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A Multimodal Corpus Study on Covers of Chinese Language Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools in China

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SI-QI LIU (Corresponding Author)
School of Foreign Languages, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei 230009, China. Email: 3038094707@qq.com
YI-HAN WANG
School of Foreign Languages, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei 230009, China.
XIN-NI LU
School of Foreign Languages, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei 230009, China.

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Abstract
This study systematically investigates the multimodal symbolic characteristics of textbook covers used in China's primary and secondary Chinese language education. The dataset comprises 75 series (585 volumes) published between 1959 and 2026. Adopting Painter et al.'s five-dimensional visual grammar framework and supported by AI-assisted coding, this study analyzes visual variables including cover themes, figures, background settings, painting styles, color saturation, and image-text layout. Drawing on critical curriculum theory, this study further interprets the evolutionary trajectory of textbook covers over nearly seven decades. Results indicate that primary-school covers center on childlike scenes and China's then industrial and/or scientific achievement, whereas secondary-school covers emphasize traditional cultural infiltration and national ideological symbol. Painting styles and color saturation have evolved in tandem with aesthetic trends and national cultural initiatives. Finally, this study discusses the embedded educational ideologies and cultural transmission mechanisms underlying visual design of textbook covers.

Keywords: textbook covers, primary and secondary education, multimodal discourse analysis; cultural symbols; curriculum theory.

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1. Introduction

As a key carrier of educational multimodal discourse, systematic research on textbook covers—such as comparative analysis of covers from different periods

and investigation of the correlation between covers and textbook content—is of great significance for deepening textbook research. However, existing textbook research mostly focuses on the level of text content, such as text arrangement logic and ideological analysis. Occasional multimodal analyses involving images mainly demonstrate the correlation between internal illustrations and content of textbooks and their role in promoting students' learning. Among the few studies specifically targeting textbook covers, most aim to elaborate the significance of cover images for subject teaching, such as analyses of covers of biology textbooks and geography textbooks; another category focuses on discussing the importance of covers in aesthetic education. Traditional research often stays at the perceptual evaluation level of "whether it is beautiful or not", and rarely examines it from the perspective of cultural capital, failing to deeply deconstruct the "transmission mechanism of educational ideology" behind covers.

Text-centrism has always implicitly contained the cognitive bias that "language takes precedence over images", holding that written language is a rational and precise tool for meaning expression, while visual symbols are perceptual and vague auxiliary means. This has led researchers to lack theoretical interpretations of the educational functions of native visual symbols in Chinese textbooks (such as ink-wash styles and red cultural images), and insufficient discussions on the cultural conflicts in the visual style of textbooks against the background of globalization (such as cartoonization versus traditional aesthetics). Systematic and in-depth studies analyzing the characteristics of textbook covers from a multimodal perspective are extremely rare.

In recent years, scholars have regarded textbooks as "carriers of visual culture". Findings from cognitive science have proven that the effectiveness of visual modality in evoking emotions, retaining memories, and constructing cultural identity is even higher than that of pure text. As the "first point of visual

contact", the cover contains rich multimodal symbols (such as color symbolism, icon metaphor, and typesetting logic), and "The cover influences readers' initial acceptance of a textbook, as well as their preliminary judgment of its quality." (Fang, 2025, p.09). The few existing studies involving covers only conduct discussions from the perspectives of aesthetic education (such as color aesthetics) or auxiliary education (such as the influence of cover design on students' interest), and fail to deconstruct their semiotic meaning from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis. This research gap limits our in-depth understanding of the role of textbook covers in cognitive guidance, cultural transmission and other aspects. Against the above background, this study puts forward the following three research questions:

