# The Balance and Insufficiency of Cultural Content in Chinese English Textbooks: A Systematic Literature Review

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**Abstract:** This study is a systematic review. The research searched Google Scholar from 2013 to 2025, etc. The search terms included "English textbooks/Cultural Presentation /Cortazzi & Jin/ICC/ concentric circles /Big C/Small C/Hofstede", etc. The inclusion criteria are: taking Chinese English textbooks or comparable EFL textbooks as the objects, discussing within the culture, and extractable methods and results. After title/abstract screening and full-text review, 18 articles were finally included (9 empirical and 9 theoretical/methodological). The main findings are: The proportion of the three types of cultures - local, target and international - is unbalanced, and international culture is significantly insufficient. A large amount of content remains at the superficial level, lacking the advancement from "Small C" to "big C" and the value level. Disconnected from student life; The inconsistent conclusions on the proportion of local and target cultures in different versions are mostly related to the differences in samples and perspectives. The contribution of this paper lies in: taking Cortazzi & Jin as the main axis, integrating ICC, concentric circles, Hofstede, and Big C/Small c for integrated comparison, and proposing an operational improvement idea of "proportion - advancement - context". Practical significance: It provides key points for quota and hierarchical design for textbook compilers, offers suggestions for localized supplementary and comparative tasks for teachers, and points policy makers towards implementable evaluation indicators and resource allocation.

**Keywords:** China, cultural content, cultural representation, English textbooks, intercultural communication

## 1. Introduction

Under the background of globalized English teaching, although a consensus has been formed that "culture is the core of teaching materials and there is currently an imbalance", there are still key gaps in the research on Chinese English teaching materials: First, the conclusions about the proportion of local and target cultures are contradictory, and there is still a lack of systematic reconciliation and cause explanation; Second, international culture has long been absent, and its causes, influences and teaching consequences have not been fully depicted. Thirdly, the problem of the disconnection between the superficial cultural content and students' lives is prominent, and there is a lack of practical plans and evaluation indicators that can be linked with multiple theories.

Based on this, this paper proposes more acute research goals and questions: 1.Based on the Cortazzi & Jin(1999) three-part framework, systematically review the research from 2013 to 2025, and attribute and calibrate the cultural distribution differences caused by different versions, educational stages and methods; 2.By comparing Byram's ICC (Byram, 1197), Hofstede's cultural dimensions(Hofstede, 2009), assess whether the advanced chain of the teaching materials from "Small c" to "Big C" (Tomalin & Stempleski)and then to the value level has been established, and measure its fit with the learning context and portability. 3.Under the Big C/Small c hierarchical path and the reference of concentric circles, the replicable improvement criterion of "proportion - advancement - context" and the operational key points of development and evaluation are proposed. Different from previous studies that mostly focused on a single set of teaching materials or a single framework, the new contribution of this paper lies in: integrating Cortazzi & Jin(1999), ICC, concentric circles, Hofstede(Hofstede, 2009) and Big C/Small C (Tomalin & Stempleski)to form an integrated holistic analytical framework;

By comparing content analysis with systematic literature review in parallel, the "proportion contradiction" is reinterpreted as being caused by the differences in "sample - framework - caliber", and a reconcilatory logic is provided.

By incorporating the presentation depth of text and images into the same evaluation coordinate, a quantitative quota, hierarchical advancement and contextual implementation plan for textbook developers, teachers and policymakers is proposed. The aim is to clarify the current state of textbook culture in China, identify the key links hindering the cultivation of ICC, and provide an executable path for enhancing the cultural and educational value of textbooks.

