

Textbooks of Chinese Culture for English Majors in China: A Semiotic Approach

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of language textbooks in promoting cultural consciousness in foreign language education. A semiotic framework is proposed that considers texts, images, and tasks as agents that create specific meanings in the process of semiosis. The analysis utilizes examples from two Chinese culture coursebooks to illustrate how semiotic analysis can shed light on how learners interact with cultural materials. The results highlight the heavy influence of the classroom on learners' interpretation of material and the primary focus on linguistic proficiency in images and texts, including those with cultural significance. The author argues for a more deliberate utilization of images and texts to cultivate critical and reflective appreciation of culture, self, and others. The findings contribute to ongoing research on the ideological practice of language education and underscore the importance of ongoing scrutiny of language textbooks.

Keywords: Textbook; Chinese Culture Teaching; Semiosis; Cultural Appreciation

1. Introduction

Ever since China attaches great importance to cultivate “cultural confidence” in education, a term Chinese President Xi Jinping added to the previous “three confidences” propagated by the Communist Party of China (CPC) during his speech to celebrate the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CPC on July 1, the teaching of Chinese culture is viewed as an important point of departure to prepare foreign language majors in colleges to shoulder the national responsibility of disseminating Chinese culture. Therefore, Chinese culture is coming to the fore of academic discussion in the English language teaching field. Currently, the teaching of Chinese culture for English majors in Chinese universities aims to enable them to attain proficiency in articulating Chinese cultural concepts and effectively narrating Chinese anecdotes in the English. There has been a shift in perception, whereby developing competence solely in the target culture is no longer desirable or feasible. In fact, it is suggested that even intercultural competence may not be enough. Prominent scholars in the field of language education, such as Kumaravadivelu (2008) and Byram (2008, 2011), have advocated for the cultivation of global cultural consciousness and intercultural citizenship as fundamental objectives of language learning. In the view of these scholars, language education should be directed towards a transformative goal that can only be achieved through critical pedagogy that emphasizes cultural reflection and understanding. Such a pedagogy requires learning materials that encourage the cultivation of an open, reflexive, and globally aware language learner. Textbooks play a crucial role in promoting the socially transformative goals of language education. Numerous studies have explored the representation of culture in English language textbooks, with many taking a critical perspective and analyzing the textual and visual materials of the textbooks. This is often done using quantitative or qualitative methods, or a combination of both. These studies have yielded valuable insights into how dominant political and cultural ideologies are reflected in the visual and textual content of textbooks, and have raised concerns about the role of English as a tool of hegemony (Su, 2007; Liu, 2005).

However, Weninger & Kiss (2013, p.2) suggest that merely analyzing learning materials as conveyors of cultural information does not fully capture the intricate process of cultural meaning-making. Such meanings are socially constructed by the interplay of perspectives from students, teachers, and materials involved in the learning process. By introducing semiotic principles in EFL textbook analysis, they focus on the formal dimensions of the meaning-making process, on how things can mean, rather than on empirical classroom data from distinct learning contexts. Drawing on Weninger & Kiss's semiotic principles in textbook analysis, the semiotic logic that generates certain interpretations in excerpts from two Chinese culture textbooks in China is analyzed.

In the following sections, key concepts from Peircean semiotics will be utilized to examine cultural representations in Chinese culture textbooks. Then, the methods section outlines the materials analyzed and explains the principles of the analysis. The article concludes with a summary of our arguments and implications for teaching and learning Chinese culture for English majors in China.

2. Semiotic Approaches to The Study of Culture

Anthropologists have shifted their focus in the past few decades from describing the language, artifacts, and beliefs of a specific culture or group to examining how cultural values and beliefs emerge and evolve ((e.g., Agha, 2003, 2007; Urban, 2001)). This approach often involves analyzing how cultural practices and their various elements, such as participants, objects, and linguistic forms, are perceived as signs and acquire distinct social meanings through discursive-semiotic analysis of cultural (re)production. By drawing upon the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, these approaches have been able to explore the interrelationships between linguistic, social, and ideological processes in cultural production and participation.