1) What evolutionary trajectory does the covers of Chinese primary and secondary school Chinese language textbooks exhibit?
2) What are the characters of Chinese language textbook covers across different school stages (primary school, junior high school, and senior high school)?
3) What educational ideology does the visual design of Chinese language textbook covers embodied?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the five-dimensional visual coding system for multimodal discourse analysis developed by Painter (2013), which is a systematic extension of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) visual grammar theory. The theoretical framework includes five core dimensions: compositional meaning (analyzing cover spatial layout, visual hierarchy, and text-image arrangement), interactional meaning (deconstructing reader engagement triggered by perspective, gaze, and color), representational meaning (interpreting image narrative logic and symbolic metaphor), intermodal synergy (quantifying the complementary or reinforcing

relationship between text and image), and cultural context (uncovering the social and historical connotations of symbols). This framework not only retains the systematicity of visual grammar, but also enables the operational decomposition of visual elements in textbook covers through clear coding dimensions. On this basis, this study introduces Bourdieu's (1997) theory of cultural capital as a macro interpretive perspective, regards cover symbols as an integral part of objectified cultural capital within the education system, and analyzes how they internalize national-level cultural will into individuals' cultural habitus. Along with visual grammar and cultural capital theory, this study draws on critical curriculum theory (Apple, 2004) to interpret how textbook covers function as a form of "hidden curriculum." According to critical curriculum theory, school knowledge is never neutral but reflects the interests of dominant social groups. From this perspective, the selection, emphasis, or omission of visual elements over time reveals the changing educational ideologies embedded in China's language arts curriculum. This complements Bourdieu's framework by showing how the state, through curriculum policies, legitimizes certain symbolic forms as proper knowledge for younger generations.

In addition, the affective system theory divides image representation into three levels: aesthetic type, affective projection type, and concrete individual type, revealing the progressive relationship of visual symbols from information transmission to affective penetration. With color as its core element, the atmosphere system divides colors into two states: activated and non-activated. The activated state includes three visual dimensions: chroma, hue, and naturalness. The text-image layout system distinguishes between integrated layout and complementary layout: the former presents text and image as an integrated whole, while the latter expresses text and image separately.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Source

This study constructs a multimodal corpus covering the covers of Chinese primary and secondary school Chinese language textbooks from 1959 to 2026. The educational stages include primary school, junior high school, senior high school, and the multi-year middle school stage in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The publishing houses cover mainstream publishing institutions such as People's Education Press, Chinese Language Education Press, and Jiangsu Education Press. Samples exclude textbooks without covers from special periods to ensure coding consistency.

3.2. Coding Method

Traditional manual coding methods are inefficient and vulnerable to subjectivity. This study uses AI vision technology for object detection and scene understanding to preliminarily divide the dimension categories of textbook covers, and then establishes a rational and accurate digital evaluation system through cross-validation between manual annotation and AI prediction. The coding dimensions cover subject content, background, painting style, color saturation, and text-image layout.

Cover themes are divided into five main categories: figures, scenery, cultural relics, animals, and others. The figure category is subdivided into ethnic minorities and global ethnic groups; the scenery category is subdivided into famous scenic spots, landmark buildings, and local natural landscapes; the cultural relics category is subdivided into cultural relic photographs, ancient paintings, and intangible cultural heritage; the animal category is subdivided into anthropomorphic animals, nationalized animals, and ordinary animals; the other category includes plants and color block splicing. A total of sixteen labels from 0 to 16 are used in coding (0. title only, 1. figures, 2. ethnic minorities, 3. global ethnic groups, 4. daily scenery, 5. famous scenic spots, 6. landmark buildings, 7. local natural landscapes, 8.

cultural relics, 9. ancient paintings, 10. intangible cultural heritage, 11. ordinary animals, 12. anthropomorphic animals, 13. nationalized animals, 14. plants, 15. color block splicing).

4. Coding Criteria

4.1. Background

The background dimension is divided into four categories: 0. no background, 1. seasonal elements, 2. ethnic landforms, 3. technological elements. As a foil to the central theme, the background also conveys information of the times. For example, the rocket element on textbook covers in the 1990s reflects the country's "Tiangong Program". Such technological symbols are not only a footnote to the progress of the times, but also a cultural means of transforming the country's cutting-edge scientific and technological achievements into the daily visual experience of national education.

