

Cultural Values in Chinese as a Foreign Language Textbooks: Tracing the Historical Evolution and Envisioning Future Textbook Writing

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Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) textbooks are an important vehicle for international communication, so examining the diachronic evolution of their cultural values has historical and practical significance. Based on previous research and textbook analysis, this paper proposes a framework for cultural values in CFL textbook, which consists of eight dimensions and 22 elements. This framework is used to examine the textual discourse of three sets of textbooks published in the 1950s, the 1980s-1990s, and the new century. The study revealed that the cultural value concerns across three generations of textbooks have grown over time, each presenting the characteristics of its era. The historical review provides valuable insights for future textbook development, suggesting that efforts should be made to portray a multifaceted positive image of China, to distinguish insider and outsider perspectives when fostering political identification, and to infuse cultural values by upholding a Chinese perspective, embracing a global outlook, and caring for the well-being of all humanity.

Keywords: Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) textbooks, culture values, textbook writing

Introduction

Language and culture are inseparable, and foreign language learning is a process of synergistic development of language, culture, and thinking. While learners acquire language knowledge and skills, they also learn about the target culture. Foreign language textbooks contain rich cultural content that may subtly shape learners' perception of the target culture. The cultural values of a nation or society are the sum of its national image, cultural traditions, ways of life, behavioral concepts, arts, etc., reflecting the core ideas and value orientations in its cultural system. With the development of globalization and more frequent international interactions, Chinese and Western cultures show a trend of integrated development. As China's comprehensive national strength and international status continue to improve, facing the influence of Western culture, China sees a greater need to

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build a positive national image and disseminate cultural values abroad. Despite the presence of various channels and media, the role of traditional textual symbols is indispensable. As a carrier of textual symbols, Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) textbooks, teaching materials for non-native speakers learning Chinese, are an important vehicle for conveying Chinese cultural values. How have the cultural values reflected in our CFL textbooks evolved over time? Is it conducive to national image construction and international cultural communication? The exploration of these questions is of historical significance and social practical significance and has enlightening effects on the future compilation of CFL textbooks and the international dissemination of cultural values.

Literature Review

Research on the History of CFL Textbooks

Since the inception of teaching Chinese to the Eastern European exchange students at Tsinghua University in 1950, China's formal Chinese teaching for foreign learners has spanned over seven decades. Many scholars have reviewed the development of CFL textbooks during this period. For instance, Zhao (1987) reviewed the evolution of CFL textbooks from the 1950s to the 1980s, and proposed principles, such as personalized, practical, engaging, and scientific. Cheng (2001) collected 260 CFL textbooks published since 1949, highlighting the innovations in the systematic design, principles, and content structure of the textbooks in the 1990s; Zhu, Jiang, and Ma (2008) reviewed the development of CFL textbooks published between 1998 and 2008 from three aspects: structure, content, and form; Geng (2011) provided a comprehensive literature review of CFL textbook writing research since 1978; Jiang (2018) summarized the development of CFL textbooks in four stages, discussing the inheritance, and innovation of textbooks in the new century. These studies have systematically sketched the historical evolution of CFL textbooks in China over the past seven decades, laying a solid foundation for the conduct of this research. Based on these reviews, the authors have selected three representative sets of textbooks from different historical stages for subsequent analysis.

Research on Cultural Value Orientation in CFL Textbooks

In recent years, academia has begun to focus on the study of cultural presentation and value orientation in CFL textbooks. Wei (2017) examined the discourse framework of China's national image constructed by two sets of textbooks from China and the US from aspects such as national image dimensions, attitude tendencies, content material selection, international relations framework, and the use of intervention strategies. Wang (2016) pointed out that the five main aspects of national identity in the textbooks analyzed constitute part of the socio-cultural knowledge that only native people can possess, and a large amount of learning content about Chinese morality and civic education may not meet the interests of international learners. Xiong and Peng (2021) examined the graphics-text relationship in two sets of CFL textbooks from China and the US, finding that American textbooks often guide readers to critically reflect on Chinese cultural values and make crosscultural comparison, while the cultural meanings triggered by images in Chinese textbooks are mostly indicative, lacking opportunities for in-depth cultural interpretation. These studies explore the cultural values of textbooks from different perspectives and are of reference value for this research. However, most studies focus on individual textbooks or discuss a specific aspect of the textbooks (such as national identity), lacking a diachronic examination of the cultural values in textbooks over different periods. Therefore, this paper intends to select three representative sets of textbooks from different stages since the 1950s for content analysis, to sort out the

diachronic changes of the cultural values they contain, and to explore their implications for future textbook writing.

