



International Chinese Language Education Communications

Volume 2, Issue 1, 52-68

<https://doi.org/10.46451/iclec.20250312>

Received: 16 October 2024

Accepted: 10 February 2025

Published: 17 March 2025

A Content Analysis of Intermediate Chinese Language Textbooks in Japan

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Abstract

In the context of negative public perception of China in Japan, this study applies appraisal theory to analyze the topics in 50 intermediate Chinese textbooks, demonstrating a notable imbalance. Approximately 70% of the topics focus on daily life and cultural themes, while critical issues such as environmental protection, technological progress, and social change are underrepresented. The emotional tone is predominantly avoidant-neutral, focusing on basic linguistic skills, with little exploration of more complex or diverse topics. This design supports foundational language learning but does not fully meet intermediate learners' needs for cognitive engagement and practical language application. Additionally, the proportion of negative topics exceeds that of positive and positive-neutral ones, potentially influencing learners' cultural attitudes and motivation. Despite this, the study identifies three strategies used by Chinese textbook authors in Japan to counteract negative perceptions of China. First, they offer cross-cultural explanations to help learners understand Sino-Japanese differences. Second, they challenge media biases by encouraging direct engagement with China. Third, they highlight China's technological advancements to reshape outdated stereotypes. These strategies aim to reduce misunderstandings of Chinese culture and enhance learners' cross-cultural awareness.

Keywords

Chinese as a foreign language(CFL), topic, cultural content, Chinese language textbooks, appraisal framework

日本中级中文教材内容分析

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摘要

在日本公众对中国的负面认知背景下，本研究运用评价理论分析了 50 本中级日本大学中文教材中的话题，发现其设计存在显著的不平衡性。约 70% 的话题集中在日常生活和文化主题上，而环境保护、科技进步和社会变迁等关键问题则较少涉及。教材话题的感情色彩以回避-中立为主，主要侧重于基础语言技能的传授，对更复杂或多样化话题的探讨较为匮乏。这种设计虽然满足了基础语言学习的需求，但未能充分满足中级学习者在认知参与和语言应用方面的深层次需求。此外，消极话题的比例超过了积极和积极-中立话题的总和，这可能会对学习者的文化态度和学习动机产生负面影响。尽管如此，研究发现日本中文教材编者采用了三种策略，以应对对中国的负面认知。首先，他们通过提供跨文化解释，帮助学习者理解中日文化差异。其次，他们通过鼓励学习者直接接触中国，挑战媒体偏见。最后，他们通过强调中国的科技进步，重塑过时的刻板印象。这些策略旨在减少对中国文化的误解，并提升学习者的跨文化意识。

关键词

中文作为一门外语，话题，文化内容，中文教材，评价框架

Introduction

As China continues to develop, the growing number of Chinese language learners worldwide has increased the linguistic capital of Chinese speakers and increased the incentive to learn Chinese as a second or foreign language (Hua et al., 2022). According to the All Japan Chinese Language Education Association, Chinese has surpassed all foreign languages except English in terms of the number of learners in Japan. Moreover, the number of educational institutions offering Chinese language courses in Japan has increased from approximately 300 in 1997 to over 800 in 2007, resulting in a corresponding increase in the number of Chinese language learners (Yamazaki, 2014).

As a fundamental element of language instruction, textbooks play a crucial role in shaping learners' understanding of the target language and culture. Rashidi and Ghaedsharafi (2015) argue that for learners who lack opportunities for direct interaction with the target language in everyday life, textbooks become an essential medium for understanding its culture. They not only convey cultural values and beliefs but can also reinforce or even perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings. The topics covered in textbooks, along with the content taught in the classroom, are vital components of language instruction, as they stimulate student engagement, enhance their willingness to communicate, and improve learning outcomes (Siegel, 2014). Textbook topic selection influences both knowledge acquisition and students' emotional and cultural attitudes toward the target language. In foreign language learning, the 'emotional tone' of topics is particularly important: positive topics enhance learners' appreciation for the target culture and motivate them to learn, while negative topics may provoke resistance or even hinder their acceptance of the language and culture. Therefore, the selection of topics in textbooks should carefully consider their potential impact on learners' emotions and attitudes to ensure the positivity and effectiveness of the learning process.

In the context of international Chinese language education, the localization of Chinese textbooks is essential. Diverse cultural backgrounds, linguistic habits, and educational systems make standardized textbooks less effective in addressing global learners' needs. Wu (2013) pointed out that while achieving "universal" Chinese textbooks is an unrealistic ideal, "localized" textbooks are a more feasible goal. Localized Chinese textbooks can be tailored to the specific conditions of the host country, accommodating the linguistic foundation and

cultural background of local learners, thereby increasing the textbooks' relevance and practicality. The process of textbook localization should consider the national conditions, regional contexts, and the social and cultural characteristics of the local population (Li & Shi, 2017; Yu, 2020). Among these factors, national conditions encompass the learners' existing perceptions of the target language and country. In recent years, as part of the Western world, Japan has seen a rise in negative media coverage of China, leading to increased public discontent towards China (Suzuki, 2019). According to the 17th "Japan-China Public Opinion Survey," the proportion of Japanese respondents with a "relatively unfavorable" or "unfavorable" impression of China rose to 90.9% in 2021 (Genron NPO, 2021). It can be inferred that most Chinese language learners in this social context are likely to develop a negative perception of China.