| Author(s), Year | Country | Focus of Study | Findings | Relevance to Current Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Lu et al., 2022a) | China | High school English textbook | Found uneven distribution of cultural categories; target culture dominant | Highlights imbalance of cultural content in Chinese textbooks |
| (Zhang et al., 2024a) | China | High school English textbooks | Emphasized Chinese traditional culture but lacked comparative perspectives | Shows limitation in developing cross-cultural awareness |
| (Teo & Zhu, 2018) | China | Emotional and attitudinal construction in textbooks | Found tensions between loyalty to local identity and global outlook | Demonstrates complexity of balancing local vs global perspectives |
| (Xiang & Yenika-Agbaw, 2021) | China | EFL Textbook for Ethnic Mongol in China | Content shaped by racial context | Shows how textbooks mirror unbalanced, stereotypical way and lack diversity |
| (Hutor, 2023) | Japan | Junior high English textbooks | Textbooks reflect Japanese identity and pride while integrating globalization | Highlights ideological weight in Japanese cultural content |
| (Adamson, 2013) | Japan | Curriculum development | Emphasis on international awareness, communicative competence | Indicates shift toward balanced cultural representation |
| (Lu et al., 2022b) | China & Japan | Comparative analysis of *Go for it!* and *NEW CROWN* | Found "cultural deficiencies" in Chinese textbooks | Directly informs present comparative approach |
| (L. Wang, 2022) | China & Japan | International understanding education | Japanese textbooks more systematic, Chinese more scattered | Supports analysis of structural and pedagogical differences |
| (L. Wang, 2012) | China & Japan | Deep structure of textbooks | Chinese emphasize systematic knowledge, Japanese focus on engaging content | Provides baseline for understanding pedagogical contrasts |

From this review, three patterns emerge. First, although Chinese textbooks integrate local and traditional cultural elements, they often do so in isolation, without contrastive frameworks that would foster intercultural competence. Second, Japanese textbooks provide a more balanced approach, though at times they rely heavily on symbolic representations that may underrepresent modern or evolving aspects of local culture. Third, comparative studies consistently reveal that Chinese materials lag behind in diversity, balance, and systematic cultural integration.

Building on these observations, this paper sets sharper research goals and questions:

- Using Cortazzi & Jin (1999) tripartite cultural framework, systematically review studies from 2013 to 2025 to attribute and calibrate cultural distribution differences across textbook versions, educational stages, and methods.
- Compare Byram (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence and Hofstede (1984) cultural dimensions to assess whether the cultural progression from "small c" to "Big C" to deeper value levels has been achieved and evaluate its fit with learning contexts and transferability.
- Drawing on the concentric circles model and the Big C/Small c hierarchical path, propose replicable criteria for improvement based on "proportion–advancement–context," along with actionable guidelines for development and evaluation.

Unlike previous research that often relies on a single textbook series or theoretical lens, this study's contribution lies in constructing an integrated holistic framework by combining Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Byram's ICC, Hofstede's dimensions, concentric circles, and Tomalin & Stempleski's Big C/Small c distinction. By aligning content analysis with systematic literature review, it reinterprets the so-called "proportion contradiction" as stemming from differences in

sample, framework, and analytical depth. Furthermore, by evaluating textual and visual representations within a single coordinate system, it develops a quantitative quota, hierarchical advancement model, and contextual implementation plan for textbook developers, teachers, and policymakers. The ultimate aim is to clarify the current state of cultural representation in Chinese English textbooks, identify key barriers to cultivating intercultural competence, and propose an executable pathway for enhancing both cultural and educational value.

## 2.    Methodology

This article is conceptual in nature and therefore does not rely on empirical fieldwork. Instead, it synthesizes and critically compares insights from prior scholarship on cultural representation in English textbooks. The analytical approach is anchored in two complementary strategies: comparative analysis and content analysis, both of which are well established in textbook research.

The study adopts Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) tripartite model of cultural representation—local, target, and international culture—as its principal analytical framework. To enrich interpretation, it integrates several additional perspectives: Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Kachru's concentric circles of world Englishes, Hofstede (1984) cultural dimensions, and Tomalin and Stempleski's distinction between Big C and small c culture. The combination of these frameworks enables both horizontal comparison across Chinese and Japanese textbook traditions and vertical examination of cultural progression from surface-level representations to deeper value orientations.

