

BALANCING “CHINESE NARRATIVES” AND “INTERNATIONAL ISSUES” IN THE NATIONAL COLLEGE ENGLISH ENTRANCE EXAMINATION: AN ANALYSIS OF TENSION AND INTEGRATION

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Abstract: As a vital selection tool for higher-education admission, the college-entrance English exam (Gaokao English) also serves as an important carrier to deliver value-oriented guidance for basic education. It is expected to tell authentic China's stories and foster students' awareness of a community with a shared future for mankind simultaneously, and such dual requirements bring about inherent tensions within test design. This study selects 2024-2026 national-version Gaokao English papers as research materials, with official exam reviews as supplementary references. It adopts qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis to construct a tension-integration analytical framework for examining Chinese narratives and international issues. Within this framework, Chinese narratives fall into three dimensions: traditional cultural heritage, modern-day Chinese wisdom and national identity, whereas international issues cover global environmental challenges, sustainable development and cross-cultural communication. Findings reveal that reading passages and grammar-fill exercises employ celebratory and problem-solution discourses to construct Chinese narratives, while international issues are interpreted in an objective, analytical tone. Hybrid texts combine both thematic dimensions, reflecting the underlying educational philosophy of “patriotic globalism”. The established tension-integration model provides insights for studies concerning value orientations in language assessment. This paper also acknowledges its research limitations and puts forward future research directions, including quantitative content measurement and cross-paper comparative analysis.

Keywords: Chinese narratives; International issues; Gaokao English; Tension-integration; Patriotic globalism

1 INTRODUCTION

As a key subject within China's college admission system, Gaokao-English mainly assesses students' foundational knowledge and practical command of the English language. Yet its influence stretches far beyond mere language evaluation. Gaokao-English text-selection undertakes the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education, with reading materials aiming to cultivate students' Chinese sentiments alongside an international vision [1]. Known as the “baton” guiding basic education, the exam shapes teaching priorities in high-school English classrooms through the themes and narrative perspectives adopted in reading passages and grammar-fill texts. While preparing for the test, students absorb cultural messages embedded in these materials almost unconsciously, which gradually shapes their cultural perceptions, value stances, and ways of understanding global affairs. The focus of language assessment has shifted from discrete basic language knowledge toward the discourse level, with growing emphasis on the authenticity of reading materials and test tasks [2].

Official exam reviews released by national educational assessment authorities have repeatedly highlighted a dual guiding principle for material selection. Exam texts should draw on fine domestic cultural resources to foster cultural confidence, meanwhile opening students' eyes to shared global challenges and building their awareness of a community with a shared future for mankind. This sets two intertwined educational goals: to tell China's stories well and nurture young people's patriotism, as well as to develop their competencies as globally-minded citizens. Nevertheless, the Gaokao has fixed paper length and a limited number of reading texts. Within such constraints, test developers have to strike a reasonable balance between local narratives and global-issue content. They need to preserve adequate space for national-cultural representation without cutting students off from international realities. This creates genuine internal tensions within this high-stakes language assessment. New-Gaokao English test-setting demonstrates four orientations: highlighting cultural confidence, valuing authentic language use, integrating popular-science content with global vision, and balancing linguistic foundation and disciplinary thinking [3]. Against such practical contexts, this paper examines how these two types of themes actually appear in Gaokao-English exam papers.

This balancing dilemma in Gaokao-English test design is not an isolated problem for test-setters. Instead, it mirrors a long-standing core debate within China's foreign-language education: how to strike a proper balance between shaping students' national identity and building their global competence. Learning a foreign language is far more than picking up a tool for cross-border communication; it is also a process for cross-cultural understanding and identity formation. Over-emphasis on local narratives may blunt students' awareness of diverse global issues. On the contrary, too much focus on international topics could weaken the development of their native-cultural standpoints. Getting this balance

right has remained a practical challenge for foreign-language educators. Foreign-language education is expected to cultivate interdisciplinary talents with “a Chinese heart and a global vision” [4]. Against ongoing globalization and rising cultural awareness among domestic public, scholars have paid growing attention to the value-oriented functions of language assessments. Theoretically, this research enriches domestic discourse studies on Gaokao-English exam materials, offering fresh perspectives to interpret educational values embedded within language tests. Practically, by sorting out tensions and integration between Chinese narratives and international issues in exam texts, it helps front-line teachers better understand exam-setting logic. It also delivers practical references for future test-material selection and value-driven foreign-language teaching practices.