0(no background) *1(seasonal elements)* *2(ethnic landforms)* *3 (technological elements)*

4.2. Painting Style

This study divides painting styles into four levels: 1. highly abstract; 2. moderately abstract; 3. moderately realistic; 4. photorealistic.

1 (highly abstract) *2 (moderately abstract)* *3 (moderately realistic)* *4(photorealistic)*

1. Highly Abstract Style

The highly abstract style does not pursue the figurative depiction of real objects, and mainly relies on the free combination of geometric shapes, colors, lines and other elements. Its forms and images present the characteristics of high simplification, distortion and exaggeration. Such works break away from the conventional forms of real objects, and their connotations need to be interpreted through association and perception, making it difficult to directly identify specific objects from the picture. The highly abstract style pays more attention to expressing the creator's subjective emotions, ideological concepts and spiritual realm.

2. Relatively Abstract Style

The relatively abstract style retains the characteristics of some real objects on the basis of abstraction, and still mainly adopts techniques of distortion, exaggeration and simplification. Compared with the highly abstract style, it contains more figurative elements. Viewers can vaguely recognize the connection with real objects, but the image deviates from conventional cognition, requiring a certain amount of thinking to understand the relationship between the picture and reality. The relatively abstract style not only expresses subjective emotions, but also attempts to create a certain echo with reality.

3. Relatively Realistic Style

The relatively realistic painting style depicts based on real objects, pursues a certain degree of similarity in form, and retains most of the basic forms and characteristics of real objects. There is moderate artistic processing in the handling of details, color, light and shadow, which is not completely equivalent to reality. Such works have an obvious corresponding relationship with reality, the depicted objects can be easily identified, and they bear traces of artistic creation, serving the dual purposes of reflecting reality and artistic expression.

4.3. Realistic Painting Style

Photorealistic painting style strives to depict reality accurately and meticulously, and highly restores the real world in terms of form, proportion, color, light and shadow, and texture. The picture corresponds almost one-to-one with reality, and viewers can intuitively and clearly identify the depicted objects. Such works mainly show the beauty of reality through superb skills, with the focus on realistically reproducing the objective world.

AI needs to judge the painting style from three dimensions:

First, analyze the presentation form of the picture elements: judge whether the objects and scenery are close to the original real appearance (realistic), deformed but still retain their characteristics (relatively realistic), greatly deformed with only a little shadow of reality retained (relatively abstract), or completely detached from the real form (extremely abstract). Second, evaluate the degree of association with reality: determine the similarity between the picture content and reality, including high similarity (realistic), with artistic processing (relatively realistic), requiring association to understand (relatively abstract), or almost no connection (extremely abstract). Finally, examine the emphasis of creative intention: distinguish whether the work focuses on presenting reality (realistic), integrating personal style (relatively realistic), expressing subjective emotions (relatively abstract), or completely breaking away from reality (extremely abstract).

4.4. Color Saturation

This study divides color saturation into four levels: 1. Elegant and light; 2. Relatively light; 3. Relatively strong; 4. Strong.

1(Elegant and light) *2(Relatively ligh)* *3(Relatively strong)* *4(Strong)*

1. Elegant and light

Images with an elegant and light style have low color saturation, presenting pale and pure tones. Such images usually contain a large amount of white or gray tones, with natural and soft color transitions and weak visual impact. Elegant and light colors can create a fresh, tranquil and soothing visual effect, giving people a plain and elegant feeling.

2. Relatively light

Images with a relatively elegant style have relatively low saturation, but they have a more obvious color tendency compared with the elegant style. There is a slight contrast between the colors, and the whole still maintains soft characteristics. This type of image has a comfortable and gentle visual effect, can create a warm and simple atmosphere, and avoid an overly strong visual experience.

