

Embedded Translation Tasks as a Vehicle of Curriculum-based Ideological and Political Education: A Case Study of an Outline of Chinese Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how translation can serve as a vehicle of curriculum-based ideological and political education (IPE) in *An Outline of Chinese Culture*, a compulsory course for English majors at a provincial university in China. Although not a translation course, translation activities were embedded as reflective tasks requiring students to compare textbook renderings, propose alternatives, and consider their cultural and ideological implications. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 16 classroom observations, student translation tasks, and 10 semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis identified three key functions of translation in this context: (1) enhancing linguistic competence through refinement of vocabulary, register, and style; (2) mediating ideological reflection by linking translation choices to cultural values and national narratives; and (3) fostering cultural confidence by enabling students to articulate Chinese concepts in English with authenticity. The findings demonstrate that translation can enrich cultural and ideological learning without turning a culture course into a translation class. The study contributes empirical evidence to research on curriculum-based IPE and offers practical implications for foreign language pedagogy, showing that translation tasks can effectively integrate language, culture, and values.

KEYWORDS

Embedded translation tasks; Translation pedagogy; Ideological and political education (IPE); Cultural confidence; Chinese culture education

1 Introduction

In recent years, the integration of ideological and political education (IPE) into university curricula has become a central agenda in China's higher education reform. Referred to as curriculum-based IPE, the initiative emphasizes that all disciplines should contribute not only to professional knowledge and skills but also to the cultivation of values, cultural confidence, and national identity (Chinese Government, 2020). In the field of foreign language education, scholars have begun to document concrete models for embedding IPE into English-major coursework (Mei & Zhang, 2024; Ruan & Yang, 2024).

An Outline of Chinese Culture, a compulsory course for English majors, provides a distinctive platform for this integration. At our institution, the course has been designated as a university-level pilot project for curriculum-based IPE. Its English-medium textbook introduces Chinese philosophy, traditions, festivals, and artistic achievements with ready-made translations. At first glance, this might appear to diminish the relevance of translation. However, translation in this course takes on a new role: reinterpretation and reconstruction. Rather than mere linguistic transfer, translation is treated as intercultural mediation, enabling students to compare existing renderings, propose alternatives, and reflect on the cultural and ideological implications of their choices (Liddicoat, 2016).

This perspective underscores that translation is not simply a technical exercise but a pedagogical tool for value mediation and cultural identity formation. For English majors, translation activities in this course foster a deeper understanding of Chinese cultural heritage, the ability to articulate it convincingly in English, and the internalization of values aligned with national educational guidance (Chinese Government, 2020). Classroom practices such as bilingual presentations, comparative translation, and interpreting exercises encourage students to transform passive reception into active cultural mediation.

Accordingly, this paper examines how translation practice in *An Outline of Chinese Culture* contributes to curriculum-based IPE for English majors. Drawing on classroom observations, student tasks, and interviews, it analyzes the ways translation enhances linguistic competence, mediates ideological reflection, and strengthens cultural confidence, while also identifying challenges. In doing so, the study provides insights into how translation can serve as both a linguistic and ideological tool in the broader framework of foreign language education reform.

2 Literature review

Research on curriculum-based IPE in foreign language education has grown rapidly in recent years. Studies show that embedding ideological elements into English-major courses not only strengthens disciplinary competence but also cultivates values, cultural awareness, and national identity (Chinese Government, 2020; Mei & Zhang, 2024; Ruan & Yang,

2024). Empirical models have been developed across linguistics, literature, and skills-based courses, illustrating that curriculum-based IPE can enrich learning without undermining academic rigor (Wu & Liu, 2022). However, within this expanding body of scholarship, little systematic attention has been paid to how translation tasks, when embedded in non-translation courses such as Chinese culture classes, function as pedagogical vehicles of IPE.

2.1 Chinese culture courses as a site of IPE

Chinese culture courses, such as *An Outline of Chinese Culture*, are widely recognized as central platforms for cultivating cultural confidence (*wen hua zi xin*), a priority of national education policy (Chinese Government, 2020). These courses aim to equip students with knowledge of Chinese heritage and the ability to present it convincingly in English. Yet most existing studies have approached them from the perspective of content delivery and ideological themes, focusing on what cultural knowledge should be taught or which values should be emphasized. Much less attention has been given to the pedagogical methods that can operationalize these goals in classroom practice.

2.2 Translation tasks as embedded pedagogy

Although Chinese culture courses are not translation classes, translation tasks frequently emerge as natural and necessary components. Students must grapple with rendering culture-bound terms such as *xiao* (filial piety), *tian ren he yi* (harmony between humanity and nature), or *Duanwu Jie* (Dragon Boat Festival) into English. These activities are not assessed as technical translation drills but as reflective exercises that encourage students to compare alternative renderings, analyze their cultural implications, and recognize the values embedded in linguistic choices. This role of translation aligns with Liddicoat's (2016) view of translation as intercultural mediation, which frames translators as negotiators of meaning across cultural frameworks. Pedagogical perspectives also reinforce this value: Kelly (2005) highlights reflective practice in translator training, while Kiraly (2012) emphasizes authentic, collaborative tasks that cultivate autonomy and responsibility. Although designed for translator education, these models illuminate how translation tasks embedded in culture courses can foster intercultural competence and ideological reflection.