The corpus for this study consists of publicly released national-version Gaokao-English papers from 2024 to 2026. Official exam reviews published by educational assessment authorities are used as supplementary interpretative sources. Primarily adopting qualitative content analysis, the research reads, codes and sorts all target passages to distinguish two major thematic categories: Chinese narratives and international issues. Discourse analysis is further adopted to examine the narrative positioning and framing of diverse cultural contents and global topics, so as to unpack value orientations hidden behind exam texts.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 National Consciousness in Foreign-Language Assessment

National consciousness offers a useful conceptual angle to examine the value-loaded dimensions embedded within foreign-language education. Far more than a theme delivered in classroom lectures, it shapes the underlying logic of educational practices and influences how adolescent learners position their own nation when engaging in cross-linguistic communication. As a high-stakes nationwide evaluation tool, the National College English Entrance Examination (NCEEE) is not merely designed to sort candidates according to their language proficiency. Foreign-language education involves not merely language acquisition but also cultural acquisition and discursive practice, in which national consciousness can be internalized through cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison [5]. Through carefully curated reading and gap-filling passages, exam authorities deliver symbolic representations of national values and real-life social contexts. In effect, examination materials function as a discursive medium, subtly conveying mainstream values and gradually fostering students’ sense of national belonging. Gaokao English functions not merely as a language proficiency test but also as a cultural experience for test-takers [6]. Such value-oriented influences mostly operate beneath the surface. Though language competence assessment remains the exam’s primary mission, its institutional setup inevitably carries educational ideologies aligned with domestic policy priorities.

2.2 Cultural Awareness as a Core Competency in English Education

Cultural awareness ranks among the four core competencies specified by senior high-school English curriculum standards, covering cultural knowledge, applied cultural skills, cultural dispositions and real-world cultural behaviours. Within the NCEEE, reading sections shoulder the major responsibility of exposing test-takers to diverse cultural content. Exam papers select texts under diverse thematic contexts to examine test-takers’ core competencies of the English subject [7]. One empirical project analyzed 38 sets of NCEEE papers issued from 2014 to 2025, covering 563 individual texts, and detected a steady rise in culture-oriented content across test papers. The proportion of culturally-oriented texts in Gaokao English papers has increased year by year, and reading sections serve as the primary carrier for cultural content [8]. These cultural texts span tangible material culture such as local geography, traditional food and public transport, as well as intangible spiritual culture including scientific outputs, literary creations and various art forms. By including such content, test designers aim to go beyond simple language-skill testing. Cultural confidence is built upon adequate cultural cognition, and foreign-language education should integrate local cultural input with an open-minded cross-cultural attitude [9]. Following national curriculum guidelines, they intend to encourage students to interpret diverse cultural phenomena and build balanced, well-reasoned cross-cultural viewpoints.

2.3 “Telling China’s Story Well” as a Contemporary Educational Mission

Against today’s educational backdrop, “telling China’s story well” has become a practical guiding principle for foreign-language education in China. Under this principle, English teaching is expected to cultivate young generations with genuine patriotic feelings, together with open-ended global perspectives. Embedding outstanding traditional Chinese culture into English exam items serves two intertwined purposes: it responds to official educational policy expectations, and meets curriculum requirements for strengthening students’ cultural awareness. Fine traditional Chinese culture constitutes the root and vein of Chinese civilization and carries significant educational value in foreign-language teaching [10]. When Chinese-themed narratives appear in English-language exam texts, students get chances to observe domestic cultural heritage through a foreign-language lens. This process helps consolidate cultural self-confidence without falling into narrow ethnocentrism. When test-takers engage with exam texts, they subtly construct their understanding and recognition of fine Chinese culture. Meanwhile, these texts open up discursive space for constructive dialogue between local cultural roots and global realities.