In light of this, the present study aims to examine the characteristics of topic selection and emotional coloring in intermediate Chinese textbooks used in Japan, with a focus on analyzing textbook compilers' tendencies in selecting topics and handling emotional tone. Specifically, within the context of growing negative sentiments toward China in Japanese society, the study will explore whether the compilers reflect these sentiments in their selection and presentation of topics, and how they address them. Additionally, the study will investigate whether the compilers attempt to influence learners' perceptions and attitudes toward China and its people through specific topic design or emotional tone adjustments.

Literature Review

The significance of topic selection in textbook design has been widely acknowledged within the field of language education. However, existing studies have predominantly concentrated on textbooks published in countries like China and the United States, with comparatively limited research on topic selection in Chinese textbooks. Notably, there are over 2,000 Chinese textbooks currently in use in Japan (Tsuda, 2010), yet research on the specific topics presented in these textbooks remains in its early stages.

The topics and design of Chinese language textbooks for Japanese learners have been a focal point of several studies, each examining the alignment of textbook materials with learners' real-life needs and expectations. Hou (2013) analyzed a beginner Chinese textbook used in several Japanese universities, emphasizing that its topics closely align with everyday scenarios, facilitating engagement and practical communication. The textbook's focus on communicative functions, along with its natural and authentic language used predominantly in dialogues, caters effectively to the learners' communication needs and expectations. This study highlights the textbook's emphasis on practical communication, which enhances its relevance to students' real-life interactions. Further advancing the analysis, Zhang (2019) investigated 12 reading passages from a Japanese Chinese textbook, informed by a survey of the actual needs of Japanese learners. Unlike traditional textbooks, which often focus on historical topics or tourist attractions like Peking opera, Zhang's study identified a shift toward highlighting contemporary social changes in China. This approach not only responds to students' need to understand modern China but also sparks their curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. Zhang's study underscores the importance of contemporary relevance in Chinese language learning materials. In a similar vein, Wang (2020) compared a Chinese-published elementary Chinese textbook with a locally published Japanese one, finding that both textbooks share a focus on practical topics like social interactions, personal situations, and family life. However, Wang also noted the limited scope of these textbooks, observing that the topics' range lacks diversity and depth.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the topic selection and design of Chinese textbooks for Japanese learners, they also highlight several gaps in the existing research. On the one hand, certain characteristics of textbook topic design—particularly in terms of communicative function and practicality—have been identified, but a systematic and quantitative analysis of their specific distribution is still lacking. On the other hand, research on the emotional tone of textbook topics, which could significantly influence learners' attitudes and motivation, remains relatively scarce. Given the potential impact of emotional tone on learning outcomes, further investigation into this area is warranted.

For the purposes of this research, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What topics are most prominently featured in current Chinese textbooks for Japanese learners?
2. What emotional tone do these topics convey?

This study aims to analyze the selection of topics and their emotional tone in Japanese Chinese textbooks to examine how textbook design may influence learners' language acquisition and cultural cognition.

Research Methods

I investigated 50 intermediate CFL textbooks utilized in Japanese universities. Intermediate textbooks were chosen as they typically encompass a wider range of topics than beginner-level materials. The selection of these textbooks was informed by a comprehensive survey of the Chinese-language instructional materials utilized in the top 200 universities¹, as per the Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings. This esteemed annual publication is widely recognized and respected globally for its rigorous university rankings methodology. I examined the Chinese textbooks adopted by these universities and found that Japanese universities have considerable autonomy in selecting textbooks, and most textbooks are chosen by faculty rather than mandated. To enhance the study's applicability, the 50 textbooks I analyzed were used by teachers at least two universities, which indicates their recognition and significance.

I employed the appraisal framework for our analysis. In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), appraisal pertains to how a speaker or writer expresses their endorsement or disapproval of concepts, individuals, activities, or ideas. When examining written discourse, the traditional Halliday lexico-grammatical model faces unique constraints. Martin and White's "Appraisal Framework" is a novel lexico-grammatical framework developed based on SFL to study interpersonal meaning (Martin & White, 2005). It represents a horizontal and vertical expansion of the interpersonal function of SFL. The appraisal framework concerns the different attitudes established during discourse and emphasizes how language is used to express assessments that shape inter-subjective and ideological stances. Consequently, it is instrumental in uncovering authors' position in narrative discourse, representing an advancement in traditional functional grammar. This study investigates the attitudes of textbook authors toward the treatment of Chinese topics and considers appraisal theory an effective framework as a result. Notably, the framework encompasses three systems: the engagement system, the attitude system, and the graduation system. The attitude system is a crucial system, and it comprises three subsystems: affect (which conveys the speaker's emotions and emotional responses toward individuals or objects), judgment (which evaluates human behavior based on social norms), and appreciation (which assesses things or products based on aesthetic standards and other social values) (Martin & Rose, 2003). In other words, they convey emotions, evaluate individuals' character and conduct, and assess the worth of things. This study uses the attitude system to examine the content of intermediate CFL

textbooks in Japan and analyze the utilization of attitude resources and discourse meanings in the text.