3. Relatively Rich

Images with a relatively rich style have high saturation, and the brightness and intensity of colors are significantly improved. The color contrast is relatively obvious, with a certain visual tension but not being overly exaggerated. This type of image gives people a lively and vivid feeling, and shows the charm of color on the premise of maintaining harmony.

4. Rich

Images with a rich style have extremely high color saturation, presenting a bright and strong visual effect. The color contrast is sharp, with high purity and lightness, and rarely uses gray or white tones for dilution. This type of image can produce a

strong visual impact, quickly attract the viewer's attention, and create a warm or solemn atmosphere.

The AI system judges color saturation through the following dimensions:

1) Vividness of color: Evaluate whether the color is close to white or gray tone (subtle), has a certain degree of vividness (relatively subtle), is distinctly vivid (relatively rich), or is extremely vivid (rich).
2) Characteristics of visual perception: Judge whether the picture brings a soft and soothing (subtle), comfortable and tranquil (relatively subtle), lively and vivid (relatively rich), or strong and striking (rich) visual experience.
3) Proportion of color mixing: Analyze the proportion of white and gray components, including the cases of relatively high proportion (subtle), moderate proportion (relatively subtle), low content (relatively rich), or almost no content (rich).

4.5. Layout of image and text

Graphic and text layout is divided into integrated layout (text embedded inside the image) and complementary layout (text and image are separated independently).

Integrated layout *complementary layout*

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1. Evolution Characteristics of Painting Styles

Due to the differences in the age groups of target readers, there are significant differences in the function and style between the covers of primary school Chinese

language textbooks and those of middle school Chinese language textbooks. Therefore, when conducting a quantitative study on the painting style of Chinese language textbook covers, this research counts primary school and middle school textbooks separately. The study divides the timeline into decades as time periods to avoid the interference of extreme data. Considering the limited number of textbook samples after 2020, to avoid data deviation, textbooks after 2020 are incorporated into the 2010 group, merged into the group "2010-".

Covers of primary school Chinese language textbooks: In the 1970s, the style was mainly relatively abstract. After entering the 1980s, the proportion of relatively abstract styles decreased, extremely abstract and realistic styles began to emerge, and cover styles tended to be diversified. After the 1990s, realistic styles disappeared, and the proportions of extremely abstract and relatively abstract styles remained stable. After the 21st century, the proportion of extremely abstract styles further rose to 44.4%. This shift toward abstraction constitutes a key phase in the evolutionary trajectory of primary school textbook covers, marking their transition from figurative reproduction of everyday scenes to the symbolic construction of decontextualized visual themes.

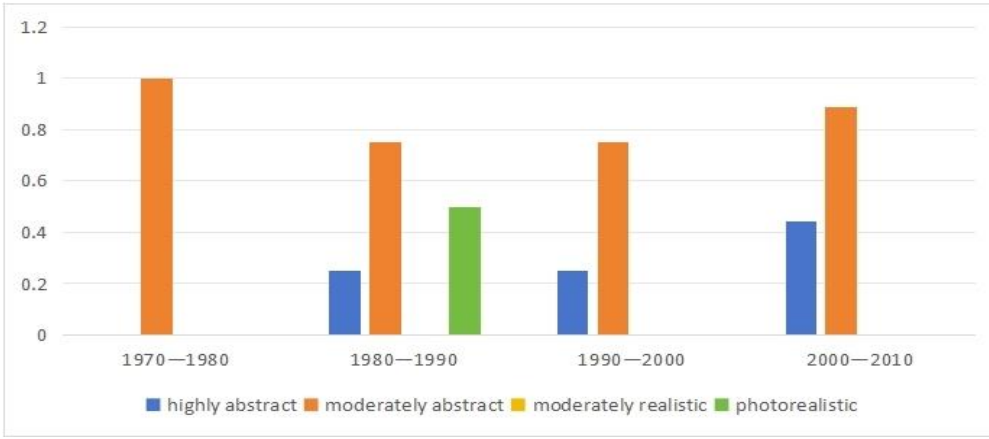

Fig. 1. The proportion of different periods of drawing styles on the covers of primary school Chinese textbooks