Frameworks of Cultural Values in Previous Studies

Some attempts have been made to analyze the cultural values embedded in the textbooks, with researchers proposing various analytical frameworks. Wu (1999) suggested a two-dimension framework, “morality” and “politics”, which he used to compare the value orientations of CFL in Hong Kong China and Chinese mainland. He (2008), based on a review of previous frameworks and educational documents, proposed a framework consisting of eight dimensions—others, nature, world, country, nation, society, family, and individual—and 27 value elements. Zhao and Lv (2011) made minor adjustments to He’s framework and analyzed the value orientations of seven sets of domestic junior high school Chinese textbooks. Liao (2020) proposed three dimensions: traditional Chinese virtues, core values of socialism, and the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, as well as 39 core value items including benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. These studies have provided insights for formulating the analytical framework of this study. A preliminary examination of the selected textbooks shows that He’s (2008) framework covers various aspects of cultural values in the textbooks. Based on his framework, combined with the analysis of the textbook content, the authors proposed their own analytical framework described as follows.

Analytical Framework of the Study

In consideration of the needs of this study and based on the analysis of the selected textbooks, the following adjustments have been made to He’s (2008) framework:

(a) rearrange the eight dimensions from the micro level to the macro level: Individual, Family, Society, Nation, Country, World, Nature, and Others;

(b) delete terms that are ambiguous (e.g., Earth’s Resources) or have overlapping meanings (e.g., Biological Knowledge and Natural Knowledge);

(c) replace Nature with Science, encompassing Scientific Knowledge and Scientific Inquiry in various disciplines;

(d) replace Others with Humanities, which covers Historical Knowledge, Literary Works, And Literary and Artistic Appreciation;

(e) delete elements with overly broad meanings (e.g., Expressing Emotions) or break them into separate elements (e.g., Life Pursuits is broken down to Personal Pursuits and Lifestyle), and replace terms too narrow with broader concepts (e.g., replace International Cooperation with International Exchange; use Family Ties to cover the three elements under the Family dimension);

(f) adjust a few elements to align with textbook content analysis, for instance, add Mindset and Character, delete Ethnic Coexistence (not relevant in the textbooks) and Social Morality (mixed with Personal Morality) etc. Based on the above adjustments, the analytical framework for this paper is proposed as follows (see Table 1).

Guided by this framework, we examined the integration of cultural values in three sets of textbooks. Considering the need for comparable data and the fact that different textbooks follow different patterns, we decided that the analysis would mainly focus on the main texts (including reading texts, dialogues, additional readings). We then conducted back-to-back text coding, and when discrepancies in coding results occurred, we reached a consensus through discussion.

Table 1

A Framework of Cultural Values in CFL Textbooks

| Dimension | Element | Details |
|------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Individual | Mindset & character | Thoughts & views, moral character & personality, interpersonal skills etc., e.g., strong-mindedness, optimism, courtesy |
| | Personal pursuits | Capability development, life ideals, aesthetic tastes, etc., e.g., love for reading, serving the people |
| | Lifestyle | Healthy habits, consumption patterns, leisure & social activities |
| Family | Family ties | Family members caring for each other, showing love & affection |
| | Family culture | Family atmosphere, family values etc., e.g., the joy of family togetherness, filial piety |
| Society | Social culture | Social values, thinking patterns, and lifestyles, e.g., gender equality, respecting teachers & valuing education |
| | Local customs | The natural environment, resident demeanor, lifestyle, and religious customs of a particular region in China |
| | Citizen image | The general image of Chinese nationals in cross-cultural communication, e.g., being thrifty and hospitable |
| Nation | National spirit | Patriotism, unity, love for peace, diligence, bravery, perseverance and ceaseless self-improvement |
| | National culture | Traditional Chinese culture, e.g., cultural stories, traditional arts |
| Country | Political identification | Identification with the Party, revolutionary history, political system, and national policies |
| | National development | Major achievements in the development of national economy, technological breakthroughs etc. |
| | Tourism geography | Tourist attractions and scenic spots across China |
| World | Knowing the world | Content about different places around the world outside China |
| | International exchange | Various forms of cross-national exchange, e.g., academic conference and trade exhibition |
| | World culture | Traditional & modern cultures of regions outside China |
| | Human wellbeing | Important issues concerning the well-being of the mankind, e.g., environmental protection and world peace |
| Science | Scientific knowledge | Popular scientific knowledge in various fields, e.g., natural environment, biology, technology, and medicine |
| | Scientific inquiry | Stories and experiences of scientific inquiry in various academic fields |
| Humanities | Literary works | Detailed introductions or excerpts of classic and popular literary works |
| | Historical knowledge | Major historical events and well-known historical figures in China and abroad |
| | Literary & artistic appreciation | Appreciation and interpretation of films, literature, and dramas |