Peirce's semiotic theory provides a framework for understanding how signs function in communication and how they are related to the things or concepts that they represent. Peirce's theory of signs is based on a triadic relationship that connects a sign, its object (the thing it represents), and an interpretant that is created in the mind of an interpreter. As Peirce (1980) explained, a sign is defined as "anything that is related to a second thing, its object, in terms of a quality that brings a third thing, its interpretant, into relation with the same object" (p. 92). Peirce's semiotic theory posits that anything can be considered a sign as long as it meets certain formal requirements (Liszka, 1996). Additionally, according to Peirce, interpretants - the meanings or mental images produced in an interpreter's mind - should be viewed as signs in their own right, capable of initiating further processes of semiosis. Peirce also developed several classifications of signs, the most notable being his categorization based on their relation to their objects. Icons, for instance, are linked to their objects through similarity or resemblance; thus, a photograph or a map qualifies as an icon because it shares traits with its object (Liszka, 1996, p. 37). In a broader sense, Peirce's concept of semiosis - the process by which the sign-object-interpretant triad operates - has been utilized by discourse analysts to describe the interpretation of both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior in social interactions. This application of Peirce's theory highlights the interplay between literal (denotational) meanings and sociocultural meanings. Researchers such as Besnier (2004) and Hall and O'Donovan (1996) have employed this framework to explore the nuances of social interaction and meaning-making. Our analysis of textbooks employs semiotic principles to develop a comprehensive understanding of how meaning is created in human interaction. The present research seeks to use Peirce's sign typology as a starting point to describe the fundamental semiotic relationship between text and image in Chinese culture textbooks. Through this approach, I hope to shed light on potential processes of semiosis and their implications. In addition to Peircean semiotics, I also incorporate the concept of indexicality into our analysis. This framework allows us to explore how the interplay between text, image, and task as a semiotic complex shapes the process of interpretation, potentially constraining or enabling the chain of semiosis.

To collect data, I focus on two textbooks currently utilized in most foreign languages Schools of Chinese Universities, which I will describe in greater detail in the subsequent section.

3. An Analysis of Textbooks of Chinese Culture to English Majors

3.1 Method

The analysis draws on two textbooks of Chinese culture that were written by and for nonnative speakers of English in China and which follow different language teaching approaches. The selection of textbooks was based on the following factors. For my analysis, I have chosen two textbooks focused on Chinese culture that were designed for nonnative English speakers in China and utilize different language teaching methods. I selected these textbooks based on the following criteria: cultural context and language teaching principle. As to cultural context, the two textbooks that I have chosen were written by both Chinese teachers and intended for a Chinese undergraduate population. This shared cultural background of the authors and potential users of the materials creates opportunities for cultural reflection that may be more difficult to achieve in textbooks designed for a global market. In terms of teaching principles, the two textbooks chosen for analysis are based on contrasting language teaching principles. One textbook follows a communicative syllabus, while the other adopts a structural approach to language teaching. As the teaching approach influences the content, language, and task types of textbooks, I selected these two textbooks to examine their differences in these aspects. The following is a basic characterization of the textbooks with regard to level, scope, and organization, taken mostly from descriptions provided in the foreword of each book:

The first textbook, *Introducing Chinese Culture in English* (Wang & Lu, 2017), was written with some broad objectives: to enhance students' awareness and sense of identification with Chinese culture, cultivate their ability to use English comprehensively, and enable them to undertake the responsibility of promoting Chinese culture to the world while understanding and loving their own culture. This book is based on the teaching practices of traditional classrooms and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The educational resource "English Talks on Chinese Culture" incorporates an innovative online Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) format, providing teachers and students with the flexibility to access the course content at any time and location via their mobile devices. The synergistic interplay between the MOOC and classroom teaching methodologies affords an immersive learning experience of Chinese civilization for both educators and learners alike. The first part of each unit is independent of the MOOC and consists of selected readings from industry experts or classic works. Although the second part of the unit is based on the content of the MOOC, the text is complete, well-structured, and accompanied by exercise, which draws on the author's years of teaching experience and are highly practical and targeted. The third part emphasizes the integration of online and offline teaching, and designs teaching activities around the content of the online MOOC, but the author provides relevant MOOC content transcripts in the teacher's edition.