The review of prior literature was guided by relevance rather than exhaustiveness. Studies were identified primarily through Google Scholar searches and citation tracing, focusing on works published between 2013 and 2025. The inclusion criteria privileged research that (a) examined Chinese English textbooks or comparable EFL materials, (b) engaged directly with questions of cultural representation, and (c) provided sufficient methodological or conceptual insights for synthesis. This approach yielded a body of empirical and theoretical studies that serve as the foundation for the comparative and conceptual analysis presented in this article.

By integrating multiple theoretical models with findings from existing research, the methodology aims to move beyond descriptive accounts of cultural imbalance. Instead, it seeks to construct an interpretive framework that clarifies contradictions in previous scholarship, highlights structural differences between Chinese and Japanese textbooks, and advances a set of evaluative criteria for future textbook development and policy considerations.

## 3.    Results and Discussion
## 3.1    Conceptual Perspectives and Doctrines on Cultural Content

The conceptual foundation for this analysis rests on the diverse ways in which scholars have defined and categorized culture.  early anthropological definition emphasized culture as a complex whole including knowledge, belief, custom, and habit, highlighting its multidimensional and evolving nature. Later models such as Kachru's (1992) concentric circles extended this perspective into applied linguistics, illustrating the global diffusion of English and exposing the tendency of textbooks to privilege Inner Circle cultures at the expense of more diverse representations.

Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) tripartite framework remains central in evaluating cultural representation, providing a structured way to assess the balance between source, target, and international cultures. Byram's (1997) theory of Intercultural Communicative Competence reframes cultural learning as the development of skills, attitudes, and values rather than static knowledge. Hofstede's (2009) cultural dimensions further explain how shared values shape behavior across societies, while Tomalin and Stempleski's (2013) distinction between Big C and small c underscores the importance of integrating both formal cultural institutions and everyday practices into language education. These conceptual doctrines provide not only the analytical scaffolding for reviewing prior studies but also clarify why research findings often diverge, since different frameworks yield different emphases and interpretations.

## 3.2    Cultural Content as a Key Component of English Textbooks

The literature consistently affirms that culture is inseparable from language learning, yet the distribution of cultural types across textbooks remains unbalanced. Studies in China reveal uneven representation, with target culture often dominant and international culture largely absent. Shi & Ma (2025) showed that local culture was scattered and underdeveloped, while Wang & Talin (2025) emphasized the presence of Chinese traditions but noted their lack of comparative framing. Rai & Deng (2016) added another layer by showing that Chinese textbooks struggle to balance local identity with global outlooks, reinforcing the tension between national loyalty and international orientation.

In Japan, textbook studies indicate a stronger orientation toward balance and continuity. Chen (2025) demonstrated that English textbooks reflected national priorities shaped by socio-political contexts, Gonja & Musaev (2025) highlighted their dual role in affirming Japanese identity and signaling globalization, and  observed curriculum reforms that promoted communicative competence and intercultural awareness. These findings suggest that Japan has systematically used textbooks to reflect cultural priorities while also adapting to global educational trends.

Comparative analyses reinforce these observations. Fang and Ding (2020) pointed out cultural deficiencies in Chinese textbooks compared to *NEW CROWN*, Wang (2012) emphasized Japan's more systematic promotion of international understanding, and Wang (2022) noted the contrast between China's emphasis on systematic knowledge and Japan's focus on cultural engagement. Together, these studies confirm that while cultural content is recognized as essential, its integration remains inconsistent and uneven across contexts.