Cultural Values in Three Sets of CFL Textbooks

Manual of Chinese Published in the 1950s

The Manual of Chinese (Volumes 1 & 2), published in 1958, was the first official textbook for teaching Chinese to foreigners after the founding of People's Republic of China. There are two types of lessons in the textbook: phonetics and grammar. An analysis of the texts in 60 grammar lessons revealed a total of 50 instances of cultural values. The main focus is on three dimensions—Country, Individual, Society (with frequencies of 16, 14, and 11 respectively, together accounting for 82% of the total), followed by the Nation dimension (7, 14%), with occasional attention to the World and Humanities, and little attention to Family and Science. Specifically, within the Country dimension, the primary focus is on Political Identification, e.g., reflecting the superiority of the socialist system and the people's love for the Party and the country through comparisons of their lives before and after the founding of New China, as well as under different social systems. The Individual dimension mainly

involves Personal Pursuits like reading, studying, and working hard, and serving the people, as well as Mindset and Character like caring for and helping others, adhering to social morality, and observing social etiquette. The Society dimension primarily depicts the hospitable and thrifty Citizen Image, followed by Social Culture (e.g., Chinese films and dramas, more women starting to receive education). The Nation dimension mainly focuses on the National Spirit of being hardworking, brave, peace-loving, and unafraid of difficulties, as well as cultural stories like the *Old Man Moving the Mountains*. The World dimension includes only one item related to International Exchange—a friend of an international student in China expressing a desire to learn more about China. In short, as a representative of the first generation of CFL textbooks after the founding of the PRC, *Manual of Chinese* places the most emphasis on integrating cultural values, such as Political Identification, Citizen Image, Personal Pursuits, Mindset and Character, and National Spirit. On one hand, it guides students to pursue a positive lifestyle and personal ideals of serving the people; on the other hand, it integrates content about the past hardships and the happy new life, reflecting the achievements made under the Party's leadership. At the same time, it portrays the Citizen Image (being warm-hearted, friendly, and hardworking etc.), as well as National Spirit (e.g., patriotism, love for peace, passion for socialism construction), helping learners better understand China.

Practical Chinese Reader Published in the 1980-1990s

Practical Chinese Reader (Volumes 1-6) was first published between 1981 and 1990 and has been reprinted 15 times, making it one of the most widely used CFL textbooks in the world. Data analysis reveals that the cultural value content of the textbook is quite rich (with a total frequency of 198), with Science being least represented (3, 1.5%). Attention to other dimensions is relatively balanced, with Country receiving the most emphasis (37, 18.7%), followed by Society and Nation (17.2% and 16.7%), Individual and Humanities accounting for 14.1% and 13.6%, and Family and World both at 9.1%. Data regarding each dimension show that:

1. The Country dimension emphasizes Political Identification (18 times), highlighting people's love for New China and support for the Party. This is primarily achieved by exposing the darkness of the old society, for example, the destruction of humanity caused by feudal ethics, the tragic life of folk musician Abing in the old society, and the grandfather in *In-Laws* recalling past hardships and saying that it was only after the Party's arrival that they had a home. Political identification is also integrated through stories of revolutionary figures, revolutionary events, and narratives of the close relationship between the military and the people. Another significant element in this dimension is Tourism Geography (14 times), which covers places like Beijing, Shanghai, Jingdezhen, the Three Gorges, and Suzhou gardens.

2. The Society dimension focuses on various aspects of Social Culture (19 times), encompassing daily life topics like Chinese cuisine and attire, as well as social trends, such as gender equality, respecting teachers and valuing education, talent selection that breaks from conventional standards and opportunities for lost youth to reform.

3. Nation showcases various aspects of traditional ethnic culture (25 times), including cultural stories (e.g., *Go South by Driving the Cart North*, *The Legend of the White Snake*), traditional arts (e.g., Peking Opera, Chinese painting, calligraphy, ethnic music), as well as health practices (e.g., traditional Chinese medicine, qigong, martial arts).

4. Individual primarily integrates personal qualities, such as kindness, dedication, selfless commitment, responding to grievances with virtue, prioritizing the collective good over personal gain, as well as personal lifestyle elements like leisure and entertainment, hobbies, and daily activities.