The second textbook, *A Glimpse of Chinese Culture* (Liao, 2008), a relatively older one, provides a comprehensive introduction to Chinese culture from various aspects, including philosophy, religion, literature, art, traditional festivals, culinary culture, fashion, architecture, tourism, and more. It not only covers the fundamental points of Chinese culture but also delves into the traditional cultural treasures of China, such as tea, liquor, and opera. Furthermore, its revised edition (Liao, 2016) introduces the latest developments and achievements of China in fields such as technology, education, literature, and cuisine, presenting the progress of the times. The content is divided into four major parts: National Overview, Education and Science, Folk Customs and Tourist Attractions. Targeted exercises are also added after each chapter, which can help teachers and students engage in deeper discussions and reflections.

The main aim of this article is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of cultural significance in the chosen textbooks' texts and images. Instead, the principal goal is to suggest an alternative approach for assessing cultural potential in textbooks, which is based on a semiotic understanding of meaning creation and emphasizes a dynamic perspective on culture. In this regard, the focus of my article is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of cultural meaning in the selected textbooks, but rather to propose an alternative method of examining cultural potential. This method is based on a semiotic conceptualization of meaning making and emphasizes a dynamic approach to culture. The analysis and examples I present are intended to illustrate specific conceptual points, and my approach is inherently qualitative. The focal points of our research comprise both images and texts, as well as the pedagogic tasks that accompany them. It is crucial to highlight this aspect since guided semiosis is a fundamental component of classroom learning, which is assumed to be the primary context in which the textbook is utilized. In contrast to reading a novel, signs and sign complexes in textbooks are generally accompanied by explicit instructions regarding their interpretation. Furthermore, students are aware of this and expect it. As a result, visual and textual elements must be examined in conjunction with tasks that aim to establish relationships between them.

This has significant implications for the types of meaning and interpretation that are likely to arise.

3.2 Findings

Example 1 is in the first part of the unit “Appreciating and Interpreting”, which is an excerpt titled “A Glimpse on the Spring Festival” from the Dream of the Red Chamber about how the Jia Family prepare for the Spring Festival. Interestingly, the illustration (figure 1) in the text has nothing to do with the Dream of the Red Chambers or Chinese festivals, but two clay sculptures, holding lanterns on each side of an ancient-style house out of wrong proportion.



Figure 1, Extract from *Introducing Chinese Culture in English* (Wang & Lu, 2017, p.69)

And the exercise (Figure 2) in the end of this unit is designed to ask students to talk about their favorite festivals, with another picture of a group of clay sculptures of people in the Qing Dynasty celebrating lantern festivals. Judged by the preceding task (not shown here), which involved a blank filling task about the ancient Chinese people's belief about the lunar July as a month for ghosts, also with an image of several clay sculptures, or colored sculptures of a family likely from the Qing dynasty. The student can only associate the clay sculptures with all kinds of Chinese festivals. And they might be misled into believing that the Qing Dynasty and the handcraft clay sculpture are associated with all the origins of Chinese festivals.



Figure 2, Extract from *Introducing Chinese Culture in English* (Wang & Lu, 2017, p.85)

As is mentioned by Peirce (1980, p. 361), text and image here are linked indexically: the drawings (as signs) point to, exhibit their objects. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the meaning or mental image that is evoked in the reader is also a symbol, which is formed by linking the denotations of clay sculptures of people from the Qing Dynasty and Chinese festivals. Although the cultural inappropriateness or inaccuracy (to say the least) of a symbolic sign may be obvious, it may have been overlooked by the visual editor of the book. In these cases, the use of semiotics is more likely to perpetuate and reinforce cultural stereotypes, rather than to initiate critical discussions about cultural representations.