Results

The 50 textbooks consist of 656 lessons, covering a total of 658 topics. Excluding topics related to Japan and other countries, there are 612 topics centered on China. This study focuses exclusively on these China-related topics. Since the difficulty level of these intermediate Chinese textbooks does not exceed Level 4 of the New HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi), the topics were classified according to the HSK Level 4 Outline standards, based on the main content of each lesson. Meanwhile, the emotional tone of each topic were analyzed using appraisal theory. The classification was jointly conducted by the author and another academically trained teacher, and any contentious points were resolved through discussion. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Classification of Topics in Intermediate Chinese Textbooks in Japan

Major Topic (Number / Percentage)	Subtopic	Total	Non- negative	Negative	Major Topic (Number / Percentage)	Subtopic	Total	Non- negative	Negative	
Daily Life (247 / 40.3%)	Food	42	40	2	Various Information (59/9.6%)	Personal Information	31	31		
	Transportation	42	37	5		Location Information	14	14		
	Campus Life	41	41			Event Information	8	7	1	
	Social Interactions	35	35			Object Information	6	6		
	Family Life	27	23	4	Education (31/5.1%)	Study Situation	24	24		
	Shopping	16	16			Phenomena & Problems	5	5		
	Sports	16	15	1		Educational Activities	2	2		
	Healthcare	12	12		Nature (12/2.0%)	Animals	8	8		
	Environmental Protection	7	6	1		Environment & Climate	3	3		
	Personal Economic Activities	4	4			Natural Phenomena	1		1	
	Weather	3	3		Literature & Arts (46/7.6%)	Various Stories	26	26		
	Workplace Life	2	2			Introduction of Famous People	9	9		
	Career & Work (9/1.5%)	Employment & Resignation	8	5		3	Various Arts	7	7	
		Daily Office Work	1	1			Introduction of Works	4	4	
Experiences & Insights (7/1.1%)	Life Reflections	4	4		Science & Technology (9/1.5%)	Internet & Information Technology	9	9		
	Life Realizations	3	3		Culture (170 / 27.7%)	National Conditions & Livelihood	82	62	20	
Economy (22 / 3.6%)	Economic Management	12	12			Geography & Famous Spots	44	44		
	Economic Phenomena	9	8	1		Customs & Traditions	28	28		
	Business Trade	1	1			Language & Characters	16	16		
Total		285	268	17	Total		327	305	22	

Daily life topics dominate intermediate Chinese textbooks, comprising 247 instances (40.3%). This indicates that daily life topics continue to dominate in intermediate materials, reflecting the authors' strong emphasis on practicality and communicative competence. Cultural topics, the second-largest category, account for 170 instances, or 27.7%. These topics typically cover traditional festivals, historical sites, and artistic forms, aiming to enhance learners' understanding and appreciation of the culture. The remaining topics account for less than 10%, suggesting a limited emphasis on diversity in intermediate Chinese textbooks. These topics include areas such as society, economy, technology, and the environment. Despite their relevance to modern society, these subjects receive limited attention in intermediate textbooks.

Overall, intermediate Chinese textbooks show a clear tendency to emphasize daily life and cultural topics in their thematic distribution. This design is more appropriate for beginners or learners whose primary goal is communicative competence. However, for more advanced learners, the content may seem limited and lacking in depth. Therefore, future textbook development should maintain the balance of daily life and cultural topics while incorporating more diverse and challenging themes to better address the needs of various learners and promote well-rounded language proficiency and cultural literacy.

Table 2 presents the classification of the emotional tones of the topics in the textbooks. Among the 50 textbooks, a total of 573 non-negative topics were identified, accounting for 93.6% of all topics. These topics cover various areas, such as campus life, social interactions, shopping, healthcare, and more, none of which express negative emotions. Non-negative topics can be further categorized into three groups based on their underlying emotional tendencies and attitudes: positive, positive-neutral, and avoidant-neutral.

Table 2

Distribution of Emotional Tones in Topics of Intermediate Chinese Textbooks

Emotional Tone	Non-negative			Negative
	Positive	Positive-neutral	Avoidant-neutral	
Number	8	21	544	39
Proportion	1.3	3.4	88.9	6.4

Among all topics, avoidant-neutral topics make up the largest proportion, totaling 544, or 88.9% of all topics. Avoidant-neutral topics are defined as content that presents information or describes phenomena without expressing evaluative opinions or subjective feelings. For example, discussions on Chinese customs (149 topics, 24.4%) and Sino-Japanese study-abroad life (257 topics, 42.1%) fall under this category. The introduction to Chinese customs covers a broad range of subjects, including geographical features, historical sites, ethnic customs, traditional festivals, and food culture. These topics offer learners the opportunity to form an initial impression of China and develop a more comprehensive understanding of its culture and social structure, free from subjective guidance. Another category of avoidant-neutral topics is the introduction to Sino-Japanese study-abroad life, typically presented in dialogue form, designed to help learners acquire language skills necessary for practical daily life and understand campus culture and daily living habits in both China and Japan. This content simulates real study-abroad scenarios, helping learners enhance their language skills and adaptability in specific situations, such as ordering food in the cafeteria, communicating with roommates, participating in campus activities, visiting a doctor, and shopping.

