



A Study on the Shift in Teaching Orientations Toward Humanistic and Instrumental Approaches in the Seventh and Eleventh Editions of China's Primary School Chinese Language Curriculum—A Case Analysis of “The Young Runtu” from the Perspectives of Sociocultural and Educational Development

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Abstract. This study compares the pedagogical orientations toward “Young Runtu” in the 7th (1987) and 11th (2019) editions of China's national primary Chinese language textbooks, aiming to trace the four-decade evolution of elementary Chinese education in its shifting balance between instrumentality and humanism. Through a diachronic comparative case analysis, the research finds that instructional strategies have shifted from the 7th edition's emphasis on linguistic structures, textual organization, and skill-based integration of reading and writing—centered on the “two basics” (fundamental knowledge and basic skills)—to the 11th edition's focus on affective engagement, cultural identity, and using reading to scaffold writing, reflecting a broader transition from a “two basics”-oriented model to one grounded in core competencies. By linking micro-level textual practices with macro-level sociocultural transformations, this study offers a dynamic analytical framework for understanding textbook reform and provides insights relevant to ongoing curricular innovation in Chinese language education.

Keywords: Primary education; humanism and instrumentality; “Young Runtu”; pedagogical change; sociocultural context

1 Introduction

In contemporary education systems, curriculum standards embody a nation's educational philosophy and vision for talent cultivation, profoundly shaping the direction and quality of instructional practice^[1]. Among the many elements influenced by curriculum reform, textbooks remain central—they serve as both the major carriers of curricular intentions and the most immediate classroom resources.^[2] Whether textbooks faithfully

translate curricular goals directly affects teaching quality, students' learning experiences, and teachers' instructional behaviors^[3]. The close interplay among curriculum standards, textbooks, and teaching strategies thus provides a crucial lens for analyzing educational transformation.

In recent years, the international education research community has widely regarded textbooks as key texts for analyzing curricular ideologies, cultural values, and social change. A series of country-specific studies have shown that textbook content is profoundly shaped by the sociopolitical climate of particular historical periods, dominant ideologies (Ting, 2023.[4, 5] However, diachronic case studies focusing on the evolution of Chinese language textbooks remain relatively scarce. Addressing this gap, the present study takes “Young Runtu” as a case, comparing its treatment in the 7th and 11th editions of China's national primary Chinese textbooks to explore the sociocultural drivers behind shifts in pedagogical orientation, thereby offering a longitudinal perspective for understanding reforms in Chinese language textbook development.

2 Socio-cultural Transformation and the Bidirectional Adaptation of Primary Chinese Teaching

Education, as a subsystem of society, is both constrained by societal demands and exerts a reciprocal influence on social development. The relative emphasis placed on the humanistic and instrumental dimensions of Chinese language instruction has continually been recalibrated in response to evolving sociocultural needs. A review of relevant materials reveals that “Young Runtu” has long been a staple text in primary school Chinese textbooks, offering a stable and consistent case for observing this ongoing adjustment.

3 Reasons for Choosing Lu Xun and “Young Runtu”

Education, as a subsystem of society, is both constrained by societal demands and exerts a reciprocal influence on social development. The relative emphasis placed on the humanistic and instrumental dimensions of Chinese language instruction has continually been recalibrated in response to evolving sociocultural needs. A review of relevant materials reveals that “Young Runtu” has long been a staple text in primary school Chinese textbooks, offering a stable and consistent case for observing this ongoing adjustment.^[6]

4 Reasons for Selecting the Textbook Editions

In 1986, China replaced its centralized textbook system with a state-reviewed model through the establishment of the National Textbook Review Committee for Primary and Secondary Schools. The 7th (1987) and 11th (2019) editions of the national Chinese textbooks—both produced under this review system and separated by over three decades—are thus comparable. The former reflects the early reform era's emphasis on

basic skills, while the latter embodies the contemporary focus on core competencies, making them well-suited for a diachronic analysis of pedagogical orientation.

5 “Young Runtu” in the 7th Edition of the Primary Chinese Unified Textbooks

5.1 Socio-cultural Context: Practical Needs, Ideological Rectification, and Foundational Skills Development

In the 1980s, China’s societal focus shifted decisively toward economic development, creating urgent demand for practically oriented talent equipped with basic literacy and writing skills. Textbook compilation during this period emphasized the “two basics”—fundamental knowledge and basic skills—resulting in a pronounced instrumental orientation.

5.2 Syllabus Philosophy: “Instrumentality First” under the Practical Demands of the 1980s

The 1986 Syllabus for Full-Time Primary Chinese Language Teaching explicitly affirmed the “instrumental nature” of Chinese, prioritizing systematic language training to develop linguistic competence, while positioning ideological education as a subtle, implicit process (“qianyi mohua,” or gradual and imperceptible influence). Text selection criteria remained consistent: texts should embody sound ideological content, exemplify effective language use, and be pedagogically suitable. Instructional objectives were specified across three dimensions—character recognition and writing, reading instruction, and foundational language practice—for each grade level in both five- and six-year primary school systems.^[7]

Notably, the 1986 syllabus introduced goals such as cultivating “socialist citizens,” fostering character, willpower, and aesthetic appreciation, and emphasized moral education through “qianyi mohua,” hinting at an early return of humanistic concerns. Nevertheless, it remained predominantly instrumental—centered on foundational language skills and aligned with societal needs—with humanistic elements playing a secondary, limited role.

