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Cultural Representation and Intercultural Communicative Competence in Experiencing Chinese: A Textbook Analysis Based on Byram's ICC Model

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Abstract. As intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a key objective of International Chinese Language Education, increasing attention has been paid to cultural representation in Chinese language textbooks.However, few studies have examined how cultural content supports learners' ICC development.This study examines the cultural representation in Experiencing Chinese: Basic Course 1 and 2 by applying Byram's ICC framework. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine cultural elements in dialogues, reading passages, illustrations, cultural notes, exercises, and communicative activities. The identified cultural elements were classified into ten cultural categories and coded according to five ICC dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The findings indicate that the textbooks emphasize factual cultural knowledge but devote considerably less attention to higher-level intercultural competencies. Activities promoting cultural comparison, intercultural interaction, and critical reflection remain limited. The findings provide implications for textbook development and Chinese language teaching.

Keywords: International Chinese Language Education, intercultural communicative competence, cultural representation, Chinese language textbooks, textbook evaluation

1. Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a core objective of language education against the backdrop of globalization. In International Chinese Language Education, learners are expected to develop not only linguistic competence but also the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for effective intercultural communication [1]. As the primary teaching resource in Chinese language classrooms, textbooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' intercultural understanding, making their cultural representation an important research topic.

Kramsch emphasizes the inseparability of language and culture [2], while Cortazzi and Jin classify textbook culture into source, target, and international culture [3]. More recently, Hua, Hu, and Liu argue that cultural content should promote learners' intercultural development rather than simply provide factual knowledge [4]. Empirical studies applying Byram's ICC framework to beginning-level Chinese language textbooks remain limited.

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To fill this gap, this study applies Byram's ICC framework to an analysis of Experiencing Chinese: Basic Course 1 and Basic Course 2 [1]. Using qualitative content analysis, cultural elements were classified into ten categories and analyzed according to Byram's five ICC dimensions. The findings contribute to textbook evaluation research and provide actionable guidance for textbook developers and language teachers in International Chinese Language Education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Intercultural communicative competence

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a key concept in language education. Byram defines ICC as the ability to communicate effectively across cultures through five dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness [1]. These dimensions encompass openness, cultural knowledge, interpretive ability, interaction skills, and critical evaluation.

Later studies expanded Byram's framework. Deardorff emphasized intercultural competence as a dynamic process, while Fantini highlighted intercultural awareness and behavioral adaptability [5, 6].

2.2. Cultural representation in language textbooks

Culture is widely recognized as an essential component of language learning. Cortazzi and Jin classify textbook culture into source, target, and international culture [3], while Kramsch emphasizes the inseparability of language and culture [2]. More recent studies advocate broader perspectives, highlighting transnational culture, intercultural communication, and reflective learning [7-9].

2.3. Cultural representation in Chinese language textbooks

Studies on Chinese language textbooks have mainly examined cultural content and transmission. Hua et al. report that textbooks emphasize mainstream Chinese culture while providing limited intercultural perspectives [4]. However, relatively few studies have analyzed textbook culture through Byram's ICC framework, providing the rationale for this study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research materials

The research materials consist of Experiencing Chinese: Basic Course 1 and Basic Course 2 (Second Edition), published by Higher Education Press. The textbooks are designed for beginning-level learners and contain eighteen lessons.Cultural content is presented through dialogues, reading passages, illustrations, cultural notes, exercises, Real Task activities, and Extension activities.

3.2. Research method

This study employs qualitative content analysis, a widely used approach for systematically identifying and interpreting cultural elements in textbooks [5]. All cultural elements found in the

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textbooks were analyzed. To ensure coding consistency, each material type was operationally defined before analysis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of materials included in the analysis

Material Type	Operational Definition	Examples from the Textbooks
Dialogues	Conversational exchanges between two or more speakers	Greetings, introducing oneself, asking for directions
Reading Passages	Continuous narrative or descriptive texts	Cultural readings on Chinese names, food culture, zodiac signs
Illustrations	Photographs, drawings, and visual representations accompanying texts	Pictures of family members, food, transportation, currency
Cultural Notes	Explicit cultural explanation sections	Chinese names, ethnic groups, Chinese festivals
Exercises	Structured language practice activities	Sentence completion, matching, dialogue practice
Real Task Activities	Communicative tasks simulating real-life situations	Class surveys, interviews, role plays
Extension Activities	Supplementary learning tasks expanding vocabulary and cultural knowledge	Additional vocabulary lists and cultural topics

3.3. ICC coding framework

The study adopts Byram's intercultural communicative competence model as the analytical framework [1]. Each cultural element identified in the textbooks was coded according to one or more of the five ICC dimensions (as shown in Table 2).

Table 2. ICC coding scheme

ICC Dimension	Coding Criteria
Knowledge	Presentation of Chinese cultural facts, customs, and social practices
Interpreting & Relating	Cultural comparison and interpretation
Discovery & Interaction	Inquiry, observation, communication, or interaction
Attitudes	Openness, curiosity, and respect toward cultural diversity
Critical Cultural Awareness	Reflection and evaluation of cultural beliefs and practices

3.4. Cultural categories

The cultural categories were developed inductively with reference to previous textbook research [3, 4]. The coding scheme is presented in Table 3.