5.2. Covers of middle school Chinese language textbooks

Before the 21st century, the proportion of extremely abstract painting styles continued to rise. The reason was that early middle school textbook covers mainly adopted graphic design patterns, and gradually shifted from realistic plant photos to abstract graphics with symbolic significance. After the 21st century, the content of covers has undergone an obvious transformation: cultural relic photos, ancient paintings and landscape photos have become the main visual elements. The proportion of relatively realistic styles reaches 60.0%, and realistic styles account for 40.0%. The introduction of traditional cultural symbols such as cultural relics, calligraphy postscripts and ancient paintings has made middle school textbook covers return from abstract symbolism to concrete cultural expression. Through the material presentation of high-definition cultural relics and ancient paintings, this shift establishes the authority and presence of cultural symbols via high-fidelity realistic imagery, thereby constructing a visual order centered on material cultural heritage.

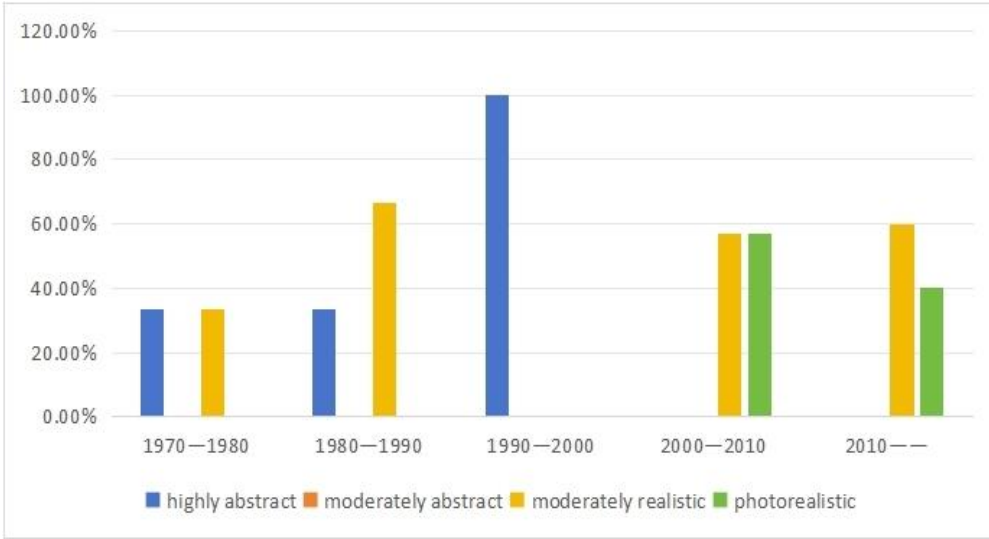

Fig. 2. The proportion of different periods of drawing styles on the covers of middle school Chinese textbooks

5.3. Characteristics of Color Saturation

Color saturation shows a significant downward trend as the school stage **increases**. The covers of primary school textbooks are dominated by strong colors, accounting for 94%, which meets the need for attracting the attention of young students.

In middle school, relatively strong and relatively light colors together account for 80%, which fits the implicit characteristic of traditional Chinese aesthetics. The traditional Chinese color system has always attached importance to the rhythmic contrast between black and white, and pursued the simple, implicit and restrained visual charm (Qiao & Qi, 2023). There is a close correlation between cover type and saturation: illustrations and photographs are mostly strongly or relatively strongly saturated; cover in traditional Chinese painting style (ink wash painting, fine brushwork) are mostly relatively strongly saturated; single-tone graphic design covers are mostly relatively lightly saturated, while multi-tone graphic design covers are strongly saturated. This is highly consistent with the laws of color psychology: high-saturation colors arouse excitement and attract attention, while low-saturation color systems create a peaceful and comfortable visual atmosphere, which helps improve students' patience and concentration in learning (Zhang, Di & Guo, 2022), and builds an aesthetic field for students to precipitate thinking and cultivate their temperament.