The proportion of positive-neutral topics is relatively small, accounting for 21 topics, or 3.4% of the total. These topics typically offer positive interpretations of Japan's negative perceptions of China, helping learners understand China from a culturally egalitarian perspective. For example, they explain why Chinese people are less likely to apologize as frequently as their Japanese counterparts. This content not only clarifies misunderstandings but also encourages learners to view Chinese culture and society from a more objective and balanced perspective through comparative analysis.

The proportion of positive topics is the smallest, accounting for only 8 topics, or 1.3%. These topics primarily present positive descriptions of China and its related aspects, often emphasizing its achievements in economics, technology, and culture. Through these topics, the textbooks aim to illustrate China's modernization process and its global influence, such as achievements in high-speed rail development and internet technology. Given that mainstream Japanese media provide limited coverage of the positive aspects of China, this section seeks to fill this gap and foster a more positive image of China among Japanese students.

There are 39 negative topics, representing for 6.4% of the total. These topics mainly address issues related to China's national conditions and people's livelihoods, with 20 (3%) of these topics focus on social problems, such as the materialistic values of Chinese women in selecting a partner, low wages for young people, and high living pressures.

In summary, the topics in Japanese intermediate Chinese textbooks cover a range of emotional tones, including positive, positive-neutral, avoidant-neutral, and negative categories. Each type of topic highlights distinct aspects of China's culture and society, thereby fostering a multidimensional understanding of China among learners. The following section will examine how these topics are presented in the textbooks and explore their impact on learners' cognitive development.

Non-Negative topics

Avoidant-neutral topics

Example 1 (Nitchuu fureai “kango” kyoushitsu chuukyuu chugokugo, Asahi Press, 2018)
Asakusa Temple is in Taito-ku, Tokyo. When you enter the temple complex through the Kaminarimon, one encounters a bustling shopping street that spans 250 meters and features an array of craft stores and specialty snack vendors. Japanese pancakes, which are generally made from rice or flour and present a unique combination of sweet and savory flavors, are particularly noteworthy. In contrast, Chinese pancakes, generally made from flour and stuffed with vegetables or deep-fried dough sticks, have a distinct flavor and texture.

Example 2 (Jitsuyou chugokugo kaiwa, kinseido, 2005)

(Exchanging money at a hotel)

A: I would like to exchange some money. What is the current exchange rate for the yen?

B: 10,000 yen is equivalent to 780 yuan. How much do you want to exchange?

A: 50,000 yen. Here are the exchange slip and my passport.

B: 50,000 yen is 3,900 yuan. Please count and verify if it is correct.

A: Yes, that is correct.

In Example 1, the story is set in Japan, the story introduces a famous place in Japan while discussing the difference between Japanese and Chinese pancakes. This textbook tells stories of contact between Chinese and Japanese students in Japan. It introduces Chinese and Japanese customs and life stories and shows similarities and differences between things related to China

and Japan, as shown in Example 1. Studies have shown that integrating cultural content into language materials helps students better understand the target culture. It also helps them compare the target culture with their culture to increase awareness of their cultural background (Alsamani, 2014). In Example 2, the story, set in China, depicts how foreigners exchange money in Chinese hotels. This textbook narrates stories about different situations that Japanese people encounter after arriving in China. It primarily focuses on teaching language and does not include any cultural elements. Since both examples present factual descriptions without any judgmental language, it is evident that the portrayal of China in these examples is neutral. This neutral portrayal is the most frequently used expression in intermediate CFL textbooks.

Positive-neutral topics

Positive-neutral views on China can be broadly expressed in two ways. The first approach is to express a negative view of Chinese people or culture with which Japanese people are familiar and then provide explanations. The misconceptions are formed by media reports or personal experiences, and the authors aim to dispel them by explaining why Chinese people and culture are the way they are. The second approach is to address Japan's biased coverage of China and encourage the Japanese to visit and experience it themselves. This approach directly or indirectly addresses the overwhelmingly negative news coverage of China in Japan, reflects authors' protests against this phenomenon, and urges people to see the real China.

Example 3 (Dokkai chuugokugo, hakuteisha, 2007)

A common perception regarding Chinese cuisine is that it is oily, However, this perception is formed based on the food served in restaurants. In reality, the food cooked in an average Chinese household is generally lighter, has a higher proportion of vegetables than meat, and emphasizes nutritional value.

Example 4 (Chūgokugo Fittonesu 14, Asahi Press, 2007)

(A: male Chinese student; B: female Japanese student)

A: Are you used to eating at the cafeteria?

B: I find the food a bit greasy and unfamiliar.

A: Do you like Sichuan cuisine?

B: Sichuan cuisine is too spicy for me. I am afraid of spicy food, so I do not usually eat it.

A: Then what type of food do you prefer?

B: I prefer dough-based foods, such as dumplings, buns, and wontons.

