

A Contrastive Study of Culture Items in Elementary Chinese and American Textbooks of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

Taking *Integrated Chinese* and *a Course in Contemporary Chinese* as Examples

Rong Sun

Xinhua College of Sun Yat-sen University
Guangzhou, China 510520

Zhen Li

Department of Chinese
Sun Yat-sen University
Guangzhou, China 510520

Abstract—This paper aims to explore the culture items in two elementary Chinese textbooks with the method of quantitative research, especially focuses on the presentation of national culture and specific culture items. It is found that American textbook show a fuller array of strategies in the presentation of culture items, and Chinese textbook's illustrations are more exquisite and accurate and more available for teaching. American textbook has more advantages but also need further improvement.

Keywords—textbooks of teaching Chinese as a second language; culture items; illustrations

I. INTRODUCTION

The fundamental purpose of language learning is to ensure that learners use the target language in a correct and standard way for communication, which requires that the arrangement of textbooks should take many factors into consideration, such as cultural differences, comparison between Chinese and foreign cultures, and cultivate learners' ability of cross-cultural communication. Previous studies on culture teaching in TCSL textbooks mainly focus on Chinese culture, but pay little attention to communicative culture. Taking two sets of elementary textbooks in China and the United States as examples, this paper makes a comparative analysis of the categories of their cultural items and focuses on the ways in which their communicative cultural items are presented. References and suggestions will be provided for the presentation of Chinese teaching materials and cultural items at home and abroad.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Subjects

This paper analyzes the two sets of elementary textbooks as the research subjects. One is the American textbook, *Integrated Chinese I*, (third edition, Yuehua Liu, 2010, Cheng & Tsui Company, Inc. "*Integrated*" for short); the other is Taiwan's textbook *A Course in Contemporary*

Chinese I, (Deng Shouxin, 2015, Linking Publishing Co. LTD. "*Course*" for short)

B. Research Methods and Tools

This paper uses the quantitative research method to systematically investigate the similarities and differences in the presentation of communicative cultural items in the two sets of elementary textbooks. Quantitative statistical analysis: statistics and classification of cultural items in selected textbooks. Quantitative comparative analysis method: to compare the distribution and presentation mode of cultural items. Enumerating: to discuss the differences between the two sets of textbooks in the compilation of cultural items through a case study.

III. A STUDY OF ELEMENTARY TEACHING TEXTBOOKS

A. Learning Targets

The learning targets of *Integrated* are to learn Chinese language and culture through the contents of 10 units in each book. The text forms include dialogue, narration, cultural notes, grammar interpretation and exercises.

The target of *Course* is improving language skills in all aspects, especially communication skill in daily life. The text includes five parts: text, vocabulary, grammar, classroom activities and cultural items.

B. Learning Objects

Integrated are for learners who study in American universities, or high school learners in America.

Course is suitable for learners studying Chinese in Taiwan and overseas high schools or universities. The first volume is designed for Chinese beginners, equivalent to CEFR level A1.

C. Contents Selection and Arrangement

1) *Nationality background of core characters*: "Core characters" refer to the characters listed separately in the

textbook with pictures or background brief introduction,

often throughout the whole textbook.

TABLE I. NATIONALITY BACKGROUND OF CORE CHARACTERS (PERSON)

Textbooks \ Nationality	China	USA	Japan	British	Korean	Vietnam	Honduras
Integrated	2	1	0	4	1	0	0
Course	2	1	1	0	0	1	1

The target learners of *Integrated* are Americans whose mother tongue is English. There are many native English speakers in the design of the core characters of the textbook. It is reasonable to reflect the similarities and difference of culture through dialogues with Chinese people. There are also African Americans in the intermediate level, which illustrated a more comprehensive picture of America's diverse ethnic background (see "Table I").

The target learners of *Course* are learners who come to Taiwan to learn Chinese, among whom there are a large number of Asians, and the core characters are Japanese and Vietnamese. The Republic of Honduras is a Central

American country, which takes Spanish as the official language. The core characters in this textbook have rich native language backgrounds, involving English, Japanese, Vietnamese and Spanish, providing a diversified topic for cross-cultural communication.

2) *Relationships and occupational background of core characters*: The relationships and occupational background of the core characters can provide rich topics for communication and ensure the authenticity and practicality of communication. This study examines the relationship between the characters in the two sets of textbooks.