5. Content concerning Humanities is evenly distributed across three elements, Historical Knowledge (8 times), Literary and Artistic Appreciation (9 times), and Literary Works (10 times). It covers historical periods like the Qin Dynasty and the late Qing Dynasty, the history of ancient medicine, diverse literary forms including poetry, novels, and plays from ancient to modern times. It also encompasses literary and artistic activities like watching plays, listening to crosstalk, and visiting art exhibitions.

6. In addition to Family Ties, Family also involves various aspects of Family Culture, such as the traditional and modern roles of women in the family, non-interference by parents in their children's love and marriage choices, and the younger generation's respect and filial piety towards elders.

7. The World focuses on a rich and diverse range of International Exchange activities (14 times), such as cross-border tourism and trade, mutual visits by national delegations, embassy receptions, academic exchanges, and the exchange of animals as symbols of friendship between countries.

Boya Chinese in the New Century

Boya Chinese (Volumes 1-9) is organized into four levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced, published since 2004 and still in use today. A total of 137 lessons in the entire series integrate cultural value elements with a total frequency of 233. Overall, the textbook emphasizes cultural values related to Individual and Society the most (together constituting 49.8%), followed by the World dimension (13.3%), while also giving significant attention to the other five dimensions (ranging from 5.2% to 9% each). Specifically, the Individual dimension mainly includes two aspects: Mindset and Character (33 times) and Lifestyle (23 times). The former, in addition to personality traits, such as curiosity, resilience, optimism, diligence, integrity, and gratitude, more often involves understanding life philosophies through stories, fostering dialectical and critical thinking, such as looking at issues from different perspectives, critically thinking about traditional stories, breaking self-imposed limitations etc.; the latter mainly concerns daily lifestyle including healthy habits, hobbies, and interpersonal interactions. Society's Social Culture is the most integrated value element (37 times), encompassing aspects, such as Chinese cuisine, dining culture, vacation systems, social harmony, and educational issues, as well as critical reflections on negative social phenomena. The World dimension includes knowledge and culture from countries across the world, such as fashionable attire in the UK, France, America, and South Africa, technological advancements in Britain, French art, the Slow Food Movement in Italy, and more. The Nation dimension primarily focuses on National Culture, which includes the Chinese language and culture, ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts, agrarian society culture, Buddhist culture, and poetry and mythical allusions. The Country dimension primarily revolves around Tourism Geography (11 times), introducing places, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Tibet, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and more. Political Identification is noticeably weaker compared to earlier textbooks. In terms of National Development, it highlights the changes in life since the founding of New China, China's urban competitiveness, and China's performance in global quality of life surveys. In the Family dimension, the element of Family Ties is often about paternal and maternal love, while Family Culture involves children's education, gratitude towards parents, and roles within the family. Science receives more attention than before (16 times), focusing mainly on popular Scientific Knowledge with topics including language learning, bees' behavior, the benefits of vegetarianism, left-handedness, single/double eyelids, desert mirages, cloning technology, climate change, and genetic modification. The Humanities dimension is primarily centered on Chinese Historical Knowledge (8 times). Although the content is not extensive, it spans a vast historical range, from the era of the Yan and Huang

emperors to the Reform and Opening-up period. There are also a few Literary Works featured, such as Shi Tiesheng’s *My Dream* and Hu Shi’s *Mr. Almost*.

Evolution of Cultural Values in Over Seven Decades and Insights for the Future

As previously discussed, the cultural value analysis of the 17 volumes across the three textbook series yielded 50, 198, and 233 instances of cultural values respectively, reflecting a clear trend toward greater emphasis on cultural values over time. The first-generation textbooks cover only 12 of the 22 elements in the framework, while the later two generations both cover 21 elements. Figure 1 illustrates the integration of cultural values across eight dimensions, the three lines from bottom to top representing *Manual of Chinese*, *Practical Chinese Reader*, and *Boya Chinese* respectively. Data indicate that the three generations of CFL textbooks since the 1950s have shifted from a focus on the Country, Individual, and Society dimensions, to a broader inclusion of Country, Society, Nation, and Individual, ultimately centering on Individual, Society, and World. Society and Individual receive consistent emphasis across all generations, while Country is prominent in the first two generations but recedes in the last, which instead focuses on global perspectives. Scientific themes remain relatively underrepresented across all three series.