Chinese restaurants are abundant in Japan, and Chinese cuisine has become deeply ingrained in Japanese food culture. Even though it is "affordable and flavorful," "Chinese food is commonly perceived as "greasy and unhealthy" (MyVoice, 2017). In Example 3, the author directly addresses this perception and uses the phrase "however" and "in reality" to explain that the perception is based on food served in restaurants. The author also uses positive terms like "generally lighter," "has a higher proportion of vegetables than meat," and "emphasizes nutritional value" to describe the true nature of Chinese cuisine in an average Chinese household. These statements demonstrate the author's efforts to correct Japanese people's misconceptions about Chinese cuisine and build a positive perception.

Sichuan cuisine, which is mentioned in Example 4, is the most famous Chinese cuisine in Japan. Therefore, it frequently appears in textbooks discussing Chinese cuisines. However, despite its popularity, Japanese people generally do not typically enjoy spicy foods. This is why, in Example 4, the female Japanese student used negative terms such as "greasy," "too spicy," and "do not usually eat" while expressing her thoughts on Sichuan cuisine. This shows

the perspective that Japanese individuals have. If the story ended at her statement, readers may have developed a negative impression of Sichuan cuisine. However, fortunately, the male Chinese student shifted the tone by asking, "What type of food do you prefer?" In Example 4, the female Japanese student's response indicated that she did not dislike Chinese food altogether but preferred non-spicy Chinese dishes, such as steamed stuffed buns and dumplings. This response not only conveys the sentiments of some Japanese people regarding Chinese cuisine but also avoids casting a negative light on Chinese food.

Example 5 (Daigakusei no tame no gendai chuugoku 12-kai, Hakuteisha, 2012)

Those who visited China in the 1970s and the 1980s likely remember going to a store and making a purchase. Back then, nearly all stores were state-run, and there were long lines to buy even the most essential items because goods were limited. Salesclerks were regarded as "gods"; they treated customers coldly and indifferently. Meanwhile, customers were bowing, scraping, and trembling with fear while interacting with them.

The situation has completely changed today. Sales staff are incredibly courteous and enthusiastic about presenting the features of a product without being bothersome.

In the goods services industry, Japan outperforms China (Frank, Abulaiti, Torrico, & Enkawa, 2013). In response to this issue, Example 5 examines the historical factors behind China's substandard services. Using derogatory terms such as "coldly," "indifferently," "bowing," "scraping," and "trembling with fear," it vividly portrays salespeople being treated like "gods" during China's planned economy. The term "completely changed" signals a significant transformation in service quality and is followed by two encouraging words, "courteous" and "enthusiastic," to describe current attitudes in service. This statement does not merely criticize China's service; instead, it explores the historical factors contributing to substandard service, allowing readers to understand its causes and consequences. It also emphasizes the positive changes currently underway, presenting them optimistic.

Example 6 (Kyodai Chugoku no Ima - Chuukyuu Chugokugo Debate e no Shotai, Asahi Press, 2019)

Mika: They (Chinese tourists) burst into purchases in Japan, scaring Japanese bosses. I do not understand how they buy so much stuff.

Xiao Li: Not only do they buy things for themselves, but also for their parents, in-laws, siblings, friends, and relatives.

(.....)

Xiao Li: However, explosive buying has become less intense than before. Nowadays, most Chinese come to Japan to buy cosmetics and medicines, and people, especially young people, focus more on experiencing the Japanese culture.

Example 7 (Yongyo de bod ni Tsuku Chinese chuukyuu, Asahi Press, 2019)

Explosive buying' can mainly be attributed to the characteristics and values of the Chinese. Most products they buy during these buying sprees are gifts for relatives and friends or to build and maintain social connections rather than for personal use.

With the increase of Chinese tourists visiting Japan, "explosive buying" has increased consumption in Japan, and the media has often reported on this practice (Jing Daily, 2015, Leng, 2015). Recent reports suggest that shopping is a salient activity for Chinese tourists visiting Japan, and it plays a significant role in boosting Japan's tourism. This trend has highlighted the essential role that consumer products play in building Japan's attractiveness as

a travel destination (Jun, 2015). Initially, it was a good thing but after being exaggerated by the media, “scaring Japanese bosses” (in Example 6) shows the actual reaction of the Japanese people, who are confused (Kato, 2016). They do not understand why Chinese people buy so many things. To clear this confusion, some textbooks have selected this topic and explained that Chinese people’s explosive purchases are mainly for gift-giving, by explaining China’s gift-giving culture and pointing out the new trend of Chinese tourists visiting Japan. The passages seek to explain the confusion among Japanese people regarding the extensive purchases of Chinese visitors from a neutral or positive perspective. The objective is to help learners understand the cultural factors underlying this trend and ameliorate the perception that Chinese tourists are “nouveau riche.”

Example 8 (Ninen-me no tsutaeru chuugokugo jibun no koto nihon no koto, Asahi Press, 2014)
Our understanding of things through media is limited, and to truly grasp the situation, one must witness it firsthand. There are many differences between China and Japan. However, as young people, we are bound to share interests and topics of discussion.

