

A Study on the Cross-Cultural Communication of Chinese Opera Cultural Elements in Teaching Materials of Chinese as a Foreign Language: Taking *New Practical Chinese Readers* as an Example

Xi Wang*, Dong Yao

China Jiliang University, Hangzhou 310018, Zhejiang Province, China

*Corresponding author: Xi Wang, 1361454034@qq.com

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Abstract: This paper selects the widely used *New Practical Chinese Readers*, a comprehensive teaching material for Chinese as a foreign language, analyzing its content selection, presentation format, and organizational characteristics. By reviewing the inclusion of Chinese opera cultural elements in this material, the study identifies existing issues and provides recommendations for improvement. Introducing opera culture into Chinese language teaching materials can align with global cultural exchanges, helping more people learn about traditional Chinese culture and enhancing China's international influence.

Keywords: Chinese opera cultural elements; Teaching materials; Chinese as a foreign language; Cross-cultural communication

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1. Introduction

In the Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC, General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward the task of “extending the reach and appeal of Chinese civilization” while “telling China’s story well and making China’s voice heard.” Language and culture are closely linked, and teaching Chinese as a foreign language is both language teaching and cultural communication. Both classroom teaching and compiling teaching materials should incorporate traditional Chinese cultural elements. With the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, the cross-cultural communication of Chinese operas has become an important way to promote China’s cultural diplomacy, which is helpful to highlight the “Silk Road Spirit” and forge closer bonds between peoples ^[1].

As Chinese learners with different cultural backgrounds, the integration of opera culture in their textbooks

enables students to master the Chinese language as well as understand the excellent traditional Chinese culture. However, there are several issues with the inclusion of opera culture elements in current teaching materials, such as the lack of a systematic introduction to opera culture and its diverse genres, with most content remaining at the conceptual level.

Based on this, this paper takes the *New Practical Chinese Readers* as a case study to investigate the similarities and differences in the content selection, presentation, and arrangement of the opera cultural elements. It also sorts out the problems existing in the textbook compilation and finally offers some targeted suggestions.

2. Research status

Yang ^[2] mainly studied the compilation of cultural factors in the comprehensive primary Chinese textbooks. Taking *New Practical Chinese Readers* and *Developing Chinese* as examples, it reveals the similarities and differences between the two different primary Chinese textbooks and provides targeted suggestions ^[2]. Zhang identified issues related to the inclusion of Chinese opera in textbooks and classroom teaching, proposing improvement strategies based on these findings ^[3]. Zong explored the application of China's intangible cultural heritage in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), which mainly designed the calligraphy class and paper-cutting class, and offered suggestions for classroom teaching and textbook compilation respectively ^[4]. Qian examined the application of Huangmei Opera in cultural courses of international Chinese education, analyzing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in entering TCFL cultural classrooms ^[5]. Ke and Yan, through the investigation of opera cultural elements in 110 Chinese textbooks, argued for strengthening the dissemination of opera culture, drawing on existing experiences, and incorporating it into textbooks to raise learners' awareness of its significance ^[6]. Sun investigated the intangible cultural heritage factors in cultural textbooks for TCFL and proposed three recommendations for better utilizing such elements ^[7]. Jin selected *Happy Chinese* and *Easy Steps to Chinese* as the research objects to compare the number, types, and presentation forms of cultural points in the two textbooks to explore the arrangement of cultural points in the textbooks ^[8]. Yang analyzed cultural factors in *Learn Chinese through Music*, categorizing these elements into three levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) and studying their arrangement to provide suggestions for textbook revisions ^[9]. Sun took *Developing Chinese* as the research object and made a three-dimensional analysis according to social life, traditional culture, and contemporary China ^[10].

To sum up, while there has been considerable research on incorporating cultural or intangible heritage elements into Chinese teaching, studies focusing specifically on Chinese opera in teaching materials remain limited. Moreover, most research emphasizes classroom teaching, with less attention paid to textbook content development.