2.4 Particularism-Universalism: A Theoretical Lens for Tension and Integration

Building on the concepts discussed above, this study draws on the intellectual distinction between cultural particularism and universalism as its interpretive lens. Cultural particularism emphasizes the unique traits of a civilisation, prioritizes national identity and highlights values generated from within a given society. Universalism, by contrast, focuses on shared human dilemmas, stresses the necessity of cross-national cooperation and highlights common interests held by global populations. This pair of concepts helps unpack the conceptual frictions that emerge when exam passages present China-centred storylines alongside transnational global issues.

Existing studies have explored national consciousness, cultural awareness and Chinese-themed texts within NCEE contexts in isolation. Nevertheless, few scholarly efforts have systematically investigated how Chinese narratives and international issues interact within exam texts — how they co-exist, generate implicit tensions, and achieve constructive integration. Most prior research treats domestic cultural materials and global-focused passages as separate objects of enquiry, rather than seeing them as interconnected discursive forces within a single test paper. This noticeable gap in existing literature gives rise to the present research. Based on these theoretical discussions, the subsequent chapter develops a practical tension-integration analytical framework to support discourse-driven empirical analysis of authentic NCEE examination materials.

3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Conceptual Definition of “Chinese Narratives” in the NCEE Context

In this study, “Chinese narratives” refer to discursive content built around Chinese culture and national development within NCEE reading and fill-in texts. Three analytical dimensions are adopted for this concept: traditional cultural heritage, contemporary Chinese wisdom, and national identity together with patriotic sentiment. Traditional cultural heritage covers Chinese philosophies, arts, folk customs and historical figures. Examples include Go-themed art exhibitions, traditional rural market fairs, and ideas derived from Tai Chi. Rather than merely listing cultural symbols, exam passages tend to unpack the spiritual meanings behind these cultural markers. Contemporary Chinese wisdom highlights domestic development outcomes and locally-generated solutions to practical challenges. It ranges from Chinese researchers’ technical attempts against microplastic pollution to ordinary people’s real-life practices of building poetic lifestyles by working with nature. National identity and patriotic sentiment aim to foster a sense of national belonging in subtle ways. Through narrative construction instead of blunt preaching, test materials guide students to form solid cultural confidence.

These three dimensions jointly shape the full connotation of Chinese narratives in NCEE papers. Comprehensive Chinese narratives should not be confined to traditional heritage but also encompass modern-day practices and China’s participation in global governance [11]. Drawing on diverse source materials, exam texts deliver multi-faceted Chinese discourses from historical heritage, modern-day achievements and national-identity perspectives. As test takers process these English-language texts, they gain access to a well-rounded image of China. Such conceptual preparation also lays a solid foundation for subsequent comparative analysis concerning international-issue texts.

3.2 Conceptual Definition of “International Issues” in the NCEE Context

International issues in this research stand for real-world cross-border problems that concern shared interests of humanity. They are broken down into three layers: global environmental threats, sustainable development, and cross-cultural exchange alongside global citizenship. Global environmental threats cover ecological troubles such as climate change, microplastic contamination and transport-related carbon emissions. Transboundary in nature, these topics frequently appear in exam items. Sustainable development focuses on efficient resource utilization. Cases including food waste reduction and Barcelona subway’s regenerative-braking energy-recycling system fall under this category. Test texts often draw on practices from various countries to display alternative ways of tackling shared difficulties. Cross-cultural exchange and global citizenship seek to spread the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind and broaden students’ outlooks toward world affairs.