5.3 Textbook Structure: Reading–Writing Orientation and Character-writing Model

“Young Runtu” was featured in the 7th edition’s fifth-grade “Writing About People” unit as a model for capturing character traits, with post-reading exercises and “Reading–Writing Notes” emphasizing practical character portrayal techniques. Chen Rong (1986) promoted a “review-through-new-learning” (*zhi xin wen gu*) approach, encouraging students to apply prior analytical skills to text study while reinforcing writing and language knowledge—exemplifying the “lesson-as-practice” (*yi ke dai lian*) strategy, where teaching doubles as structured review.^[8]

5.4 Teaching Strategies: Emphasis on Vocabulary and Rhetoric, Integration of Reading and Writing

In 1983, Chen Xixuan proposed a focused teaching strategy for “Young Runtu,” using key exercises and passages to guide students in analyzing descriptive language. She highlighted environmental imagery (e.g., “deep blue sky,” “golden full moon”) for accumulation, and character details like “rosy face” and “silver neck ring” to illustrate vivid portrayal. By examining the phrase “endless fascinating stories” and related actions/dialogue, students inferred Runtu’s competence and knowledge. This method systematically taught character depiction through appearance, events, and speech.^[9]

6 “Young Runtu” in the Eleventh Edition of the Primary Chinese Unified Textbooks

6.1 Socio-cultural Context: Educating the Whole Person

The reforms embodied in the 11th edition textbook closely align with the sociocultural imperatives of the new era. Emphasizing cultural confidence and moral development, contemporary educational goals have shifted toward fostering well-rounded individuals. Chinese language instruction now seeks a unified integration of instrumentality and humanism, placing greater emphasis on cultural inheritance and affective engagement.

6.2 Syllabus Philosophy: The Unity of Wen (Language and Literature) and Dao (Moral Way) under Quality-Oriented Education

The 2022 curriculum standards explicitly define the Chinese language course as integrating “instrumentality and humanism, structuring its objectives and task clusters around four core competencies: cultural confidence, language use, thinking capacity, and aesthetic creation. The standards advocate a shift from knowledge-centered to competence-centered learning, promoting students’ holistic development through Chinese language education.”^[10]

6.3 Textbook Structure: Thematic Organization and Emotional Engagement

With the growing emphasis on humanism in Chinese language education, the teaching of Lu Xun’s works has shifted from “learning to write” to “reading for emotional understanding.” In the 11th edition of the national textbook, “Young Runtu” is placed as the first lesson in Unit 8 of Grade 6 (first semester), which carries the humanistic theme “Approaching Lu Xun” and emphasizes conveying genuine emotions through narrative—marking a clear departure from the 7th edition’s focus on “character traits.”

Moreover, the new edition dedicates an entire unit to Lu Xun at the Grade 6 level, introducing students to his literary world through affective engagement. These changes

highlight the unique role of humanistic orientation in fostering students' core competencies.

6.4 Teaching Strategies: Reading-to-Write Emotional Expression and Core Literacy Cultivation

Instruction in the 11th edition emphasizes affective engagement and cognitive development, employing strategies such as expressive reading, questioning, and marginal annotation to guide students in interpreting characters' emotions. Task clusters—such as “Telling a Fresh Story” or “Completing the Narrative”, which are designed to integrate literary insight with language practice.

Teaching during this period foregrounds the integration of thinking and expression. Dai Meixue (2023) utilized visual thinking tools to help students deepen their emotional engagement with the text while conducting imitative writing exercises, thereby merging linguistic application with aesthetic experience.^[11]

7 Reflection and Conclusion

This study uses “Young Runtu” as a central case to compare the 7th (1987) and 11th (2019) editions of China's national primary Chinese textbooks, focusing on curriculum standards, textbook organization, and teaching strategies. It reveals the historical evolution from a strong instrumental focus in the 7th edition—driven by practical needs and emphasizing language skills and moral education—to a more balanced approach in the 11th edition, which integrates humanism under the national policy of “core literacy.” The latter highlights cultural understanding and emotional expression, blending affective experience with linguistic competence. This study has certain limitations: it focuses only on “Young Runtu” in two textbook editions, excluding other works by Lu Xun or additional versions, and emphasizes the “teaching” dimension while neglecting the “learning” perspective. Future research could combine student work analysis, classroom observation, and interviews to examine whether the identified pedagogical orientations genuinely affect learning outcomes, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay among textbooks, teachers, and students.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

J.Y.X. conceived the study, conducted the textual analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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