3. Importance of applying Chinese opera cultural elements to teaching materials of Chinese as a foreign language

Language learning is inseparable from cultural integration, and teaching Chinese as a foreign language is also inseparable from cultural teaching. The two are interrelated and interdependent. Traditional Chinese opera bears thousands of years of history and profound artistic connotations. Therefore, foreign students can learn about ancient values and aesthetic concepts through the introduction of traditional Chinese opera culture in the textbooks, which helps Chinese opera go global.

3.1. Helping international students understand traditional Chinese values

Most of the stories told by traditional operas are based on honesty and justice. Meanwhile, foreign students can learn about the Confucian concept of Five Constants by studying opera culture, fully realizing Chinese values and promoting mutual understanding.

3.2. Helping international students improve their language skills

Chinese opera contains a large number of idioms and technical terms, such as “make oneself up and go on the stage,” “singing, reciting, acting, and fighting,” “long-sleeved style,” “Liyuan aristocratic family,” “costumes and props,” “beat pattern,” “strike a pose,” “challenging someone,” and so on. Therefore, the historical stories of these words can be presented to students when designing the teaching materials, so that they can fully understand and use them flexibly in communication, thus improving their language skills.

3.3. Enhancing the interest of the classroom

The unique features of Chinese opera, distinct from Western drama, captivate learners with its novelty. Integrating opera culture into textbooks can make lessons more attractive and spark students’ interest in learning Chinese.

3.4. Promoting the popularization of Chinese opera

The education of Chinese opera is the key to passing down the art as well as an important carrier for conveying Chinese ideas and values. Introducing Chinese opera elements into teaching materials will help more foreign students understand Chinese opera and enhance its influence and popularity.

4. Rationale for selecting the New Practical Chinese Readers

The *New Practical Chinese Readers*, influenced by the late 1990s “structure-function-culture” approach, is widely used and caters to a broad audience. Comprising four volumes and 50 lessons, it builds on the Practical Chinese Reader and overseas teaching experience. It is primarily designed for Chinese learners whose native or primary language is English.

5. Statistics and analysis of opera cultural elements in New Practical Chinese Readers

5.1. Content selection

5.1.1. Opera genres

China’s national opera boasts a long history with 275 recorded forms. In the textbook, Peking Opera and Yue Opera are mainly introduced, with Peking Opera mentioned 20 times. Yue Opera mainly appeared in lesson 22 and was referenced as an example seven times in other lessons.

5.1.2. Opera costumes

Costumes serve as a crucial tool in shaping characters, bridging the gap between actors and their roles. In lesson 6, three pictures are shown, through which students can observe the facial makeup, beard pieces, and headdresses worn by actors, but there is no detailed explanation of their types and characteristics.

5.1.3. Opera roles

The role of traditional Chinese opera is divided into five categories according to gender and role characteristics: Sheng, Dan, Jing, Mo, and Chou. In the whole textbook, there is an introduction about the roles of Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and the characters in the opera *Butterfly Lovers*.

5.1.4. Opera movements

Actions in opera are essential for conveying a character's personality and emotions. In lesson 6, it is briefly mentioned that suggestive movements in opera are performed in coordination with the melody of traditional musical instruments. However, the lesson fails to provide foreign students with a deeper understanding of the martial arts techniques and dance skills.

5.1.5. Opera performance artists

Opera artist refers to an artist who is engaged in the creation of opera art and has made outstanding achievements in this field. Lanfang Mei, a famous Chinese performing artist, was mentioned in lesson 6, but his life, outstanding achievements, and influence on Chinese opera were not mentioned too much.

5.1.6. Opera works and theaters

Lesson 6 mentioned the work *Farewell My Concubine*, and encouraged students to go to Mei Lanfang Theater, Chang'an Theater, and other theaters to watch this work. Lesson 15 mentioned the opera *Butterfly Lovers*, and lesson 22 mentioned *Dream of the Red Chamber* at Chang'an Theater.

5.2. Forms of content presentation

5.2.1. Text form

The *New Practical Chinese Readers* primarily introduces Peking Opera and Yue Opera to foreign students through textual content. The discussion of traditional Chinese opera is mainly concentrated in lessons 6 and 22, while references in other lessons appear in the form of related topics.