Example 9 (Charenji! Ninen-sei no chuugokugo, Asahi Press, 2016)
Suzuki planned to study in Beijing, but he felt hesitant because frequent negative news about China left him with a poor impression of the country. However, a friend who had returned from China shared an experience that moved him. He recounted a story about a rural couple who were driving to the city to sell watermelons, but when they got into an accident, all watermelons had broken. Then, the passersby picked up the edible watermelons and bought them from the couple.

Suzuki was touched, but also confused after hearing the story. The story had contradicted the negative reports he had seen, and he was unsure of what to believe. Nonetheless, he put aside his hesitation and decided to travel to China during his winter vacation to experience the country himself.

For a long time, Japanese media have provided biased reports about China, propagating a negative image of the country (Wang & Liang 2017). However, Examples 8 and 9 provide a positive response to this issue by highlighting the media’s bias using words such as “limited,” “frequent negative news,” and “contradicted.” Additionally, the “to truly grasp... one must...” structure implies that experiencing China firsthand is necessary to understand its reality. Example 9 depicts Suzuki’s hesitation to study in China because of negative media coverage, highlights a broader negative perception of China in Japanese society. This is not limited to studying abroad. I once learned from a Japanese housewife that if her husband had been assigned to a European or American country, she would be overjoyed and accompany the family; however, if the assignment were to China, she would not join him. This also reflects the overall negative impression of China in Japanese society. Later in the textbook, the author uses words such as “planned...but...because...touched but also confused...unsure...decided” to express the change in Suzuki’s perception after hearing about his friend’s experience in China. These materials challenge Japan’s biased reporting of China and encourage students to seek a first-hand understanding of the real China.

Positive topics

Example 10 (Chugokugo dokkai no kotu, Kinseido, 2015)
Beijing’s population continues to increase after reaching 20 million, and the problem of traffic has always been prominent in urban areas. (...) In recent years, Beijing has vigorously

developed urban public transportation, built new subway and light rail tram lines, and increased bus lines and bus stops to facilitate travel.

Example 11 (Kyodai Chugoku no Ima - Chuukyuu Chugokugo Debate e no Shotai, Asahi Press, 2019)

Xiao Li: When I returned to China last month, I stopped by my father's hometown and felt that transportation conditions had significantly improved in China!

(.....)

Xiao Li: (.....) So, in recent years, China has built airports and high-speed trains and constructed expressways to shorten commute time between cities. The subway has also greatly enhanced cities.

(.....)

Xiao Li: High-speed rail symbolizes China's technological development. (.....) It has made China's high-speed rail system highly competitive internationally.

Meijia: So, Japan's Shinkansen technology has met a strong rival! I am worried about Japanese railways!

The theme of changes in China's transportation system is frequently included in intermediate Chinese textbooks in Japan, and it encompasses two aspects. The first aspect discusses the issue of traffic congestion in Beijing and the government's measures to address it. The second aspect focuses on the significant changes in China's transportation system. To depict the first theme, Examples 10 uses words such as "prominent," "vigorously developed," "built," and "increased" to reflect the dynamic nature of the situation and highlight the government's determination in resolving the issue of traffic. Xiao Li's experience depicts the second theme by using words such as "symbolizes" and "highly competitive internationally" and highlighting the success of China's high-speed rail. Additionally, "a strong rival" and "worried" highlight how China's high-speed rail gives strong competition to Japan's Shinkansen technology and emphasize China's progress in the transportation sector.

Negative topics

Example 13: (Shitteru? Ima no Chūgoku Daijesuto-ban, Asahi Press, 2023)

The real estate market has been growing rapidly, resulting in a significant rise in housing prices. Currently, housing prices in Beijing and Shanghai have surpassed those in the United States, leaving most low-income groups gazing at the towering buildings in despair. For young people today, owning a home has become a prerequisite for marriage. Similarly, over 100 million migrant workers aspire to own property in urban areas. However, the incomes of these two groups remain insufficient in the face of continuously rising housing prices.

On one hand, the wealthy enjoy luxurious mansions and villas; on the other, ordinary people spend years saving and living frugally, yet still cannot afford a modest home, many of them destined to remain lifelong "mortgage slaves." This stark contrast in living conditions calls for urgent attention from both the government and society.

The real estate bubble and widening wealth gap in China are key themes in the negative portrayal of the country in intermediate Japanese textbooks. First, the combination of the "rapidly" development of the real estate market and the "significant rise" in housing prices conveys a negative emotional tone, emphasizing the disorderly inflation of housing prices. By comparing housing prices in China to those in the United States, the term "surpassed" emphasizes the irrationality of the price surge, further underscoring the abnormality of housing costs. Immediately afterward, the phrase "gazing at the towering buildings" underscores the

disparity between the rich and the poor, evoking feelings of helplessness and despair among low-income groups. The term “prerequisite” suggests that home-ownership has become nearly a necessity for marriage, reflecting the extreme societal emphasis on property, while the incomes of these groups are “insufficient” in the face of soaring housing prices. Additionally, the stark contrast between the wealthy and ordinary people, particularly the juxtaposition of “luxury mansions and villas” with “spend years saving and living frugally,” further emphasizes social inequality. The term “mortgage slaves” intensifies the negative portrayal of the pressures of home-ownership, conveying the heavy burden of life. Finally, the “stark contrast” presented by this phenomenon is considered deserving of “urgent attention” by both the government and society, signaling the seriousness of the issue. Through these emotionally charged terms, the paragraph effectively exposes the wealth gap and social inequality within China’s real estate market, urging the reader to pay attention to and reflect on this issue.

