' values and confidence in sharing their own.

Knowledge involves understanding the cultural practices, products, and perspectives of both one's own culture and others. In the context of Chinese governance narratives, this might mean knowing how certain political concepts, such as "common prosperity" or "harmonious society," are rooted in Chinese history and ideology—and also being aware of how they might be interpreted abroad.

Skills of interpreting and relating help individuals explain one culture to someone from another, building bridges of

understanding. When students translate Chinese ideas into English, they must clarify unfamiliar terms and find ways to make abstract or culturally specific concepts relatable.

Skills of discovery and interaction allow learners to engage in real-time intercultural exchanges, even without complete knowledge. For example, when presenting Chinese policies to an international audience, students might need to explain their meaning spontaneously in response to questions or reactions.

Critical cultural awareness is the ability to evaluate cultural practices and beliefs, including one's own, from a reasoned and ethical perspective. This means not only explaining Chinese values but also reflecting on how they compare to other systems, and acknowledging both strengths and potential criticisms.

2.2 Challenges in ICC Development Among Chinese Undergraduates

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), many Chinese undergraduates still face significant challenges in developing this ability. These difficulties stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from structural, pedagogical, and cultural factors within the current educational environment.

2.2.1 Limited Exposure to Authentic Intercultural Contexts

One major challenge is the lack of real intercultural interaction. Most students learn English in classroom settings that emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and standardized testing, rather than meaningful cross-cultural communication. As a result, their learning tends to be passive, exam-oriented, and disconnected from real-world intercultural exchanges. Opportunities to use English for authentic cultural expression—especially on topics such as Chinese governance—are rare in traditional curricula.

2.2.2 Imbalanced Emphasis on Language Over Culture

English teaching in many universities focuses primarily on linguistic accuracy, often neglecting the cultural and communicative dimensions of language use. Students may become proficient in reading or translation, but struggle when asked to explain cultural concepts or engage in cross-cultural discussions. For instance, expressing political or governance-related ideas in English requires not just translation skills but a deep understanding of how to frame those ideas appropriately for a global audience. Without sufficient training in intercultural discourse, students may resort to literal translations or overly simplified expressions that fail to convey cultural depth.

2.2.3 Lack of Confidence and Cultural Awareness

Another common issue is the lack of confidence in expressing Chinese values and narratives in English. Many students fear making cultural or ideological "mistakes" or worry that foreign audiences will not understand or accept their perspectives. This uncertainty can lead to self-censorship, avoidance of complex topics, or reliance on formulaic expressions. Additionally, students may not have received systematic education in Chinese governance concepts in English, making it difficult to explain them convincingly or clearly. The absence of bilingual civic education further widens this gap.

3 Chinese Governance Narratives: Meaning and Cultural Significance

In the context of international discourse, national narratives play a critical role in shaping how a country is perceived by the world. For China, governance narratives serve not only as descriptions of policy practices but also as expressions of national identity, values, and vision. These narratives communicate how China governs itself, manages development, and interacts with global challenges. When Chinese university students engage with such narratives in English, they are participating in an important form of cultural communication—one that blends political education with intercultural expression.

3.1 Core Themes in Governance Narratives

Chinese governance narratives encompass a range of recurring themes that reflect the country's political philosophy and development path. These themes, often found in official speeches, policy documents, and white papers, are deeply rooted in China's historical experiences, cultural traditions, and contemporary goals. Understanding these themes is essential for students aiming to communicate them to global audiences in meaningful ways.

3.1.1 People-Centered Development

A central theme in Chinese governance is the commitment to serving the people. Referred to as “以人民为中心的发展思想” (people-centered development), this idea emphasizes that all policies and reforms should ultimately benefit the majority of the population. It is frequently used to explain decisions in areas such as healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. This theme resonates with global values such as equity and human development, but may require contextualization when expressed in English to avoid oversimplification.

3.1.2 Common Prosperity

The concept of common prosperity reflects China's goal of reducing regional and social inequalities. It promotes balanced economic development and social fairness, aiming to narrow the wealth gap between urban and rural areas, and among different regions. In intercultural communication, this idea must be carefully articulated to distinguish it from Western notions of wealth redistribution or welfare state models.

3.2 The Relevance of These Narratives in International Communication

As China takes on an increasingly prominent role in global affairs, its ability to communicate its values, development model, and political philosophy to the international community becomes vital. Chinese governance narratives are central to this effort. They not only inform foreign audiences about China's domestic policies but also challenge prevailing global discourses that often originate from Western perspectives. For university students, especially those studying English, learning to convey these narratives effectively is both a communicative task and a form of global citizenship training.

3.2.1 Framing National Identity in Global Discourse

Governance narratives offer a structured way for China to present itself to the world—not just as a rising economic power, but as a nation with a coherent, culturally grounded system of governance. Concepts such as “common prosperity” and “ecological civilization” reflect Chinese priorities and philosophies that differ from Western liberal-democratic norms. When students articulate these ideas in English, they are engaging in what scholars call “discursive framing”: shaping how information is perceived based on cultural and ideological context. This requires a deep understanding of both Chinese and foreign value systems.

