

An Empirical Study on Integrating Excellent Chinese Language and Culture into the College English School-based Teaching System Empowered by Digital Intelligence

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Abstract

Under the background of ideological and political construction in foreign language courses and cultural confidence cultivation in higher education, college English teaching is no longer limited to language skill training. It also undertakes the mission of spreading China's excellent language and culture and cultivating students' two-way intercultural communication competence. Traditional college English classrooms are plagued by problems such as insufficient input of local culture, monotonous forms of cultural teaching, and students' weak ability to express Chinese culture in English. Supported by digital intelligence technology, this study selects the text Hutong Karma as teaching case, constructs a school-based teaching system of digital intelligence platform, in-depth text reading plus cultural output, exploring the practical paths and educational effects of intelligent tools in integrating China's excellent language and culture into college English classrooms. The research results show that utilizing digital intelligent tools can significantly improve students' ability to interpret traditional Chinese culture in English, enhancing their cultural identity and intercultural communication literacy.

Keywords

Digital intelligence empowerment; excellent Chinese language and culture; college English; school-based teaching; Hutong Karma.

1. Introduction

Seven departments including the Ministry of Education, in January 2026, jointly issued *Opinions on Further Promoting the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Chinese Language and Culture and Enhancing the National Language and Cultural Literacy*, which puts forward to integrate excellent Chinese language and cultural resources into the school education and lifelong education system.[1]. As one of the most widely offered general basic courses, college English, is a vital carrier to fulfill the fundamental task of moral cultivation, realizing the integration of value guidance and knowledge teaching[2].

Taking the text Hutong Karma as the teaching case, this paper constructs a school-based teaching system of digital-intelligent platform, in-depth text reading as well as cultural output through lightweight digital intelligence empowerment, covering pre-class, in-class and after-class stages. It aims to explore the practical paths and educational effects of intelligent tools in integrating excellent Chinese language and culture into college English classrooms.

2. Overview of Hutong Karma

The theme of Unit 2 in *New Progressive College English-Integrated Course Book 4* is China in Transition. It focuses on social changes and the preservation of cultural heritage during the process of China's urbanization and modernization.

Text A, Hutong Karma, is written by American author Peter Hessler. Written from the perspective of first person, it records his five-year experiences living in Ju'er Hutong of Beijing. The writing depicts the communal life in the hutong, urban renewal projects such as fitness stations and public-toilet renovations around the 2008 Olympics, the hustle and bustle of W.C. Club, and the relocation of the local resident Good Old Wang. Depicting historical shifts of courtyard, the author profoundly illustrates the essence of hutong lies in spirit rather than structure. He draws the conclusion that it is always the mighty who were laid low. This text naturally incorporates Chinese characters, linguistic symbols, Chinese classics, modes of thinking and folk customs. Thus, it serves as one of the optimal teaching carriers for integrating excellent traditional Chinese language and culture into teaching.

3. Connotation of Excellent Chinese Language and Culture

The Opinions calls for the exploration and educational transformation of resources related to Chinese characters, Chinese classics, national ideological values, and regional folk language resources. Combined with the context of college English teaching, learning lessons from existing research classifications in foreign language education, this study aims to explore teaching resources of excellent Chinese language and culture from five dimensions: Chinese characters and their culture, linguistic symbols of Chinese classics, Chinese classics and textual culture, Chinese modes of thinking and value-oriented language culture, and regional and folk language culture[1].

3.1. Chinese Characters and their Culture

3.1.1. The Cross-cultural Comparison of the Karma VS Chinese Character Yinyuan

Karma and Chinese character Yinyuan (因缘) differ fundamentally in cultural roots and connotations. Karma, originating from ancient Indian religious philosophy and later localized in Western discourse, centers on causal retribution, reincarnation and pre-determined fate, carrying strong fatalism and moral judgment on individual behaviors.