Example 14 (Dokkai Chugokugo, Hakuteisha, 2007)

After graduating from university, Xiao Li stayed in Shanghai and worked at an advertising company, earning a monthly salary of over 1,000 yuan. She rented an apartment near the subway station, dedicating half of her salary to rent each month. Living along the subway line ensures she can reach work on time, but the daily round-trip transportation cost of six yuan accumulates, resulting in a significant expense. Whenever she works overtime until 10:30 p.m., she becomes as punctual as a clock, grabs her bag, and heads out.

.....After graduating, Xiao Zhao worked as a Chinese language tour guide in Xi'an, earning a monthly salary of approximately 1,000 yuan.Xiao Zhao rarely ate out; when she did, she would usually go to a small restaurant for a bowl of noodles. She bought a rice cooker and purchased frozen dumplings or other simple foods on weekends to enhance her quality of life.

This passage highlights the low income and economic hardships experienced by young people in China, conveying a negative outlook. First, expressions such as "half of her salary to rent" and "significant expense" emphasize the high cost of living, making it difficult for the income to cover basic needs, thus highlighting economic pressure. The description of "punctual as a clock" symbolizes overtime work, conveying a monotonous and constrained work life, thereby intensifying negative emotions. Phrases like "rarely ate out" and "go to a small restaurant for a bowl of noodles" depict frugality and poverty, reflecting the protagonist's low living standards and inability to enjoy a more varied diet. Finally, reliance on a rice cooker and frozen dumplings to improve her quality of life further underscores the protagonist's compromise on living standards. These negative expressions collectively paint a picture of a young person trapped in economic pressure and life difficulties, highlighting poverty, financial hardship, and low living standards. In terms of content, even within the lower social strata, it is now rare for young people to earn around 1,000 yuan per month. Since this textbook was published in 2007 and more than a decade has passed, significant changes have taken place in Chinese society, suggesting that the textbook content needs to be updated promptly.

Discussion

This study examines 50 intermediate Chinese textbooks used in Japan and finds that avoidant-neutral topics prevail, especially in sections concerning Sino-Japanese study-abroad experiences. These materials primarily focus on providing linguistic knowledge. While this approach effectively helps learners acquire foundational language skills, intermediate-level learners typically already have a solid grasp of the language. Therefore, they require exposure to a broader range of complex topics to expand their thinking and enhance their language application skills. The prevalence of avoidant-neutral topics may result in a lack of emotional

depth in textbooks, hindering learners' development of emotional, value-based, and attitudinal aspects in language learning. As Kramersch (1993) emphasized, language learning involves not only grammar and vocabulary but also cultural perception and emotional resonance. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2001) similarly emphasized the critical role of learners' emotions in language acquisition. If textbook content is overly neutral or simplified, it may diminish learners' engagement with the material, subsequently affecting their enthusiasm and depth of learning.

The current textbooks primarily emphasize daily life scenarios and basic language knowledge, while discussions of relevant social issues in Chinese society—such as environmental protection, technological advancements, and social change—remain relatively scarce. As modern society evolves, learners must go beyond mastering basic conversational skills to engage with complex, real-world topics. Erfani (2012) and Brown (2024) highlight a similar trend in English textbooks, where controversial issues are often avoided in favor of neutral themes like shopping and travel. This tendency also appears in Chinese textbooks, where discussions on environmental protection, technological innovation, and social change remain limited. This phenomenon stems from a general tendency in textbook design to avoid controversial topics, often driven by the desire to attract a broad audience. This trend is also observed in Chinese language textbooks. Furthermore, as Chinese society has rapidly developed, some textbook content has become outdated, failing to reflect the dynamic changes in contemporary society.

However, an opposing extreme in topic design also merits consideration. In this study, the 39 negative topics in 50 textbooks outnumber the combined total of positive and positive-neutral topics combined. This indicates a tendency among textbook authors to emphasize societal challenges and contradictions in topic selection. While a balanced presentation of social issues helps learners understand the complexities of the target culture, excessive focus on negative topics may negatively influence learners' cultural perceptions and motivation. For example, *Daigakusei no tame no Gendai Chugoku 12 Kai · III* (selected by 14 universities, ranked 15th) contains 12 lessons, at least 8 of which address social issues in China, such as the wealth gap, tax evasion, the unscrupulous pursuit of money, and the failure of hospitals to provide adequate care. Excessive focus on negative topics may create a biased impression of China among learners who have never experienced the country firsthand, thus diminishing their interest in learning Chinese. Research suggests that learners' attitudes and biases toward different cultures significantly influence their language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2009). (Dörnyei, 2009). Kramersch and Vinall (2015) and Hilliard (2014) also argue that overly optimistic portrayals (i.e., neglecting discussions of critical or societal issues) may lead to learners' intolerance of negative information, while excessively negative depictions may deepen cultural gaps. In countries like Japan, where media coverage of China is often biased (Lyu & Takikawa, 2022), learners need content that corrects these biases and provides a balanced cultural perspective, rather than simply perpetuating the narratives presented by the Japanese media. A balanced approach to topic design is crucial, as it helps learners gain a comprehensive understanding of the target culture's diversity, stimulates their interest in learning, and fosters positive language learning motivation.