2.3 Translation and cultural confidence

Translation also contributes directly to the cultivation of cultural confidence. Baker (2018) portrays translators as narrators who construct cultural representations and shape international perceptions. Gao (2021) stresses that translating Chinese cultural concepts in global contexts requires negotiation to maintain cultural specificity while ensuring accessibility. Li (2022) provides empirical evidence that reflective translation of Chinese classics enhanced English majors' cultural awareness and their sense of responsibility in representing Chinese culture. These findings suggest that embedded translation tasks in Chinese culture courses can help students articulate cultural heritage in English while reinforcing ideological values such as pride and identity.

2.4 Research gap

In summary, research has demonstrated the importance of curriculum-based IPE in foreign language education and highlighted the central role of Chinese culture courses in fostering cultural confidence. Yet how embedded translation tasks in these courses serve as vehicles for linking language practice with ideological reflection has not been systematically examined. Moreover, existing work often relies on descriptive accounts, with few studies employing classroom observation, student outputs, and interviews as a triangulated evidence base. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how embedded translation tasks in *An Outline of Chinese Culture* enable English majors to integrate linguistic competence, ideological reflection, and cultural confidence within one pedagogical framework.

3 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how translation functions as an embedded pedagogical activity for curriculum-based IPE in *An Outline of Chinese Culture*, a compulsory course for English majors. A case study was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of classroom practices and student experiences within a bounded setting, highlighting the interaction between teaching activities and value formation.

3.1 Research context and participants

The study was conducted in the first semester of the third year at a provincial university with a strong engineering

background but increasing emphasis on foreign language education. An Outline of Chinese Culture uses an English-medium textbook introducing Chinese philosophy, literature, traditions, and historical achievements. Although not a translation course, translation was deliberately embedded through tasks designed to encourage students to compare and reflect on English renderings of cultural concepts and their ideological implications.

Participants included one instructor with a Ph.D. in English language studies and experience teaching translation-related courses, and 21 English majors. All students had previously completed basic translation training and were simultaneously enrolled in a translation course, allowing them to draw on relevant knowledge in cultural tasks. While the sample size was modest, case studies in education prioritize depth over generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.2 Data collection

Data were gathered across 16 sessions using three sources:

3.2.1 Classroom observations

The researcher recorded how embedded translation tasks were introduced, how students engaged with culture-bound concepts, and how discussions linked language with values. Special attention was given to debates prompted by different translation choices.

3.2.2 Student outputs

Instead of routine assignments, students completed embedded tasks such as comparing textbook translations of *xiao* (filial piety), *tian ren he yi* (unity of Heaven and man), and *yi dai yi lu* (the Belt and Road Initiative), proposing alternatives with justification. Some also gave bilingual presentations to explain cultural significance and defend strategies. These activities highlighted how translation fostered critical engagement with language and ideology.

3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

At semester's end, 10 volunteer students were interviewed for 20–30 minutes each, focusing on their experiences, awareness of cultural values, and confidence in narrating Chinese culture in English.

3.3 Data analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Coding was inductive but guided by translation as intercultural mediation (Liddicoat, 2016) and the objectives of curriculum-based IPE (Chinese Government, 2020). Three themes emerged: translation as linguistic competence, as ideological mediation, and as cultural confidence.

3.4 Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the university. Students were informed of the study, participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms were used. Reliability was ensured by triangulating observations, outputs, and interviews, and by member checking of interview transcripts.

4 Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of the case study, organized into three interrelated themes: translation as linguistic competence, translation as ideological mediation, and translation as cultural confidence. Each theme is illustrated with examples of classroom translation activities and discussed in relation to existing scholarship.

4.1 Translation as linguistic competence

One of the most immediate outcomes of embedding translation tasks in An Outline of Chinese Culture was the development of students' linguistic competence. Although the course is not formally a translation class, students were asked to engage in comparative translation exercises of culture-bound terms. For example, the term *xiao* was consistently rendered as filial piety in the textbook. However, students discussed alternative renderings such as filial devotion or parental respect, highlighting the nuances of register and usage in English. Through these comparisons, students not only

expanded their vocabulary but also developed sensitivity to stylistic choices and cultural semantics.

The exercise of translating *li yi zhi bang*, often translated as “the land of propriety,” further exemplified the dual linguistic and cultural challenge. Some students found the phrase overly literal and suggested “a nation of etiquette” or “a land of ceremony and propriety.” The classroom discussion around these options revealed how lexical selection involves balancing precision, fluency, and cultural resonance. This aligns with Kelly’s (2005) argument that translation training should extend beyond accuracy to reflective practice, fostering an awareness of how language choices influence meaning.