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Table 3. Cultural categories

Code	Cultural Type	Description	Examples from the Textbooks
C1	Daily Life Culture	Everyday routines and daily communication	greetings, schedules, daily activities
C2	Social Interaction Culture	Interpersonal communication norms	greetings, politeness, asking for help
C3	Identity Culture	Personal and social identity	names, nationality, occupations
C4	Family Culture	Family relationships and values	family members, family structure
C5	Campus Culture	Student life and education	courses, classrooms, school routines
C6	Food Culture	Chinese food and eating customs	dumplings, hotpot, regional cuisine
C7	Travel and Transportation	Transportation and direction giving	buses, subway, asking for directions
C8	Consumer Culture	Shopping and consumption	RMB, bargaining, mobile payment
C9	Traditional Festivals	Traditional customs and festivals	Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival
C10	Contemporary Chinese Society	Modern Chinese society	ethnic groups, technology, digital payment

3.5. Coding procedures

Cultural elements were identified, classified into ten cultural categories, and coded according to one or more ICC dimensions.To ensure consistency, the coding criteria were established before analysis and applied throughout the study. The tables reported below were derived from the coding results.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Distribution of cultural types

The analysis shows that cultural content in Experiencing Chinese is concentrated mainly in practical communicative situations. Table 4 shows that Daily Life Culture and Social Interaction Culture are the dominant categories.This distribution reflects the communicative orientation of the textbooks.

To evaluate the relative presence of each cultural category, four levels were adopted. High denotes frequent occurrence across multiple components (e.g., in more than five lessons); Medium, occasional occurrence in several lessons; Low, infrequent appearance in one or two lessons; and Very Low, near absence from the textbooks. These criteria were applied consistently throughout the analysis.

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Table 4. Distribution of cultural types

Cultural Type	Relative Presence
Daily Life Culture	High
Social Interaction Culture	High
Identity Culture	Medium
Family Culture	Medium
Campus Culture	Medium
Food Culture	Medium
Travel and Transportation	Low
Consumer Culture	Low
Traditional Festivals	Low
Contemporary Chinese Society	Very Low

The findings indicate that the textbooks emphasize everyday communicative situations while giving comparatively less attention to contemporary social issues and intercultural perspectives.

4.2. Distribution of ICC dimensions

The identified cultural elements were further analyzed according to Byram's ICC framework. Table 5 shows that the Knowledge dimension predominates, whereas Critical Cultural Awareness is least prominent.

Table 5. Distribution of ICC dimensions

ICC Dimension	Relative Strength
Knowledge	Very High
Attitudes	Moderate
Skills of Interpreting & Relating	Low
Skills of Discovery & Interaction	Low
Critical Cultural Awareness	Very Low

The predominance of the Knowledge dimension indicates an emphasis on factual cultural information.The Attitudes dimension appears mainly in interactions between Chinese and international characters.

However, the remaining three dimensions receive considerably less attention. Activities involving cultural comparison are relatively infrequent, while opportunities for inquiry-based learning and critical reflection remain limited.Thus, the textbooks prioritize cultural knowledge over higher-level ICC.

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4.3. Cross-analysis of cultural types and ICC dimensions

To further examine the relationship between cultural representation and ICC development, a cross-analysis was conducted, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Cross-analysis of cultural types and ICC dimensions

Cultural Type	Knowledge	Skills of Interpreting & Relating	Skills of Discovery & Interaction	Attitudes	Critical Cultural Awareness
Daily Life Culture	High	Low	Low	Medium	Very Low
Social Interaction Culture	High	Low	Low	Medium	Very Low
Identity Culture	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low
Family Culture	High	Low	Low	Low	Very Low
Food Culture	High	Low	Low	Low	Very Low
Campus Culture	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low

The cross-analysis demonstrates that cultural representation is consistently associated with the Knowledge dimension across almost all cultural categories. Knowledge predominates across all cultural categories, especially Daily Life and Social Interaction.Nevertheless, Critical Cultural Awareness remains weak across all categories. Few activities encourage learners to compare cultural perspectives, question stereotypes, or evaluate cultural practices from multiple viewpoints.

4.4. Discussion

Experiencing Chinese effectively integrates language learning with cultural knowledge.This emphasis suits beginning-level learners.However, when viewed from an ICC development perspective, several limitations become apparent. Opportunities for cultural comparison are relatively limited, which may restrict learners' ability to relate Chinese culture to their own cultural experiences [1]. Inquiry-based learning is also underrepresented, as most activities emphasize language practice rather than cultural exploration or interaction. In addition, Critical Cultural Awareness attracts the least attention, with learners rarely encouraged to examine cultural assumptions or reflect critically on cultural values [10].

Overall, the textbook prioritizes cultural transmission over higher-level ICC development.Future editions could incorporate more comparative, inquiry-based, and reflective activities.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined cultural representation in Experiencing Chinese: Basic Course 1 and Basic Course 2 by applying Byram's ICC framework. The findings show that the textbooks emphasize everyday communicative culture and primarily support the Knowledge dimension of ICC.They

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primarily support the Knowledge dimension, while higher-level ICC dimensions remain underrepresented. In contrast, opportunities for developing Skills of Interpreting and Relating, Skills of Discovery and Interaction, and Critical Cultural Awareness remain limited.

This study contributes to textbook evaluation by applying Byram's ICC framework.The findings also offer practical implications for textbook developers and language teachers.

This study has several limitations, including its focus on two beginning-level textbooks and the use of qualitative content analysis. Future research could include additional textbook series, incorporate quantitative coding and inter-coder reliability measures, and examine how cultural representation influences learners' ICC development in classroom settings.

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