TABLE II. RELATIONSHIPS AND OCCUPATIONS OF KEY FIGURES (GROUP)

Textbooks \ Relationships	Siblings	Teachers and Learners	Colleagues	Lovers	Friends	Classmates
Integrated	1	1	1	1	0	1
Course	0	0	0	0	3	1

The relationships and occupational backgrounds of the core characters in *Integrated* are diversity (see "Table II"), including siblings, teachers and learners, colleagues, lovers and classmates, which provide richer language materials from multicultural perspective. However, the relationships between the core characters in *Course* only involve friends and classmates, and the cultural communication is relatively narrow.

3) *Activity scene of characters*: The primary teaching scene of *Integrated* is designed in America, and the second volume of intermediate level was transferred to China. The textbook adopts reciprocal visits design and dual-perspective. It has two characteristics: firstly, it tends to present the American social and cultural environment, especially in the initial level; secondly, it presents the complex relationship between Chinese culture and American culture by virtue of the "micro-environment" of Chinese ethnic groups in North America (Ouyang Fanghui, 2006¹).

The teaching environment of *Course* is designed in Taiwan, mainly for internal exchange and study in Taiwan. Except for lesson 1 (at the airport), lesson 4 (in the restaurant) and lesson 15 (in the hospital), the other contents do not emphasis on the locations. Because most of the characters are classmates, it can be speculated that it happens in the campus. The scope of communicative activities is relatively

narrow, which cannot meet the real communicative needs of learners in the real social environment.

IV. A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF PRESENTATION OF CULTURAL ITEMS

A. Cultural Items in the Texts

Zhou Xiaobing (2010²) points out, in terms of the text form, the dialogue is better and easier than narration for the beginners. The speakers in dialogues include Chinese and foreigners, the vocabularies they used are obviously easier and appropriate, and the proportion of contemporary cultural items is obviously higher. Texts in the two sets of textbooks all give priority to the dialogues (*Integrated*, 20 lessons, 2 texts for each lesson; *Course*, 15 lessons, 2 texts for each lesson). In addition to dialogues, there are narrative (1), diary (1), letter (1) and mail (1) in *Integrated*; however, *Course* is all dialogues. Based on the *Table of Cultural Items in International Chinese language Classification (Guide Edition)* of Sun Yat-sen University, this paper classifies and counts the cultural items in the texts of *Integrated* and *Course*.

¹ Ouyang Fanghui & Zhou Xiaobing. A Contrastive Study of Cultural Presentation in Chinese and American Textbooks of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language from an Intercultural Perspective [J]. TCSOL Studies, 2010.

² Zhou Xiaobing & Luo Yu & Zhang Li. A Systematic and Comparative Investigation into Chinese Culture Textbooks [J]. Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies. 2010(5): 1-7.

TABLE III. DISTRIBUTION STATISTICS OF CULTURAL ITEMS (%/ TIMES)

Classifications Textbooks	Chinese National conditions	Culture of Achievements	Daily Life & Customs	Communication Activities	Values & Views	Total
Integrated	2.21/3	0/0	40.44/55	51.47/70	5.89/8	100/136
Course	19.78/18	0/0	38.46/35	41.76/38	0/0	100/91

As shown in “Table III”, neither of the two elementary textbooks involves culture of achievements. It is acknowledged that culture of achievements is relatively difficult. It is a reasonable arrangement that the elementary textbooks take learners’ knowledge level and acceptance ability into account. In terms of the total number of culture items, *Integrated* contains more items than *Course*. The number of culture items about daily life and customs and communicative activities involved in *Integrated* are relatively higher, while China’s national conditions, values and views are relatively lower. *Course* contains far more culture items about China’s national conditions than *Integrated*. It can be seen that Chinese textbooks will focus more on the introduction of China’s national conditions, especially the knowledge of Taiwan’s geography and localization. The views and values of Chinese are not involved in the teaching material.

B. Culture Items in Supplementary Part

At the end of each unit, the two set of textbooks set up the supplementary part of culture items. *Integrated* has the part of *Cultural Highlights*, while *Course* has the part of *Bits of Chinese Culture*. The topic of this part is related to the text content, which is the supplementary and extension of the text culture item, and is expressed in English.

For example, the two sets of textbooks both discuss names in the first lesson. The contents involved in *Integrated* are mainly focused on widen learners’ knowledge, such as family names, sources of family names, common family names, etc. While the contents that involves in *Course* are the origin of nicknames, the emotional factor in nickname, which pay more attention to the communicative culture with practicability. In addition, the *Course* provides more culture items on Taiwan’s social habits, and tries to select the typical and interesting items, for example, leisure activities - fishing shrimp, 24-hour convenience stores, food stall lines and street vendors in Taiwan, bike sharing, TV programs with subtitles, the typhoon holiday, etc. If learners want to learn the knowledge of the Chinese culture, there are many channels to get information, but *Course* avoids the difficult topics in elementary textbooks, such as literature, philosophy, politics, history, traditional festivals. It provides some useful culture items in daily life, such as Taiwanese social habits of taboo of number four. It will help the learners to understand more about Taiwan while learning language.