Yinyuan, derived from traditional Chinese secular philosophy and life wisdom, has evolved from a religious borrowed term into a unique local cultural concept. It captures the perpetual flow of worldly affairs, historical vicissitudes and the passage of time, carrying none of the fatalistic or retributive connotations found in Western thought. It embodies the open, inclusive Chinese attitude towards the rise and fall of human affairs, with a calm, non-judgmental philosophical tone that cannot be simply equated with Karma.

3.1.2. The Circled *Chai* (Dismantle): A Cultural Marker of Urban Transition

Whenever a hutong was doomed, its buildings were marked with a huge painted character surrounded by a circle: "pull down, dismantle.[3]" (Para.9)

The giant red Chinese character *Chai* (dismantle), enclosed in a bold red circle and painted on the outer wall of the building, is never a rigidly stipulated official sign, but a widely accepted industry convention that took shape gradually in China's urban renewal practices. The circle carries multiple layers of practical and cultural functions. Firstly, it prevents deliberate scribbling. Without the enclosed circle, there is plenty of blank space on the old wall for people to add extra characters before or after the original *Chai* (dismantle), turning it into phrases like *dismantle or not* or *no dismantling* that completely reverse the original meaning. Secondly, it acts as a prominent visual warning: the bold red character paired with the eye-catching circle makes the demolition notice instantly remarkable to all passers-by, revealing non-negotiable demolition decision from the relevant authorities. Thirdly, it conveys unique implicit cultural psychology. The circle, in traditional Chinese culture, is a classic symbol of completeness and smoothness. For workers who face the complex, high-risk old building structures, this red circle carries a plain, sincere wish for a safe, accident-free demolition process.

3.2. Linguistic Symbols of Chinese Classics

3.2.1. Changes of the Times

The compound in the hutong has witnessed the changes over hundreds of years. The compound had belonged to a Manchu prince in the nineteenth century; it was used as Chiang Kai-shek's Beijing office in the 1940s; it served as the Yugoslavian embassy in the 1960s; it was called the Friendship Guest House in the author's narration[3]. (P.15)

The version can be matched in several versions in Chinese wisdom:

Times have changed.

The tides turn in thirty years.

Every dog has its day.

Pride goes before a fall.

3.2.2. Wisdom in Reading the Times

The original meaning of "Whoever Understands the Times is a Great Man" is only those who can clearly perceive the current situation and the trend of the times can be regarded as outstanding figures. It is often used to persuade people to assess the situation, making sensible choices that go along with the general trend. In Hutong Karma, this traditional wisdom is fully embodied.

At the individual level:

Manifestation 1: *He used to say that it was only a matter of time before more buildings in our neighborhood were pulled down, but he never dwelled on the future[3]. (Para. 10)*

Here, the local resident Wang Zhaoxin (Good Old Wang) had foreseen the demolition trend in advance, and peacefully accepted the general tide of urban renewal. It turns out he was clearly aware that the decline of old hutong, which could no longer adapt to modernization, was an inevitable tendency, avoiding unnecessarily vain resistance.

Manifestation 2: *He had already sold the cigarette shop, because the margins had fallen too low. When his apartment building was finally torn down, he moved out without complaint[3]. (Para. 11)*

When the profit of his cigarette shop shrank sharply during the process, he voluntarily sold the business, giving up his old livelihood, rather than rigidly insisting on the outdated way to make a living. Afterwards, he moved out of the hutong without a single complaint, completely embracing the realistic changes that had occurred, which perfectly reflected the spirit of assessing the situation and performing along the trend.

At the collective level:

Manifestation 3: *Residents immediately found creative ways to incorporate a McDonald's or an Olympic toilet into their routines[3]. (Para. 12)*

Confronted with the intrusion of modern facilities into hutong, the residents did not bear any grudge or rejection in mind. Rather, they racked their brains to make on-the-spot use of the new public space, transforming it into a neighborhood social spot (such as the W.C. club). Their ability to perceive environmental changes clearly and adapt to them creatively is obviously the collective portrayal of the classics.