3.2.2 Correcting Misunderstandings and Building Mutual Understanding

Governance narratives help clarify the rationale behind China's policy decisions and long-term strategies. By participating in English-mediated storytelling, students contribute to reducing cultural and political misperceptions. This fosters dialogue rather than confrontation, and encourages listeners to view China from a more nuanced perspective.

3.2.3 Enhancing China's Soft Power

The ability to tell compelling, culturally resonant stories is a key aspect of soft power. As student ambassadors or future professionals working in global contexts, university students equipped with the ability to explain Chinese governance narratives in English play a crucial role in enhancing the country's international image. Unlike official government communications, student voices can appear more authentic, relatable, and persuasive—especially when shared through speeches, videos, academic exchanges, or online platforms.

4 English-Mediated Storytelling as a Pathway to ICC

The development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) requires more than passive exposure to cultural knowledge—it demands active engagement in communication across cultural boundaries. For Chinese university students, telling Chinese governance stories in English offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between understanding cultural content and practicing intercultural communication. In this context, storytelling becomes not just a language exercise, but a formative process through which students develop cultural insight, rhetorical flexibility, and global awareness.

4.1 From Cultural Knowledge to Communicative Practice

Transforming cultural knowledge into effective intercultural communication involves a dynamic process of

interpretation, adaptation, and delivery. English-mediated storytelling serves as a practical medium through which students refine these abilities.

4.1.1 Interpreting Cultural Concepts for International Audiences

Governance narratives such as “common prosperity” or “ecological civilization” are rich in meaning but often unfamiliar to non-Chinese audiences. To convey such ideas effectively, students must go beyond literal translation. They need to interpret the underlying values, historical context, and policy logic behind these terms and express them in ways that resonate with listeners from different cultural backgrounds. This encourages students to think critically about how their own cultural knowledge can be received and understood by others.

4.1.2 Reframing and Simplifying Without Oversimplifying

Effective intercultural storytelling often requires reframing complex or abstract ideas in accessible terms. For instance, students might compare “ecological civilization” with global environmental movements or draw analogies between “people-centered development” and well-being indicators used in other countries. Such communicative strategies allow students to maintain the integrity of the original concepts while making them comprehensible to a wider audience. This reframing process is a core skill in ICC, requiring both cultural empathy and linguistic resourcefulness.

4.2 Illustrative Examples

To better understand how English-mediated storytelling can enhance intercultural communicative competence (ICC), it is helpful to examine typical classroom practices and extracurricular activities that encourage students to express Chinese governance narratives in English. These examples, while not drawn from empirical data, reflect common and accessible modes of instruction and engagement that can be found across many Chinese universities.

4.2.1 English Public Speaking Competitions on Chinese Topics

In recent years, many universities have organized English speech contests under themes such as “China in My Eyes”, “Telling China’s Story”, or “Chinese Modernization for the World”. These competitions encourage students to select themes from real governance issues—such as rural revitalization, green development, or social harmony—and present them to an imagined or actual international audience. Through this process, students not only practice language skills but also explore how to frame national policies using globally understandable logic and persuasive rhetoric.

4.2.2 Classroom Presentations on Chinese Governance Models

In courses such as English for Academic Purposes or Business English, instructors may design tasks where students give presentations comparing Chinese and foreign systems, such as healthcare, education, or economic planning. A student might, for instance, explain the concept of “common prosperity” and contrast it with the American “trickle-down economics” model, using English as the medium.

5 Pedagogical Implications and Suggested Practices

The previous sections have demonstrated how English-mediated storytelling of Chinese governance narratives offers a meaningful pathway for enhancing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among university students. This approach holds valuable pedagogical implications for English language education, especially within the Chinese higher education context. To maximize its potential, educators must adopt teaching strategies that intentionally integrate cultural content, promote reflective communication, and support students in becoming globally competent communicators.

5.1 Integrating Chinese Governance Content into English Curriculum

One of the most direct ways to foster ICC is to enrich English teaching materials with culturally meaningful content. Currently, many English textbooks in Chinese universities rely heavily on Western cultural references, leaving little room for local perspectives. Incorporating governance themes—such as poverty alleviation, ecological development, or community governance—into classroom texts and activities allows students to engage in content that is both familiar and globally relevant.

5.2 Promoting Project-Based and Output-Oriented Learning

Rather than relying solely on drills or exams, educators should promote project-based learning (PBL) that emphasizes student output and creativity. Projects such as English presentations, storytelling videos, mock interviews, or simulated policy dialogues can engage students in meaningful tasks that develop both language proficiency and ICC.

6 Conclusion

In a globalized world where communication across cultures is both inevitable and essential, the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among university students has become a fundamental goal of higher education. For Chinese undergraduates, particularly those studying English, the task of articulating national narratives in a global context offers a meaningful pathway for achieving this goal. This paper has explored how engaging with Chinese governance narratives—through English-mediated storytelling—can serve as a powerful tool for developing students' ICC.

In conclusion, English-mediated storytelling of Chinese governance narratives not only supports national soft power and international communication efforts—it also empowers students to become culturally aware, articulate, and responsible participants in global conversations. As China continues to engage with the world, equipping young people with the skills to “tell China’s story well” in intercultural settings is not merely an educational choice—it is a strategic necessity.

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