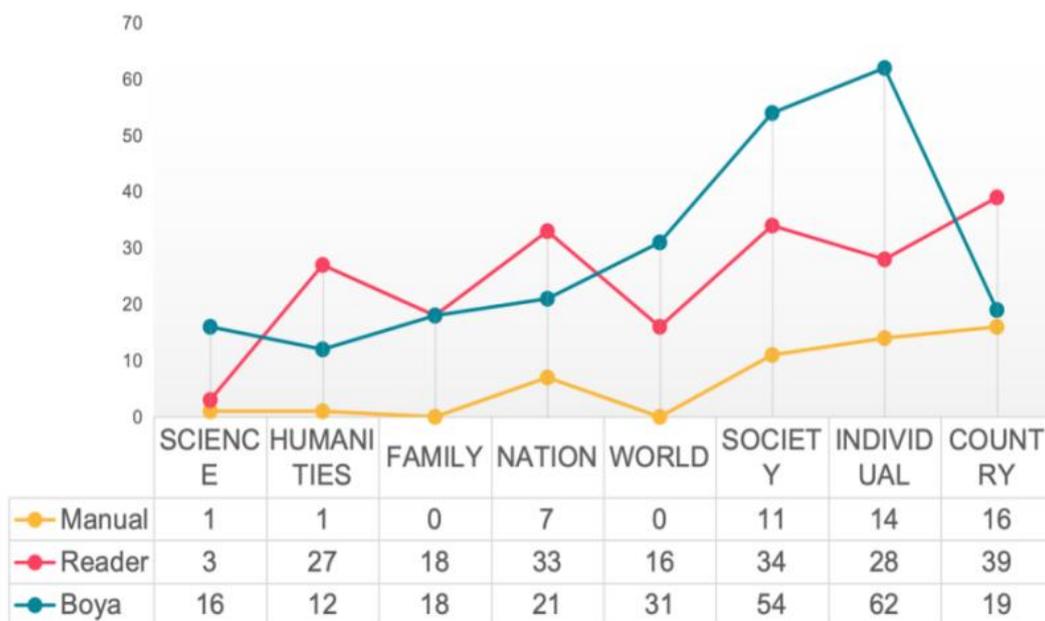


Figure 1. Cultural value elements in the eight dimensions across the three textbooks.

When it comes to the integration of specific cultural value elements, the 1950s textbook has significantly lower coverage of most value elements compared to the other two series, with an uneven distribution focused primarily on Political Identification, Citizen Image, Personal Pursuits, and Mindset and Character. A key feature of the textbook is its use of political language and themes to reinforce Political Identification, including phrases, such as “Long Live Chairman Mao” and “Long Live the People’s Republic of China”. It contrasts pre-liberation hardships under landlords—characterized by hunger, inadequate clothing, and child mortality due to cold—with the improved post-liberation conditions, including land distribution, cooperative farming, and a more prosperous communal life.

The 1980s-1990s textbook showcases a balanced integration of cultural values, with the most prominent elements being National Culture, Social Culture, Political Identification, Tourism Geography, and International Exchange. While maintaining a focus on Political Identification, this textbook indicates a cultural shift, with increased emphasis on National Culture and a growing attention to Tourism Geography. These two aspects are often intertwined, as demonstrated in a text quoting Mr. and Mrs. Brown: “The landscapes of China are not only beautiful, but also closely intertwined with its ancient culture. When visiting historical sites, you can hear many myths and historical stories, as well as see poems and writings left by ancient literary figures, and appreciate their calligraphic art. In the most scenic spots, there are also often many ancient gardens, buildings, and cultural relics. Tourists... not only enjoy the scenery there but also gain an understanding of China’s ancient culture”. Another distinctive change is that International Exchange extends beyond single context of international students in China to include trade, cultural events, academic exchanges, and international fairytale festival. All this content fosters a portrayal of China as a friendly and open country.

In the 21st-century textbook, Social Culture and Mindset and Character are prioritized, followed by Lifestyle, National Culture, Knowing the World, and Scientific Knowledge. Compared to the textbook of earlier generation, this textbook continues to emphasize social and ethnic culture while substantially increasing content related to personal values and lifestyle. The World dimension has evolved from minimal mention in the 1950s to multiple international contexts in the 1980s-1990s and, finally, a focus on global lifestyles, new trends, arts, technology, and notable figures across the world. Scientific Knowledge also receives more attention, with an increase in frequency from 0, 1, to 15, and topics expanding to biology, geography, technology, ecology, language, and psychology. Political Identification at the Country level receives less emphasis, shifting towards Human Wellbeing. Rather than explicit political discourse, political identity is subtly integrated through content on China’s socioeconomic development and rising living standards post-reform, fostering implicit support for China’s policies and governance. Key global themes include resource conservation, ecological protection, world peace, and sustainable development.