3.2.3. Taking Things as They Come

Original connotation: *Since circumstances have come to pass, accept reality peacefully.*

The idiom emphasizes that when the real situation is already set and cannot be changed, one should stay calm, adapt to whatever comes, and never indulge in resentment.

Manifestation 1: Wang Zhaoxin's attitude toward demolition

... practical, good-humored, and unsentimental... he moved out without complaint[3].

Having grown up in the hutong and witnessed decades of its transformations, he realized his home would eventually be torn down. When demolition finally arrived, he voiced no complaints

nor indulged in sorrow. He peacefully accepted the given reality, refused to dwell on the past, reconciling himself to the circumstances, which is a concrete embodiment of the spirit of taking things as they come.

Manifestation 2: Hutong residents' acceptance and adaptation to their living

From paragraph 2, it is known that hutong had humble living conditions, with no private bathrooms or toilets, and dozens of households shared the same entrance. The residents did not make mere complaint about the material constraints. Instead, they made instant use of the alley streets and the open spaces in front of public toilets, spontaneously forming social spaces. They shared daily joy and anxieties through barbecues, chess games and casual chats, nurturing their vibrant street life within the limited realistic conditions, and sheltering their daily lives peacefully in the surroundings.

3.3. Chinese Classics and Textual Culture

3.3.1. The Supreme Goodness of Water

Tao Te Ching says the highest good is like water and water benefits all things. This philosophy finds full expression in hutong residents' tolerance and adaptability. In their ways of dealing with people and events, residents are as gentle and inclusive as water, never rejecting new external elements. When outdoor fitness stations were installed in the community, they did not assume them as occupying their activity space. Reversely, they turned the area around fitness equipment into a gathering spot for casual chats. When the government rebuilt high-standard public toilets for Olympics, they didn't view the space outside as indecent. Instead, they brought in sofas and set up chessboards, transforming the entrance of the public toilets into the liveliest W.C. Club across the whole hutong. Bicycle repairmen placed their tools here, vendors took their rests here, and even a television for watching ball games was set up. Like water that nourishes all things, residents skillfully incorporated every new element into carriers for their own convenience and neighborhood bonding. Free from the rigid obsession that old hutong must remain unchanged, they integrated all elements into their daily life.

3.3.2. The Wisdom of Not Blaming Heaven and Others

The Analects says never complain about Heaven, nor blame other people. As a typical resident of the hutong, Wang Zhaoxin perfectly lives up to this principle of conduct. Having lived most of his life witnessing the transformations of the hutong, he accepted the demolition from the depth of his heart. He made no unreasonable demands, nor was he trapped in nostalgia for the old hutong and get stuck in the past. He was grounded firmly in the present, never resenting his circumstances or blaming others. His optimistic state of accepting circumstances has become a vivid, and visible example for all residents in the hutong.

3.3.3. Transformation Bringing Continuity

The Book of Changes says extreme leads to change; change leads to smoothness from. As the wave of modernization swept over Ju'er hutong, the traditional living space of the hutong communities was continuously exploited, seemingly reaching a dead end. Yet the residents, drawing on their innate wisdom of flexibility, found a new way out. Instead of clinging rigidly to the old form of the traditional courtyard houses, they re-empowered every transformed public space: chessboards were placed against the abandoned walls, barbecue grills were set up in the idle corners, and even when the most modern chain brand McDonald's opened at the hutong entrance, they turned the open space in front of the store into a new base for neighbors to chat. The physical bricks and tiles of the hutongs may gradually age and be demolished or renovated, but the hutong spirit has not been trapped within the old buildings. Instead, it flexibly transforms along with the changes of the times, bonding neighborhood connection in the new environment, allowing the centuries-old lively street atmosphere of the hutong to continue smoothly in a fully modernized city.

3.4. Chinese Modes of Thinking and Value-oriented Language Culture

The pragmatism, open-mindedness, profound insight, freedom from complaining, and adapting flexibly to circumstances manifested on Good Old Wang embody the spiritual traits of the Chinese people.