With distinct yet complementary focuses, these three layers build up the global perspective embedded within exam papers. Stepping past the viewpoint of a single nation, such materials encourage test-takers to reflect on common hurdles facing humanity. They also create a meaningful counterpoint to China-oriented narratives, which makes comparative examination between the two thematic groups feasible for later empirical analysis.

3.3 Tension-Integration Model and Analytical Dimensions

This study puts forward a tension-integration continuum model to interpret how these two sets of themes relate to one another. Tension stems from inherent divergences in value orientations: Chinese narratives lean toward cultural particularism, highlighting native civilizational features and national pride, whereas international issues follow universalist logic by emphasizing shared human dilemmas and cross-border cooperation. Integration, by contrast, rejects an either-or understanding of the two themes. A number of exam passages incorporate both perspectives at the same time, one typical instance being Chinese research solutions addressing worldwide environmental troubles. This gives rise to a continuum ranging from “purely Chinese narratives” to “purely global issues”, with most test texts occupying hybrid positions somewhere in-between these two extremes.

Built upon this model, three analytical dimensions are adopted for text examination. The first concerns distribution patterns, mapping the relative presence of Chinese narratives and international issues across different exam sections. The second is framing strategy, which identifies whether texts adopt affirmative, neutral or critical stances toward given topics. The last dimension focuses on integration patterns, exploring concrete ways Chinese and global elements interweave within a single reading or gap-filling passage.

4 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: CHINESE NARRATIVES AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN NCEEE TEST MATERIALS

The reading passages selected for the NCEEE national papers serve far more than mere language-learning materials. They also function as textual carriers that deliver orienting values for education. Drawing on real-world exam cases from the 2024-2026 national NCEEE English papers and guided by the analytical framework established in previous chapters, this chapter examines how Chinese narratives and international issues take shape within test texts, alongside their respective rhetorical strategies. It further sorts out how these two thematic categories are distributed across different test sections, and explores how exam-set reading materials put the dual goals of cultural confidence and global awareness into practice.

4.1 Manifestations and Narrative Strategies of Chinese Narratives

4.1.1 Traditional culture as a vehicle for cultural confidence

Traditional-culture materials constitute the major source for constructing Chinese narratives within the NCEEE. Most of these texts appear in the grammar-fill-in section. Instead of presenting rigid cultural popularization, they unfold through compact short stories or vivid cultural scenarios. The grammar-fill-in passage in 2025 National Paper I centers on an art exhibition themed around Go. Rather than dwelling on the basic rules of this board game, the text highlights how ancient philosophical ideas embedded within Go generate new expressive possibilities when combined with artificial intelligence and contemporary art, breathing fresh life into age-old Eastern wisdom within modern artistic contexts. The 2026 National Paper I grammar-fill-in text turns to folk market fairs. Through life-oriented depictions, it reconstructs bustling street-market scenes, where local food, vendors and crowds jointly paint a vivid picture of Chinese folk customs. Another grammar-fill-in excerpt from 2026 National Paper II follows an Australian woman's practical experience learning Tai Chi. From her personal perspective, it interprets culturally-rooted notions such as mind-body harmony, qi and dantian.

These passages collectively establish a narrative logic oriented toward cultural confidence. Test designers avoid preachy statements to impose values directly. Instead, they deliver cultural messages indirectly via scene descriptions and individual characters' lived experiences. While recognizing the unique local features of Chinese traditions, the texts draw on foreign learners' experiences to illustrate that Chinese culture holds appeal across cultural boundaries. Gaokao papers adopt cross-cultural materials that bridge China and the world to demonstrate the international appeal of fine traditional Chinese culture [12]. While test-takers finish language-related exercises, they can subtly appreciate the charm of native traditions and gradually form a sense of identification with their own culture.