This study identifies three strategies used by Chinese textbook authors to counter students' negative perceptions of China. Although these strategies are limited in number, they offer valuable insights.

The first strategy is to address misunderstandings and encourage students to reflect objectively. Textbook authors use common misconceptions about China held by the Japanese as a starting

point, analyzing the root causes of these misunderstandings and encouraging students to engage in cross-cultural comparison and reflection. By providing background information, this strategy enables students to understand the underlying causes of Sino-Japanese cultural differences, rather than simply criticizing them. For instance, the textbooks may explore differences in social customs, historical contexts, and lifestyles between China and Japan, prompting students to consider the deeper reasons behind these differences, thereby reducing biases arising from misunderstandings. This approach not only deepens students' understanding of complex social phenomena but also fosters a deeper awareness of the target culture.

The second strategy is to expose biases in media and promote the value of personal experience. The textbook authors highlight discrepancies between the real-life experiences of Japanese individuals in China and biased portrayals of China in Japanese media, thereby exposing the media's tendency to distort information, either directly or indirectly. For example, the textbook contrasts the positive experiences of Japanese individuals in China—such as friendly social interactions and convenient living conditions—with negative media portrayals, prompting students to critically assess the authenticity of media representations. Research indicates that mass media stereotypes of foreign countries often serve as a major source of public perception (Wang & Liang, 2015). By emphasizing the importance of personal experience, the textbook encourages students to visit China first-hand, thus overcoming the limitations of media narratives and gaining a more comprehensive perspective. This approach not only stimulates students' interest and fosters positive attitudes toward the target country but also broadens their international perspectives.

The third strategy is showcasing China's modernization achievements. The textbook aims to challenge Japanese students' ingrained perceptions of China as a poor and underdeveloped country by introducing advanced technologies in fields such as transportation and electronic payments. This 'positive offensive strategy' constructs an image of a modern and dynamic China by emphasizing its technological achievements (Veugelers, 2017). For instance, the textbook offers detailed descriptions of China's high-speed rail network, smart payment technologies, and the development of modern cities, aiming to help learners perceive China not only as a country with a rich history but also as a modern society continually advancing in science, technology, and economics. Through this strategy, the textbook not only enhances students' engagement with China but also underscores the significance of Chinese as a global language and the value of its study.

In conclusion, although it is reasonable for textbook design to emphasize language fundamentals and everyday topics, overlooking the diversity, emotional nature, and social relevance of topics may hinder learners' holistic development in both language proficiency and cultural understanding. Therefore, textbook design should place greater emphasis on the diversity, emotional nature, and social relevance of topics to promote a deeper understanding of both the language and the culture.

Conclusion

This study employs appraisal theory to analyze the topics in 50 intermediate Chinese textbooks. The analysis reveals a significant imbalance in the design of these topics. In terms of topic classification, daily life and cultural topics account for nearly 70% of the total, whereas discussions of pressing issues in Chinese society, such as environmental protection, technological progress, and social change, are notably scarce. Regarding emotional tone, avoidant-neutral topics dominate, primarily focusing on the delivery of basic linguistic knowledge, but lacking in-depth exploration of more diverse and complex topics. Although

this design helps learners master foundational language skills, it fails to address the deeper needs of intermediate learners in terms of language application and cognitive depth. Moreover, the number of negative topics exceeds the total of positive and positive neutral topics, and the excessive focus on social issues may negatively impact learners' cultural attitudes and motivation.

Despite this, the study reveals that Chinese textbook authors in Japan employed three strategies to address negative perceptions of China among the Japanese. First, they aimed to help learners understand Sino-Japanese cultural differences from a cross-cultural perspective by offering explanations and guidance. Second, they highlighted the biased portrayal of China in Japanese media and encouraged students to experience China first-hand in order to challenge the stereotypes created by the media. Lastly, they sought to reshape Japanese students' prejudices about China's outdated image by actively showcasing its technological advancements. These strategies seek to mitigate misunderstandings of Chinese culture while fostering cross-cultural awareness.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for balanced topic selection in language textbooks. Future textbook development should emphasize a balanced representation of positive, negative, and neutral topics, while also ensuring diversity, emotional engagement, and alignment with social realities. This approach will not only broaden learners' global perspectives and cultural awareness but also ignite their interest in learning, enhance the practicality and effectiveness of language acquisition, and ultimately achieve language teaching objectives more effectively.

Notes

1. The examination of the top 200 universities in Japan revealed that a portion of these institutions do not divulge their course information to the general public, and others do not provide Chinese language courses. Consequently, the available data for this study is limited to 140 universities.
2. As some lessons contain both dialogues and reading passages on different topics, the total topic count surpasses the number of lessons.

Acknowledgments

I sincerely extend my heartfelt gratitude to Associate Professor Shinichi Sarashina of Yamaguchi University for his invaluable support and guidance throughout the course of this research.

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