5.2.2. Form of vocabulary

Most new words are presented within texts and vocabulary lists, with some extended for additional context. However, relying on individual words or phrases to convey opera culture makes it challenging for learners to gain a clear understanding, offering only a basic introduction.

5.2.3. Example form

The author found that "Peking Opera" is used as a sentence-making vocabulary when explaining grammar in most courses. By making sentences, students can master language and grammar rules, thereby improving their language application ability. The repetition of Peking Opera and Yue Opera helps consolidate students' knowledge of opera.

5.2.4. Annotation form

After-class notes in lesson 6 introduce Peking Opera in English, while lesson 22 covers the style and regional distribution of Yue Opera, helping students expand their knowledge and deepen their understanding of each opera's roots.

5.2.5. Practice form

The author found that opera content mainly appears in the practice section as “familiar phrases,” “sentence pattern replacement,” and “conversation practice.” Incorporating opera into these practices helps deepen foreign students’ impression of opera, while after-class reading further enhances their interest in learning Chinese.

5.2.6. Writing form of Chinese characters

Lesson 22 introduces in detail the stroke order of the character “Yue (越),” the historical origin of the character “Yue (越),” and the stroke order of “Xi (戏).” Understanding the origin and stroke order of Chinese characters is helpful for foreign students to understand and use Chinese characters, as well as to feel the long history of Chinese civilization.

5.3. Characteristics of content distribution and arrangement

In terms of content distribution, the appearance of opera cultural elements is uneven. It appears very often in lesson 6 and lesson 22, while in the other texts, only opera genres are shown as example sentences. The two phrases “Peking Opera” and “Yue Opera” have a high repetition rate in texts and after-class exercises, which is conducive to the consolidation of knowledge.

In terms of content arrangement, the cultural elements showed a decreasing trend. In the first two volumes of the *New Practical Chinese Readers*, there are more Chinese operas, but the number of appearances in volumes 3 and 4 is not as high as that in volumes 1 and 2.

6. Reflections and suggestions on how to introduce the cultural elements of opera into TCFL textbook

At present, in the textbooks for teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the introduction of traditional Chinese opera cultural elements is too superficial without much narration of its cultural connotation and knowledge background. Besides, the introduction of opera culture lacks systematicity, appearing only as example sentences in each course. The opera types are relatively simple, with Peking Opera and Yue Opera introduced. In view of the above problems, the following improvement suggestions are put forward.

6.1. Increasing the variety of operas and taking into account the diversity of operas

Peking Opera is known as the “national essence” of China. While focusing on Peking Opera, it is also necessary to promote excellent local operas. Incorporating more operas will help international students learn more classical works and famous writers.

6.2. Selecting representative repertoire supplemented by an accurate English translation

When choosing repertoire, representative classical works can be selected. For example, *The Drunken Beauty*, *Butterfly Lovers*, and *Hua Mulan*. In addition, the teaching materials can be accurately translated with the help of the learners’ native language first, and then the Chinese language can be utilized for teaching, which is more conducive to students’ understanding of the content of the opera.

6.3. Selecting opera content close to actual social life

The purpose of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is to cultivate Chinese learners’ ability to communicate in Chinese. Therefore, the content should be selected in accordance with the language norms and for the

service of language communication. For example, words such as “be neither humble nor pushy,” “beat around the bush,” “deliberated,” and so on. It is beneficial to deepen students’ understanding and application of the vocabulary by explaining the connotation of the vocabulary in the opera.

6.4. Adding colorful pictures and classic melodies about opera culture

Through the display of pictures, foreign students can more intuitively feel the charm of Chinese opera costumes and action skills. The display of classical melody, supplemented by the combination of short videos and opera music in the classroom, can immerse students into the cultural atmosphere of Chinese opera in a comprehensive way.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, as a performing art integrating music, dance, fine arts, and other art forms, Chinese opera is unique in the history of world art. However, it still faces many difficulties in cross-cultural communication. Integrating Chinese opera cultural elements into Chinese language teaching materials for foreigners can be one of the most important ways to promote its foreign dissemination, and this new way of dissemination is conducive to promoting China to the world stage and letting the world listen to China’s voice.

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