



From Instrumental Communication to Value-Oriented Dialogue: Reconstructing the Presentation of Chinese Culture in International Chinese Textbooks

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Abstract. International Chinese textbooks, as key media for both language instruction and cultural communication, directly influence the effectiveness of developing international Chinese education in the new era through the ways they present Chinese culture. This paper examines four dimensions: the relationship between Chinese culture and international Chinese textbooks, a chronological overview of the presentation of Chinese culture in such textbooks, existing problems and challenges, and strategies for reconstruction. Based on this analysis, it proposes reconstruction strategies that shift the presentation of Chinese culture in international Chinese textbooks from instrumental communication to value-oriented dialogue, aiming to advance international Chinese education toward fostering civilizational dialogue in support of building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Keywords: International Chinese Textbooks, Chinese Culture, Instrumental Communication, Value-Oriented Dialogue.

1 Introduction

On November 15, 2024, Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory letter to the 2024 World Chinese Language Conference. In his message, he noted that “language is a tool for people to exchange ideas, a carrier for the communication of civilization, and a bridge for enhancing understanding” [1]. In the new era, international Chinese language education has consistently taken mutual learning among civilizations as both its goal and mission. International Chinese textbooks serve as one of the key instruments for disseminating language and culture, as well for promoting mutual trust and exchange among civilizations. Strengthening research on strategies for presenting Chinese culture in international Chinese textbooks is therefore crucial to advancing Chinese language teaching from instrumental communication to value-oriented dialogue.

2 The Relationship between Chinese Culture and International Chinese Textbooks

Within the context of globalization, Chinese culture and international Chinese textbooks have formed a mutually empowering relationship: cultural connotations enhance the reception of textbooks, while the systematic design of textbooks facilitates the construction of cultural identity. This relationship can be understood in two main respects. First, Chinese culture constitutes the core content of international Chinese textbooks. International Chinese Textbooks serve the dual functions of language instruction and cultural communication. Second, policy frameworks have reinforced the cultural function of textbooks. Documents such as *Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education* explicitly incorporate cultural awareness into teaching objectives, thereby promoting the transformation of textbooks from mere instructional tools into bridges for mutual learning among civilizations.

3 A Chronological Overview of Chinese Culture as Presented in International Chinese Textbooks

From a global perspective, throughout the development of second language teaching, many countries have tended to focus primarily on the internal structural system of language, while paying insufficient attention to the socio-cultural dimensions embedded within it. This situation did not begin to change until the rise of sociolinguistics in the 1960s.

When this issue is examined in the Chinese context, however, a different picture emerges. Owing perhaps to the enduring vitality of literary creation throughout Chinese history, scholars in ancient China consciously incorporated literary works into the design of Chinese language teaching materials. This tradition of textbook compilation has continued to the present day. From the Yuan dynasty to the Qing dynasty, a considerable portion of international Chinese teaching materials was adapted from literary works such as *Stories Old and New*. Well-adapted international Chinese textbooks not only help learners build a solid foundation in understanding the Chinese language and its writing system, but also transform textbook study and instructional activities into important vehicles for conveying Chinese culture to the wider world.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the relationship between language teaching and culture teaching became a focal point of scholarly discussion. For example, Bentahila & Davies (1989) categorized knowledge in language teaching into linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge [2]. Claire Kramsch, meanwhile, critiqued several “dubious dichotomies” in language teaching discourse at the time, such as the opposition between grammar and communication, and between language and culture [3].

With the growing demand for international communication, Chinese language education has gradually shifted from a sole focus on linguistic skills to a developmental stage that emphasizes the integration of language and culture. In 2017, the General

Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China launched the Project of Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture, identifying “promoting exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and foreign cultures” as one of its seven key tasks. The initiative aims to build China into a country with strong socialist culture, enhance national cultural soft power, and realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

Driven by ongoing innovation, international Chinese textbooks have increasingly highlighted traditional Chinese elements such as folk customs, everyday social life, and intangible cultural heritage practices. At present, three main types of cultural textbooks have emerged in the field of international Chinese education: cultural course textbooks, general cultural knowledge textbooks, and specialized cultural textbooks. Among these, specialized cultural textbooks account for more than 50 percent. Given the wide variety of cultural textbooks available on the market and their uneven quality, careful selection is essential in their use.