Example2, from *A Glimpse of Chinese Culture*, appears at the beginning of Unit 10, “Architecture”. The image (figure 3) captures the essence of an ancient Chinese garden with a close-up of a pavilion built on a river, while in the distance, a stone arch bridge completes the picturesque scenery. The pedagogic task appearing at the bottom of the picture instructing students to answer four questions: What ancient Chinese architecture impresses you most? Are there any residential houses with distinct features in your hometown? Why are there two stone lions in front of many Chinese buildings? Do you know any famous stone arch bridges in China? These questions are designed as brainstorming questions, open-ended prompts that intend to stimulate creative thinking and generate ideas. Apparently, the task here goes beyond strict denotation in relating image and text and infuses a cultural element, the ancient Chinese architecture. However, the task presents several problems when it comes to using it as a means of cultural learning and reflection. As the task aims to explore a topic, problem, or challenge from different perspectives, yet the picture gives the connections that resulted from process of unguided semiosis. The students can hardly name any other ancient Chinese buildings except the pavilions or bridges.

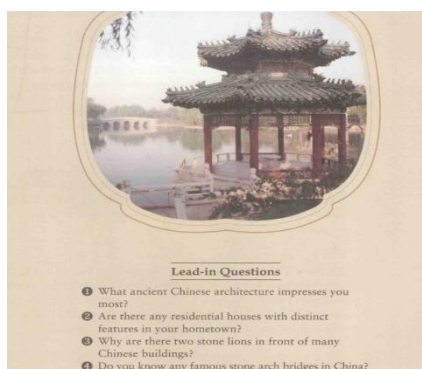


Figure 3 Extract from *A Glimpse of Chinese Culture* (Liao, 2015, p.197).

3.3 Discussion

Our analysis of the examples has been rather critical, which implies a critique of the textbooks as well. However, it is crucial to note that this article does not aim to evaluate *Introducing Chinese Culture in English* or

A Glimpse of Chinese Culture as foreign language textbooks. Rather, the focus is on how culture is incorporated into these materials and how the combination of text, image, and task shapes the process of semiosis, potentially leading to cultural implications that students may perceive. While both textbooks contain segments that explicitly address culture, overt or factual culture lessons alone are insufficient. This is particularly true because these segments are typically not accompanied by tasks that encourage students to reflect on the material. The point made in this article is relevant to this issue. The article argues that both explicit cultural content and implicit cultural representation (such as through images and texts) tend to focus heavily on denotation, treating text and images solely as linguistic resources, while neglecting to examine and fully utilize cultural connotations.

4. Conclusion

Language textbooks have played a central role in teaching and learning languages across various contexts. Due to their widespread use and popularity, they are expected to continue being a valuable resource for language teachers. However, their popularity also underscores the importance of ongoing research to scrutinize language textbooks as a means of the ideological practice of language education. This paper starts the analysis by drawing upon the advancements made in the realm of social sciences that have questioned the monolithic conceptualizations of culture and taking into account recent arguments that underscore the significance of intercultural citizenship and global cultural consciousness as pivotal goals of foreign language education. The author argues that achieving such transformative pedagogical objectives necessitates a more dynamic comprehension of how culture is integrated into teaching materials, as well as an understanding of the processes by which learners interact with such materials. This article proposes a semiotic framework that considers texts, images, and tasks as agents that create specific meanings in the process of semiosis. By providing examples from two Coursebooks of Chinese Culture for undergraduates in China, the paper uses these examples to illustrate the application of a semiotic analytical approach, which highlights two critical observations. Firstly, learners' interpretation of material in the classroom is often heavily influenced. Secondly, images and texts, including those with cultural significance or emphasis, appear to primarily foster linguistic proficiency. The article argues that images and texts should be utilized more deliberately to cultivate a critical and reflective appreciation of culture, self, and others.

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