From the analysis of the integration of cultural values in CFL textbooks over the past seven decades, useful lessons can be drawn to shed light on future textbook writing. Firstly, throughout the ages, textbooks have aimed to shape a positive national image across multiple dimensions. Yet, some texts contradict this principle and may lead to misunderstandings or reinforce negative stereotypes about China. For example, one text is about a woman nicknamed Glutton, who is so fond of eating that she describes everything in terms of food, such as “as white as milk” or “as thick as a pancake.” One day, her husband, fed up with this, slaps her and shouts, “Stop talking about food! Otherwise, I’ll beat you.” The portrayal of a gluttonous, foolish woman and a rude, violent man may reinforce the stereotype of the male-dominated culture in old China. In another text, an old man repeatedly abandons his dog, but the clever dog always manages to find its way back home. Eventually, it is given to a dog collector from a medical research institute for use in scientific research. Such content, which depicts the heartless treatment of animals, is improper for CFL teaching materials, particularly given the Western false accusations regarding the consumption of dog meat in China. In future textbook writing, the impact of discourse content on national image should be carefully considered to avoid negative influences.

Secondly, it is evident that the political characteristics of textbooks are marked by the times. For example, the first-generation textbook often integrated political content and discourse explicitly. The second-generation textbook also integrated political identification implicitly through stories of people’s ideological awakening and

work enthusiasm in the new era, and stories of the close relationship between the military and civilians. By the third-generation textbook, the content of political identification is significantly weakened. It is worth noting that textbooks should consider the different identities of learners in the design of ideological and political content, distinguishing between domestic and international audiences. The effort concerning political identification should be directed towards helping overseas students understand Chinese people's identification first and then develop their own identification with China. To this end, attention should be paid to content selection and integration methods, integrating implicitly through stories that can evoke empathy, rather than blunt political discourse. It is particularly improper to attempt to develop identification with China by criticizing the West. For example, in a text about how doctors have managed to save a severely burned steelworker under the leadership of the Party, it claims that we should not blindly trust capitalist medical literature (which says that a 75% burn is incurable). Viewing scientific issues from a political perspective seems inappropriate. These pitfalls that early textbooks fell into should be avoided in future textbook writing.

Lastly, all the three sets of textbooks have endeavored to shape an overall positive national image, with a noticeable emphasis on domestic topics over global ones. Discussions about the world are often framed within the context of China or serve as a comparison point. For example, the text *America Doesn't Have So Many Bicycles* contrasts U.S. demographics, history, and development with China, ending with the student's impressions of China's abundances in population, vehicles, foods, historical sites, and ethnic groups. International exchange scenarios often remain China-centered, such as a professor visiting China to study ancient Chinese history, a winery director sharing Chinese wine stories with foreign guests, or Chinese ink-painting animation winning an award at an international fairytale festival. Looking ahead, textbook development should continue to highlight China while broadening its scope to include more of the global context. Future textbooks could place greater emphasis on global issues that affect humanity, including the popularization of education, educational equality, poverty alleviation, environmental conservation, energy crises, refugee challenges, technological innovation, world peace, social justice, and cultural diversity. By doing so, we can cultivate in students an awareness of a global community of a shared future and instill a sense of global citizenship.

Conclusion

This study introduces a framework of cultural values encompassing eight dimensions and 22 elements, applying it to analyze the cultural content within 17 volumes from three textbook series spanning the 1950s, the 1980s-1990s, and the early 21st century, encompassing 306 lessons and nearly 1,000 texts. The results indicate a rise in content embedded with cultural values across generations, each reflecting the historical context of its time. The second-generation textbooks provide the most balanced distribution of relevant content across the eight dimensions. All three generations place significant emphasis on the Society and Individual dimensions, which include Personal Pursuits, Mindset and Character, and Social Culture, while paying limited attention to Science. Attention to the Country dimension (Political Identification in particular) features prominently in the first two generations, whereas the 21st-century series shifts focus towards global perspectives. For the integration of cultural values in future CFL textbooks, there should be a continued effort to portray a positive national image across multiple dimensions, while distinguishing between insider and outsider perspectives for political identification. In addition to adopting a Chinese perspective, future textbooks should embrace a global outlook, demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of humanity.

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