4.1.2 Solution-oriented narratives embodied in contemporary Chinese wisdom

Beyond drawing on historical folk traditions, exam papers also incorporate real-life practices from modern-day China into test materials. Quite a number of passages place Chinese practices against the backdrop of worldwide challenges, creating blended narratives that pair global-scale troubles with Chinese-developed responses. Reading Passage D in 2025 National Paper I opens with microplastic pollution, a pressing environmental hazard across the globe. It first lays out various ecological damages caused by microplastics worldwide, before shifting focus to research conducted by domestic Chinese scientific teams. The text highlights mitigation strategies put forward by Chinese researchers, illustrating how local scientists tackle tangible ecological difficulties with practical mindsets, while sharing China's hands-on experience in building an ecological civilization. The grammar-fill-in task from 2025 National Paper II records observations from an American woman residing in rural Zhejiang. Through this foreign observer's eyes, it describes local residents' habit of air-drying laundry outdoors. From such small-scale daily practices, the passage reveals ordinary Chinese people's life wisdom of working with natural conditions to build poet-infused living spaces.

Different from texts centred on traditional culture, narratives of this kind move past merely displaying cultural symbols and root their discussions in real-world problems. China is no longer presented solely as an object for cultural appreciation; it is framed as a participant and problem-solver for global public-interest issues. Such narrative design breaks down barriers between local realities and international concerns. It enables Chinese-themed content to go beyond domestic-oriented cultural promotion and deliver practical insights that may resonate with audiences around the world.

4.1.3 Summary of overall strategies for Chinese narratives

When reviewing relevant passages across multiple exam sets, consistent rhetorical tendencies behind Chinese narratives in the NCEEE become visible. The general tone leans toward affirmation and recognition. Whether covering folk-art heritage or modern social achievements, most passages adopt a positive descriptive stance and rarely include critical commentary. Moreover, these texts establish a dual positioning: they stress the distinct ethnic features of Chinese civilization, while arguing that such cultural heritage and practical experience hold universal value understandable and referable for other nations. Furthermore, passages addressing contemporary themes frequently follow a solution-driven

logic. Rather than simply laying out national conditions, they seek to showcase practical lessons from China from a global vantage point.

4.2 Manifestations and Narrative Strategies for International Issues

Texts touching upon international issues mostly appear within reading-comprehension tasks. Written mainly as popular-science expositions and social-issue articles, they centre on real-world dilemmas shared by humanity as a whole. Reading Passage A from 2025 National Paper I discusses carbon emissions generated by the transport sector. Drawing on sets of comparative data, it weighs strengths and weaknesses of various energy models and identifies green-energy advancement as a key route for future transport-sector reforms. National Gaokao reading passages attach great importance to global-oriented themes such as environmental protection and popular science to broaden test-takers’ cognitive horizons [13]. Man-and-nature-themed passages deployed across diverse question types prompt test-takers to reflect on global issues including ecological conservation and sustainable development [14]. Reading Passage D in 2025 National Paper II presents a practical case where leftover food ingredients are remade into fine dishes. Through this everyday example, it conveys sustainable-development ideas including food conservation and making full use of available resources. Reading Passage D of 2026 National Paper II turns to an overseas innovation: Barcelona subway’s regenerative-braking system. It describes how the facility recaptures surplus energy released during train braking and feeds the power into charging devices installed at station platforms, demonstrating technological breakthroughs in energy recycling achieved by foreign cities. By drawing heavily on non-Chinese practical cases, these reading materials encourage test-takers to step beyond a single-nation mindset, so they can recognize pressing global challenges as well as innovative solutions developed across different parts of the world.

Texts addressing international issues largely follow an implicit logical chain: problem identification, phenomenon analysis and solution exploration. Rather than putting forward arbitrary subjective judgements, these articles build their arguments around objective statistics and real-life cases and keep a neutral, rational tone throughout. Cases are sourced from diverse countries and regions instead of being restricted to one single location, which reflects that global challenges can be tackled through multiple alternative approaches. Instead of emphasizing panic triggered by worldwide crises, these passages adopt a constructive orientation. Their core message suggests that technological innovation and cross-national joint efforts equip humanity with viable ways to cope with common survival-related risks, delivering forward-looking reflections for readers.