4 Problems and Challenges in Presenting Chinese Culture in International Chinese Textbooks

4.1 Flattened Representation of Cultural Content and Textbook Organization

In comprehensive textbooks that are not primarily focused on culture, the forms of cultural presentation tend to be relatively limited. In terms of structural design, cultural content is often relegated to supplementary sections of the textbooks, rather than being effectively integrated into the learning of linguistic knowledge, making it difficult to cultivate learners' awareness of the interrelationship between language and culture. Although specialized cultural textbooks significantly increase the proportion of cultural content, their compilation still largely follows a flattened approach.

To illustrate this point, this study takes *Chinese Traditional Culture and Modern Life* (an advanced cultural reader for international students), edited by Zhang Ying and Jin Shunian, as an example. Compiled in 2000 and published by Peking University Press, this textbook can be regarded as a representative concluding work of cultural textbooks in the late twentieth century.

The textbook consists of eighteen lessons, each addressing a different aspect of traditional culture and modern life, such as Chinese characters and culture, Chinese personal names, marriage customs, and regional cuisines. Although the teacher–student dialogues touch upon cultural differences across countries and regions as well as intercultural communication, they remain primarily centered on the teacher's introduction of Chinese culture and responses to students' questions. As such, they still fall within the paradigm of “cultural transmission” rather than “value-oriented dialogue.” The same editors subsequently published two intermediate-level cultural readers for international students in 2003 and 2004. These volumes largely follow the structure of the advanced reader, with the main modification being the replacement of the teacher figure in the dialogues with that of a “friend.” This change enables a shift

from a unidirectional, omniscient teacher perspective to a more egalitarian dialogic relationship between peers.

Since the beginning of the new century, the update of cultural textbooks has accelerated significantly. However, their capacity to incorporate and summarize new content reflecting contemporary Chinese culture, technological advancements, and social changes remains limited.

For example, consider *Chengdu Impression*, compiled by the Chengdu Base of Confucius Institute Headquarters and published by Southwestern University of Finance and Economics Press in 2019. For instance, the textbook design is more flexible, and the cultural content reflects everyday life and folk practices. Nonetheless, the overall orientation remains primarily focused on cultural communication, and value-oriented dialogue is still insufficiently represented.

4.2 Stereotyped Design of Cultural Activities in Textbooks

Given the diverse cultural backgrounds and cognitive characteristics of Chinese language learners, and the broad, unpredictable audience of international Chinese textbooks, it is difficult to dynamically adjust content to suit individual learners. Regardless of the learner group, cultural activities in a given textbook are typically presented in a fixed format, making the activities rigid and limiting the distinctive features of Chinese culture. Concepts fostering value-oriented dialogue are even rarer.

For instance, in the previously mentioned *Intermediate Cultural Reader for International Students I* from the *Chinese Traditional Culture and Modern Life* series, the first lesson introduces Chinese cuisine. One of the practice activities requires each student to prepare a dish representing their own country, followed by a communal class meal. Objectively, this activity demands considerable resources, is time-consuming, and is unsuitable for typical classroom settings. Similar issues can be found in cultural activities across other textbooks and will not be elaborated further here.

4.3 Digital and Intelligent Enhancement of Cultural Resources in Textbook Materials

The range of media formats available for international Chinese textbooks has been expanding year by year and supporting resources have become increasingly sophisticated with technological advancements. However, there remains a considerable gap between current provisions and the increasingly specific needs of learners. Many textbooks have supplemented traditional media; in addition to the basic “trio” of textbook, teacher’s guide, and workbook, teaching aids such as test manuals, flashcards, color illustrations, and CDs have been added. Current textbooks often include QR codes, allowing users to access learning content via scanning. Children’s editions frequently provide read-aloud functions and incorporate online audiovisual materials, mini-games, and other features to engage younger learners.

Amid the wave of digitalization, a few textbooks have already responded to the evolving needs of international Chinese language education by establishing conven-

ient digital resources such as apps or online learning platforms. For example, the Confucius Institute Headquarters has developed a new model of teaching Chinese as a foreign language called “*Great Wall Chinese*,” which deeply integrates intelligent technology with language instruction. Through the Great Wall Chinese Smart Cloud Platform, the model enables flipped classrooms, blended online–offline teaching, and other flexible modes, effectively delivering Chinese language knowledge and culture to learners worldwide. Looking ahead, it is hoped that the field of cultural instruction will soon see the emergence of optimized smart and digital textbooks, widespread development of cultural teaching apps, and the construction of comprehensive digital cultural resource libraries.