These activities illustrate how translation can serve as a scaffold for language learning within a non-translation course. By practicing translation, students developed greater precision in English expression while deepening their understanding of cultural terminology. Such outcomes confirm the pedagogical claim that translation, even when not the primary focus of a course, can significantly contribute to linguistic development (Kiraly, 2012).

4.2 Translation as ideological mediation

Beyond language development, translation also functioned as a medium of ideological reflection and value mediation. When tasked with translating *tian ren he yi*, students debated how to render this philosophical concept. The textbook version, “unity of Heaven and man,” was criticized by some for sounding archaic and potentially inaccessible to contemporary readers. Alternatives such as “harmony between humanity and nature” were proposed, which foregrounded ecological and ethical dimensions relevant to modern contexts. This shift demonstrates how translation choices can frame cultural values in ways that resonate with current ideological concerns, such as environmental sustainability.

Another salient example was the translation of *yi dai yi lu*. While the official rendering “the Belt and Road Initiative” was accepted, students were encouraged to discuss why “initiative” was chosen over alternatives like “strategy” or “program.” The conversation highlighted how terminological choices reflect ideological positioning, as “initiative” conveys openness and cooperation, aligning with China’s diplomatic discourse. Such discussions resonate with Liddicoat’s (2016) view of translation as intercultural mediation, where linguistic decisions are inseparable from ideological and political contexts.

These examples illustrate that translation tasks enabled students to engage critically with cultural narratives and reflect on how linguistic choices embody ideological orientations. This supports the findings of Mei and Zhang (2024), who argue that embedding IPE elements in foreign language courses encourages students to connect disciplinary learning with broader ideological goals. In this context, translation acted as a bridge between language learning and value education, making abstract concepts tangible through classroom practice.

4.3 Translation as cultural confidence

The third theme concerns the role of translation in fostering students’ cultural confidence. Through translation activities, students not only acquired linguistic competence and ideological awareness but also developed a stronger sense of identity as cultural mediators. For instance, in translating *Duanwu Jie*, the textbook rendering “Dragon Boat Festival” was supplemented by student presentations that introduced the story of Qu Yuan and the associated themes of loyalty and patriotism. These additions transformed a simple festival name into a richer narrative that communicated cultural pride and values to a global audience.

Similarly, when working with the term *Changcheng* (the Great Wall), students discussed how to move beyond literal translation and highlight the symbolic significance of the monument as a representation of resilience and unity. Some students proposed explanatory phrases such as “the Great Wall of China, a symbol of perseverance and defense,” thus linking linguistic expression with cultural meaning. Li (2022) observed that reflective translation tasks deepen students’ cultural awareness and sense of responsibility in representing their heritage. The present findings corroborate this, showing that translation assignments empowered students to narrate Chinese culture in English with confidence and authenticity.

By positioning students as active translators and cultural narrators, the course fostered a sense of pride and ownership over cultural representation. This outcome directly supports the policy emphasis on cultivating cultural confidence (*wenhua zixin*) in higher education (Chinese Government, 2020). Translation thus served not only as a language-learning activity but as a tool for strengthening students’ identity and confidence in cross-cultural communication.

The findings demonstrate that translation, when embedded in a non-translation course like *An Outline of Chinese Culture*, can function on three levels: as a means of enhancing linguistic competence, as a medium for ideological mediation, and as a vehicle for fostering cultural confidence. These outcomes align with previous research on translation pedagogy (Kelly, 2005; Kiraly, 2012), intercultural mediation (Liddicoat, 2016), and curriculum-based IPE (Mei & Zhang, 2024; Ruan & Yang, 2024). Importantly, the study highlights that translation need not transform a cultural course into a

translation class; rather, it can serve as a pedagogical tool that enriches cultural learning and ideological reflection. In this way, translation becomes a vehicle through which students not only learn to use English more effectively but also engage with and internalize cultural and political values.

5 Conclusion and implications

This study has examined how translation can serve as a vehicle of curriculum-based IPE in *An Outline of Chinese Culture*, a compulsory course for English majors. The findings demonstrate that translation, when embedded as a pedagogical activity, operates at three levels: it enhances students' linguistic competence, mediates ideological reflection, and fosters cultural confidence. These outcomes highlight the pedagogical value of translation beyond its technical function, showing its potential as an integrative tool that bridges language learning, cultural understanding, and value education.

The implications of this study are threefold. First, for translation pedagogy, it suggests that embedded translation tasks should not be confined to professional training but can be effectively integrated into non-translation courses to enrich cultural and ideological learning. Second, for curriculum design, it illustrates a practical pathway for embedding IPE into foreign language education by leveraging translation as a reflective and meaning-making activity. Third, for students' development, the study underscores the role of translation in cultivating cultural confidence and the ability to narrate Chinese culture to international audiences with clarity and authenticity.

Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The small sample size and single-institution context restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research could extend the analysis to other institutions, include larger cohorts, and employ mixed-methods approaches to triangulate results. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on curriculum-based IPE by demonstrating how translation, even in a non-translation course, can meaningfully support the goals of ideological and cultural education.

About the Author

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