When looking at how content spreads across different question types, reading comprehension serves as the primary vehicle for both Chinese narratives and international-issue topics. Its relatively long text length allows for fuller, more in-depth thematic discussions that cannot be easily achieved in shorter task sections. By contrast, the grammar-fill-in items tend to favour Chinese-cultural storylines. Story-oriented narratives occupy a prominent proportion in NMET reading materials, while argument-driven texts appear less frequently [15]. Test developers often build these short passages around personal life experiences or folk-custom scenarios. Topics concerning international issues, nevertheless, appear far more frequently within reading texts. Such materials demand stronger competences from test-takers, including the ability to sift through information and draw logical inferences.

Test designers follow a clear-cut balancing principle when picking source texts. A single national exam paper will normally include materials representing both Chinese narratives and international issues, avoiding heavy bias toward either side. Some passages keep these two themes separate to deliver their respective value messages independently, while others weave them together organically within one text. Within the limited scope of an exam paper, such arrangements manage to nurture students’ sense of cultural identity alongside their global outlook, putting the dual educational objectives of NCEE English into real-world practice.

5 DISCUSSION

Drawing on the empirical text-analysis results from Chapter Four, both Chinese narratives and international-issue themes co-exist within NCEE English papers. Rather than standing in straightforward opposition, they reveal a complex interplay marked by tension and integration. Building on previous case findings, this chapter explores the conceptual friction between cultural particularism and universalism embedded in these two sets of discourses. It unpacks how hybrid narratives take shape in test texts, extracts the “patriotic globalism” orientation implied by exam materials, and further discusses practical implications for test construction and classroom-based English teaching.

5.1 Tension: Conceptual Tug-of-War between Particularism and Universalism

The friction between Chinese narratives and international issues reflects a long-standing internal dilemma within China’s foreign-language education. Rooted in cultural particularism, Chinese narratives highlight the unique historical features of Chinese civilization, aiming to strengthen students’ sense of national belonging and cultural confidence. By contrast, international-issue texts follow universalist logic. They centre on shared real-world hardships for humanity and advocate cross-border cooperation as well as intercultural understanding.

This conceptual conflict is not fully resolved in exam papers. Instead, test designers manage it carefully through material selection and textual framing. The exam never forces test-takers to pick either patriotic commitment or global-citizen awareness as an exclusive choice. Through deliberate text organization, it conveys the idea that these two

values can co-exist. While recognizing the distinct worth of local culture, exam materials keep students' global perspectives open, accommodating both value systems within one assessment framework.

5.2 Integration: Hybrid Narrative Patterns in Exam Texts

Several well-constructed test passages achieve organic integration of the two themes and form persuasive hybrid narratives. One integration pattern starts with worldwide difficulties before bringing in Chinese research or practical responses. Reading Passage D from 2025 National Paper I on microplastic pollution serves as a typical example. The passage frames environmental contamination as a shared global concern, then presents countermeasures developed by Chinese researchers, completing a narrative arc from "global problem" to "Chinese contribution" and finally to "world-wide benefits".

A second integration approach demonstrates the outward influence of Chinese culture through outsiders' viewpoints. The grammar-fill-in excerpt about an Australian woman learning Tai Chi in 2026 National Paper II does not frame traditional Chinese culture as something confined within national borders. Instead, the foreign learner's personal experience illustrates that Chinese cultural traditions carry cross-border appeal. Such hybrid passages show that the exam's educational goals go beyond promoting domestic culture. They encourage students to see cultural exchange as a two-way, mutually enriching process. Well-constructed Chinese narratives can transform local practical experience into globally referable insights to facilitate civilizational exchanges and mutual learning [16].

5.3 Underlying Educational Philosophy and Practical Implications

Such balancing strategies point to an underlying educational philosophy of "patriotic globalism". The "patriotic" dimension consolidates students' cultural identification through diverse texts. Its "globalist" side expands learners' world outlooks via international-issue content. These two qualities are not contradictory. Instead, they represent complementary qualities expected of ideal learners: individuals who love their home country and are ready to contribute to common human progress.