The concept of cause and effect, and the transformation of all things are embodied in the text. Hutong doesn't mean being static. Long-lived residents, newly-arrived dwellers, migrant workers, newly-installed public facilities and outside commercial brands—all people and elements interact and exert influence upon one another, which gives them a chance to shape the so-called hutong spirit. It is a living, organism emerging naturally from the convergence of all these karmic forces.

Compared with the high-rise urban life today, life in hutong has never been an isolated mode centered on individual families. The traditional Chinese collectivism and neighborhood mutual assistance are fully embedded in every detail of daily life. Hutong has no strict boundaries for private space, and all residents take it for granted that hutong is the shared home for everyone. This collective bond, stronger than any family ties despite no blood relation, unites scattered households into a whole, and it is also the core support that keeps the hutong spirit alive for one generation after another.

3.5. Regional and Folk Language Culture

3.5.1. Old Beijing Hutong Culture

Rows of brick-and-wood courtyard homes, shared gateways for multiple families, the absence of private bathroom, alleyways acting as daily gathering spots, and street vendors wandering through the lanes—these are the distinctive residential folk traditions and vibrant street life that define old Beijing's hutongs.

3.5.2. Public Space Culture

Public space in the hutong are fully designed to meet the real life needs of residents, built collectively through small contributions from every household bit by bit. Even the public toilet, originally a purely functional space, has become hutong's most bustling social hub. Through small-scale spontaneous modifications by residents, public facilities with originally single functions acquired multiple cultural attributes such as socializing, leisure and mutual aid. Sterile urban spaces were thus imbued with warm neighborhood bonds.

3.5.3. Urbanization: Old-City Renewal and Urban Memory

On the one hand, fitness stations newly built and renovated public toilets facilitated the living of hutong residents. On the other hand, some shabby old housing stood in sharp contrast to the renewed surroundings, which was destined for demolition. This serves as a microcosm of Beijing's urbanization and old-city renewal. Physical buildings can be torn down, yet people's memories and life stories of the past are preserved. The generational modes of neighborhood interaction, residents' philosophy of life, and shared collective memories within hutong do not vanish along with the disappearance of buildings. Instead, they have been penetrated into residents' daily life.

Old-city renewal does not simply mean tearing down all old buildings to make way for real-estate developments. Rather, it should preserve the humanistic memories embedded in physical spaces. As cities undergo rapid modernization, people ought to retain their native cultural roots and avoid the dilemma of identical urban landscapes across different cities.

4. Implementation Procedure of Digital Intelligence Empowered Teaching

4.1. Pre-class Self-study: Immerse in Cultural Context

AI will sort out the unit's core cultural vocabulary list, generate theme-related bilingual cultural passages supplemented with corresponding reading tasks which imitates question types of reading comprehension in CET-4 test. All learning tasks will be uploaded to Mosoteach platform for students to complete, helping them fully grasp the connotation of the text in advance, consolidate the foundation of cultural cognition, and foster their firm cultural confidence.

4.2. Interactive Opening: Anchor the Cultural Theme

Task 1: warm-up question

"Have you ever visited old-Beijing hutongs? What images come to your mind when you hear the word "hutong"? Students mentioned *siheyuan* (courtyard houses), bustling scenes, narrow lanes, antiquity and so on, which activated their memories of traditional culture, stimulating their interest in English expressions related to hutong. Meanwhile, it built a natural connection between prior knowledge and new content for the upcoming text study.

Task 2: cultural introduction: AI lecture on Chinese character culture

With the help of AI technology, this part presented a cross-cultural comparison between the English concept of *karma* and the Chinese cultural notion of *Yinyuan* through video demonstrations. It also introduced the iconic circled Chinese character *chai* (*dismantle*). This helped students get familiar with the highly representative linguistic markers of urban transformation in China's urbanization, deepening their understanding of language and culture.

4.3. Text Analysis and Thematic Interpretation

Students were guided to sort out the text structure and build a macro understanding of the passage, from introduction (the foreign author's residence in Ju'er Hutong), to development (modern facilities built for the Olympics and W.C. Club), to turning point (hutong houses being demolished, the dissolution of the W.C. Club, and Old Wang's open-mindedness and insight), to climax (revisiting the hutong and reflecting on hutong karma).