## 3.3    Portrayal of Cultural Content in Chinese English Textbooks

When examining Chinese textbooks more specifically, three recurring patterns emerge. First, there is an imbalance in cultural types. While some studies emphasize that target culture is dominant (Tang & Liu, 2025), others highlight attempts to showcase Chinese traditions (Zhang et al., 2024b). Regardless of these differences, international culture is consistently scarce, which significantly limits students' exposure to global perspectives (Fu, 2024; Jiang et al., 2025). Second, cultural representation tends to be superficial. (Li et al., 2023) showed that foreign culture often appears only in passing, while local culture is described in simplistic terms without progression from surface-level practices to deeper values. This lack of depth reduces opportunities for meaningful cultural learning, confirming earlier critiques by (Lu et al., 2022a). Third, there is a notable disconnect between textbook content and learners' lived experiences. Romero et al. (2024) observed that depictions of Western urban lifestyles alienate rural students, underscoring how textbook content may fail to resonate with students' realities, reducing relevance and engagement.

These findings align with the conceptual frameworks employed in this article. The contradictions in earlier research about whether local or target culture dominates can be interpreted as artifacts of the different frameworks and levels of analysis applied. By synthesizing multiple theoretical lenses, this study clarifies that the deeper problem lies not in which culture dominates but in the imbalance across types, the superficiality of representation, and the weak connection to learners' real lives.

## 3.4    Existing Limitations and Future Prospects

The synthesis of conceptual frameworks and prior studies points to persistent limitations in cultural representation in Chinese English textbooks. The most significant are the imbalance between local and target culture, the continuous absence of international culture, and the superficial treatment of cultural content. These shortcomings limit the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence and reduce the ability of learners to develop global competence (Fu, 2024; Li et al., 2023).

Addressing these issues requires reforms in textbook development, pedagogy, and policy. Developers need to distribute local, target, and international cultures more proportionally and design progression pathways from small c to Big C culture (Lasekan et al., 2024). Teachers should supplement textbooks with diverse cultural perspectives and use classroom discussions to bridge content with students' lived experiences (Molema, 2024). Policymakers must establish evaluation standards that explicitly prioritize cultural diversity and intercultural competence, ensuring that teaching materials are responsive to both national identity and global engagement (Álvarez Valdivia & González Montoto, 2018). Future research should combine textual analysis with investigations of learning outcomes to evaluate the impact of cultural representation on students' intercultural skills. It should also embrace multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches to capture how culture is transmitted not only through text but also through images and tasks (Teo & Zhu, 2018). Longitudinal studies tracking revisions of new textbooks would further help establish whether reforms succeed in improving cultural balance and depth (Jacobs, 2013).

By grounding the analysis in conceptual doctrines and linking it with empirical studies summarized in the literature review, this article offers a framework to reinterpret contradictions in earlier findings and to propose a more coherent, balanced, and contextually relevant pathway for cultural representation in English textbooks.

## 4.    Conclusion

This study has explored cultural representation in Chinese and Japanese junior middle school English textbooks through a conceptual and comparative framework. By synthesizing existing research and applying multiple theories—including Cortazzi and Jin's tripartite classification, Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Kachru's concentric circles, and Tomalin and Stempleski's Big C/Small c distinction—the analysis has revealed persistent imbalances in cultural content. Chinese textbooks often emphasize target culture or fragmentary local elements, while international culture remains consistently underrepresented. In contrast, Japanese textbooks demonstrate a more systematic and balanced integration of cultural types, reflecting responsiveness to both national identity and global perspectives.

These findings underscore that English textbooks are not only linguistic tools but also cultural instruments that shape learners' worldviews and intercultural communicative competence. To move beyond surface-level cultural mentions, future textbook development in China should pursue proportional representation of local, target, and international cultures, ensure deeper progression from small c to Big C content, and strengthen connections to students' lived experiences. While this article is conceptual rather than empirical, its contribution lies in clarifying contradictions in prior research and offering an integrated evaluative framework. Further empirical studies linking textbook content with

learning outcomes will be crucial to advancing intercultural competence and ensuring language education serves both national and global goals.

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