This philosophy yields practical take-aways for test developers and front-line educators. For exam designers, sustaining this balance means avoiding tokenistic cultural decoration and choosing authentic, thought-provoking reading materials. Foreign-language education ought to pursue dual objectives: improving linguistic competence and fostering capabilities for cultural communication [17]. For English teachers, daily instruction should move beyond linguistic knowledge and foster cultural confidence alongside global awareness. Foreign-language assessment and teaching ought to balance the evaluation of linguistic proficiency and the cultivation of cultural-communication literacy [18]. For students themselves, the exam offers a mode of thinking: national identity and global-citizen status are not mutually exclusive, but can engage in constructive dialogue.

6 CONCLUSION

This study takes national-version NCEE English papers from 2024 to 2026 as its research corpus. Using qualitative content analysis and discourse-analysis methods, it investigates how Chinese narratives and international-issue materials are constructed within exam texts. It further explores tensions and integration patterns between these two thematic strands, so as to uncover implicit educational values embedded in the Gaokao English test. Drawing on prior empirical findings and discussion sections, this chapter summarizes core research outcomes, points out the paper's theoretical contributions, notes existing limitations, and puts forward prospects for follow-up research.

Findings suggest that test developers deliberately keep a balance between Chinese narratives and international-related issues during material selection. Chinese-themed content falls largely into two categories: traditional cultural heritage and practical achievements from contemporary China. Most passages adopt an affirmative tone. They highlight distinctive local cultural features, while also framing Chinese practical experience as viable responses to worldwide difficulties. Texts covering international issues centre heavily on environmental risks and sustainable-development topics. Maintaining an objective and impartial analytical stance, they draw on real-world cases across different regions to prompt students to reflect on shared challenges facing humanity. Some well-designed reading materials blend the two themes effectively. By placing Chinese cultural resources and practical solutions within a global context, such texts demonstrate that Chinese traditions and local practices hold value for cross-cultural communication and international reference.

Theoretically, the tension-integration continuum model developed in this paper offers a workable lens for examining how multiple value orientations coexist within language-assessment contexts. High-stakes language assessments can simultaneously shape learners' national identity and develop their global-oriented competencies [19]. This study shows that high-stakes language tests serve more purposes than merely sorting test-takers by language proficiency. They can simultaneously foster learners' national identity and build their global competence. This creates a practical analytical reference for future domestic studies targeting similar language-testing subjects.

Still, this research carries noticeable limitations. Its empirical analysis draws heavily on official exam commentaries and selected representative excerpts, rather than full-scale coding and statistical processing of every exam text. Future work may expand the sample pool by including provincially-produced exam papers for cross-comparison, and trace shifts in thematic material across longer time spans. Future corpus-driven studies on NMET text selection may expand sample

size and incorporate test-designers’ direct perspectives [20]. Researchers could also bring in quantitative measures to calculate the proportional weight of different thematic texts and generate more concrete numerical evidence. This deliberate balance between local narratives and global-issue content within NCEE English embodies a thoughtful educational vision: to nurture young people firmly rooted in their own culture yet ready to engage with the wider world. Against today’s backdrop where globalisation interacts with rising local-cultural awareness, such exam-setting logic delivers meaningful insights for language education. Language learning is far more than mastering a communication tool. It should help learners build solid cultural self-confidence and encourage them to view world affairs from the perspective of shared human futures.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

This work was supported by 2024 National Education Examination Scientific Research Planning Project titled “A Study on the Pathways for Integrating National Consciousness into English Test Item Development for the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) from the Perspective of Language Strategy” (Project No.: GJK2024010); and 2026 Foreign Language Textbook Research Project of the Institute for Foreign Language Textbook Research, Shanghai International Studies University, titled “A Study on the Discursive Representation and Construction Pathways of National Consciousness in Senior High School English Textbooks from the Perspective of Language Strategy”.

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