The W.C. Club constitutes a confusing point for students. They struggled to imagine how such a functional place could turn into a bustling spot for casual chats and gatherings. With the help of AI, the teacher generated a set of reconstructed historical photos in advance: the 2008 Olympic public toilets, the W.C. Club, and the scene of McDonald's entering the hutong. Students were subconsciously immersing in the setting. Some residents chatted about life while others laughed and talked. The seemingly contradictory elements—public toilets and the club, western fast food and old Beijing hutongs—blended naturally in the AI-generated images, delivering a sense of urban memory that felt both ridiculous and authentic. Many students admitted they perceived no sense of incongruity. Instead, the plain scenes instantly awakened their long-buried childhood memories.

Thus, AI enables students to grasp the human warmth of ordinary neighborhood life and understand social changes of the era. It also provides vivid and concrete samples for reflection on the inheritance of fine traditional Chinese culture.

4.4. In-depth Cultural Exploration with Ideological and Political Integration

This part deeply connected the English narrative text with classic Chinese linguistic symbols and traditional Chinese ideological connotations.

Task 1: matching exploration of ancient Chinese wisdom (classic Chinese linguistic symbols + Chinese classics culture)

Students were required to complete a matching task on Mosoteach, linking the behaviors of Lao Wang and other hutong residents with corresponding classic Chinese philosophical quotes.

Then students presented their matching results in English. Students were guided to realize that the wisdom from ancient classics was not distant text confined to books, but could be seen vividly from the local natives in daily life, subtly influencing people and the environment.

Task 2: critical thinking discussion on Chinese thinking and value culture

Question: When old buildings are pulled down during city development, should local residents hold on tightly to the past or accept changes?

Connecting with real-life urban renewal cases, students easily associated with holdout households in urban relocation and renovation practices. In class, the teacher built a visual practice project with AI tools, guiding students to generate and share comparative images of the two scenarios. Through these visuals, students intuitively perceived that the decision to respect the development of the times and prioritize public interests is more conducive to promoting urban progress and bringing a thriving, prosperous outlook. In contrast, holdout households that only focus on individual demands will lead to long-term damage of the block, stagnation of public projects, hindering the improvement of people's livelihood.

The strong visual impact directly resonated with students, avoiding the sense of resistance caused by one-way teacher indoctrination. It better facilitated their critical thinking sublimation, helping them voluntarily establish the value cognition of balancing cultural inheritance and innovative development, and consciously transformed this concept into their own attitudes and behaviors to protect regional cultural heritage.

4.5. Learning Output: Human-AI Comparative Analysis

In-class task: students were required to write an impromptu short essay themed on rural revitalization. Students were only allowed to look up new vocabulary, and direct AI-generated full text was strictly prohibited, so as to expose their real language problems and retain their complete independent thinking process.

After students finished their first draft, AI assisted in polishing and optimizing the text. Teachers then organized students to compare and evaluate students' original works and AI-polished versions from three dimensions: vocabulary selection, sentence structure and content expression, guiding students to learn from the strengths of different versions and make up for their own shortcomings.

4.6. After-class Consolidation: Continuous Knowledge Accumulation

AI was used to assist language output practice on Mosoteach, including bilingual translation exercises, CET-4 style cloze task, theme-based cultural writing and other forms, to continuously enrich students' cultural knowledge reserve.

5. Conclusion

Taking Hutong Karma as the teaching case, this study shows that the blended school-based teaching model can effectively mitigate native cultural aphasia problem among college students. It enhances students' English linguistic competence while fostering their cultural confidence. College English teaching should be based on the school-specific learning situation, make use of the lightweight empowerment of digital intelligent tools, explore English texts with both linguistic value and profound cultural connotations. Students should be guided to understand Chinese culture in depth, tell Chinese stories well in English, realizing the integration of language competence cultivation and cultural value education.

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