C. Illustrations

Exquisite illustrations can effectively stimulate learners’ interest in learning and help them have a more comprehensive understanding of cultural connotation. This paper has carried on the statistics to the illustrations in the

teaching material. The forms of illustrations in *Integrated* and *Course* are mainly reality images, cartoons and charts. The following is our statistics on the illustrations³.

It can be found from “Table IV” that the total number of illustrations in the two sets of textbooks both exceeds 400 pieces, and the average number of illustrations in each lesson is near. Firstly, illustrations presented in the form of cartoons account for the largest proportion, respectively 68.35% and 73.33%. Such illustrations are easy to understand and interesting. Secondly, the reality images can stimulate learners’ metacognition, deepen their memory of the real communication, and more intuitively understand the cultural connotation behind the illustrations. Charts are the least important.

Through statistical comparison, some problems are found in *Integrated*. Most of the reality images in *Course* are clearly sourced, and are mainly high-quality images authorized by Taiwan’s central meteorological bureau, enterprises and photographers, which complement the presentation of culture items. For example, in *Course*, the Lesson 9 *TV program with subtitles* selected 3 illustrations, they are pictures in news, variety shows and TV series with subtitles, and the sources are indicated. However, the reality images in *Integrated* have not indicated the sources, and some illustrations are disconnected with the content or culture items.

³ It’s important to point out that the pictures of the textbook which are being researched in this paper only relate to teaching process, such as texts, grammar and exercises, not including the illustrations that are meant to be decorative content.

TABLE IV. STATISTICS OF PRESENTATION FORM OF ILLUSTRATION (%/PIECE)

Forms	Reality Images	Cartoons	Charts	Total	Mean (per lesson)
Textbooks					
Integrated	25.61/157	68.35/419	6.04/37	100/613	30.65
Course	22.38/94	73.33/308	4.29/18	100/420	28.00

The following six illustrations (level1 part1) are selected as examples to illustrate the problems in *Integrated*.

First, the information conveyed by the illustrations is not connected to the text. As shown in “Fig. 1”, the topic of this text is *Shall We Eat Chinese food or American food today*, but the illustration just shows Chinese food without American food. Second, the information conveyed by the illustrations is unclear. As shown in “Fig. 2”, it cannot make people recognize the content of the illustration at a glance. It cannot be inferred from the illustrations that the text should be “they like to dance”, and this should be replaced by the illustration with more explicit information. Third, the English translation of the illustration is improper and inaccurate. As shown in “Fig. 3”, the English words are “Please Keep Your Belongings Safe to Ensure They Are Not Stolen”, actually we should say “Please Take Care of Your Belongings against Being Stolen”. In daily life, there are many signs and slogans which provide English translations inaccurately, but the editors use them directly without careful selecting and rearranging, which will affect the teaching results. Fourth, illustrations cannot reflect the reality of modern life. It is impossible to find paper money in one cent (“Fig. 4”) in daily life, and for the learners, there is no need to learn this kind of information.



Fig. 1. Illustration.



Fig. 2. Illustration.



Fig. 3. Illustration.



Fig. 4. Illustration.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper systematically investigates the presentation of cultural items in the two elementary textbooks in China and the United States from a cross-cultural perspective. In terms of the relationship between core characters and activity scenes, *Integrated* has more abundant, diversified and communicative materials. In the presentation of the culture items in the text, *Integrated* is more diverse in form and more extensive in content. From the perspective of culture highlights, *Integrated* focuses on knowledge culture to broaden learners’ horizons, while *Course* focuses on communication culture, which is beneficial for the learners to adapt to local life immediately. For the illustrations, the selection of pictures in *Course* is exquisite, accurate, practical, which worth to learn by the editors. In general, when compiling textbooks, the presentation and arrangement of culture items should be fully considered, and proper use of high-quality illustrations is more effective to accurately convey cultural information.

In order to combine the culture items with learners’ native culture in teaching, we need further discussion and study on how to improve the quality of presentation in culture items, how to meet the needs of Chinese cultural teaching in specific countries and regions, how to improve learners’ cross-cultural ability and create meaningful cross-cultural learning opportunities.

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