5 Problems and Challenges in Presenting Chinese Culture in International Chinese Textbooks

To support the transition of international Chinese language education from language instruction to intercultural dialogue, and to more effectively facilitate the communication of Chinese culture within the framework of mutual understanding and cultural exchange, it is necessary to break through the limitations of traditional textbook design and strive to construct an internationally standardized cultural framework for textbooks. Specifically, the approach can be developed along three key dimensions.

5.1 Flattened Representation of Cultural Content and Textbook Organization

In comprehensive textbooks, efforts to expand channels for cultural communication should be centered on teaching objectives, integrating language knowledge with cultural elements. A key principle is to embed cultural content organically within the textual context, incorporating material, spiritual, and institutional aspects of culture, thereby avoiding a separation of language and culture. In exercise design, emphasis should be placed on the expansion and interpretation of cultural knowledge. Teachers can use multimodal approaches aligned with the cultural focus of each lesson to facilitate deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Classroom and extracurricular activities can be designed to create authentic communicative contexts, allowing learners to engage in role-playing, debates, investigations.

Cultural textbooks should uphold an open and inclusive perspective, reconstruct the cultural knowledge system, and fulfill the aims of understanding, respect, and innovation in intercultural dialogue. They should establish localized frameworks for interpreting and communicating culture, following a design logic that moves from global issues to regional cases and then focuses on a Chinese perspective, thereby promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. While maintaining a Chinese cultural perspective in discourse, textbooks should also aim to construct a multidimensional framework for value-oriented dialogue.

5.2 Continuing the Development of Digitally-Enhanced Cultural Textbooks and Supporting Resources

In its key work plan for 2024, the National Textbook Committee explicitly stated the need to “accelerate the digital transformation of textbooks and promote textbook development to serve major national strategies and talent cultivation needs” [4]. Looking ahead, we should draw on the Confucius Institute’s “Great Wall Chinese” digital-intelligent model to develop digital resources and immersive teaching functions, creating diverse application scenarios for cultural communication and value-oriented dialogue. This requires textbook authors to stay abreast of developments in big data and artificial intelligence, collaborating with technology specialists to produce entirely new digitally-enhanced cultural textbooks.

Online learning platforms leveraging AI and other network information technologies should be developed to map global intercultural dialogue, systematically present the evolution of world civilizations, and highlight both the historical status and contemporary value of Chinese civilization, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of textbook use. The digitized performance of *Night Banquet in the Tang Dynasty Palace* by the Zhengzhou Song and Dance Theater has been widely praised, demonstrating that the integration of traditional aesthetics with modern technology can effectively lower barriers to cultural understanding. Such examples can serve as dynamic materials for presenting Chinese culture in textbooks.

5.3 Leveraging AR/VR Technology to Reconstruct Chinese Culture in Textbooks and Innovate Teaching Models

AR/VR technology, through immersive experiences and interactive design, provides a transformative tool for presenting culture in textbooks, shifting from “knowledge transmission” to “value resonance.” As Mills, N., Courtney, M., Dede, C., Dressen, A., & Gant, R. (2020) found, “the VR narratives allowed students to envision, experience, and understand diverse facets of local culture and more vividly imagine their future role as participants in local communities” [5]. At its core, this approach constructs a three-dimensional teaching framework of virtual-real integration, dynamic interaction, and intercultural dialogue, breaking the static presentation mode of traditional textbooks.

By integrating AR/VR technology to build cultural experience scenarios, a technology-driven immersive learning environment can be created. In Chinese cultural education, virtual reality can, for example, reconstruct ancient Silk Road trade scenes, allowing learners to understand the principles of mutual benefit through role-playing and engage in value-oriented dialogue with the modern concept of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, AR/VR can bring textbook content such as paper-cutting, shadow puppetry, and woodblock New Year prints to life through 3D animation and gesture-based interaction. AR/VR technology can also support the design of cross-cultural dialogue mechanisms, such as comparative learning modules. By overlaying similar cultural phenomena from different civilizations, students can analyze the underlying value logic behind cultural differences.

6 Conclusion

International Chinese textbooks function as primary vehicles for conveying Chinese culture and values, fostering “the development of the ability to perceive national and cultural values of the target language, training the subjects of the educational process for a successful dialogue of cultures” [6]. Through carefully designed pedagogical strategies and scientific support, Chinese language textbooks can successfully achieve the reconstruction of cultural presentation, moving from instrumental communication to value-oriented dialogue.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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