Before the 21st century, the proportion of covers with high-saturation colors continued to rise, which is consistent with the development of printing technology; after the 21st century, the proportion of high-saturation colors decreased significantly, and the number of medium- and low-saturation colors increased, which is directly related to the extensive use of cultural relics and ancient painting elements in middle school textbook covers.

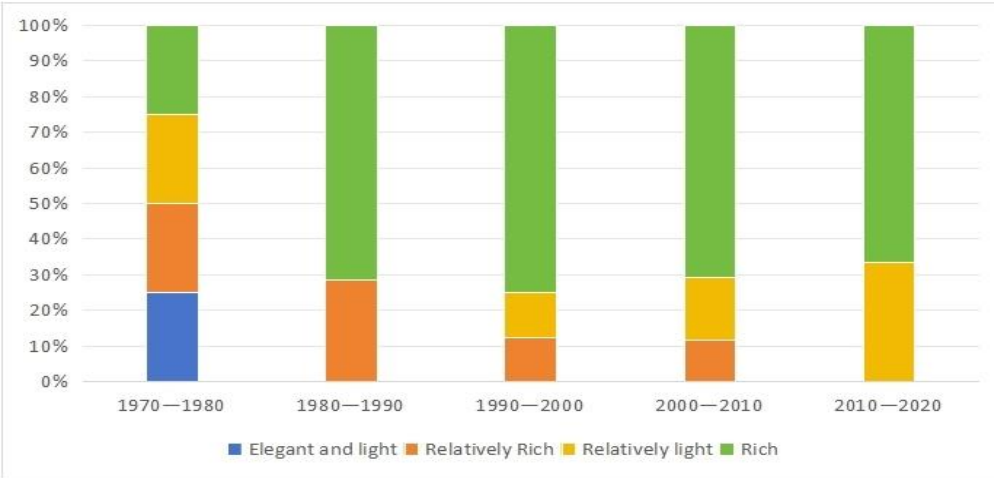

Fig. 3. The proportion of color saturation on the covers of Chinese language textbooks at different times

5.4. The Relevance Between Theme Content, Background and the Times

The themes of textbook covers profoundly reflect the hot issues of the times and national policies.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the backgrounds of primary school Chinese textbook covers focused on people's daily labor, and most primary school students wore red scarves, which conformed to the keynote of encouraging all people to work in that era. After the 1990s, the life backgrounds of covers were more in line with the nature of children in this era. Most of the children shown in the covers are playing, and the covers no longer carry strong indoctrinating significance. Compared with previous textbooks, seasonal elements that match the semester have also begun to appear. Symbols representing high technology began to emerge. For example, in the 1990s, the cover of the fifth-grade second-semester textbook published by Liaoning Education Press included the scientific and technological element of a rocket, which echoes the Tiangong Program launched by China in 1992. These characteristics align with the abstract's finding that primary-school covers center on childlike scenes (e.g., playing children) and

China's then industrial and/or scientific achievem ents (e.g., rockets and labor symbols) . After 2000, elements of ethnic minorities began to appear on the covers of primary school Chinese textbooks, which had never appeared before. Furthermore, in the textbooks published by People's Education Press in 2001, elements of world nations appeared (the cover of the third-grade second-semester textbook shows people of different skin colors); the emergence of these two multi-ethnic elements is related to China's successful bid to host the Olympic Games in 2001. After 2000, the content of textbook covers not only depicts the life of learners, but also begins to reveal the learning content in the textbook. For example, the cover of the fifth-grade second-semester Chinese textbook published by Hebei Publishing House in 2002 uses the scene of Lu Xun stabbing a zha in a melon field, which comes from the textbook text. After 2000, for the Chinese textbooks published by People's Education Press, China's general-purpose textbooks, most of the cover layouts adopt complementary cover designs.

The iteration of these cover symbols vividly records a growth history of national spirit that evolves from "labor is glorious", the rise of science and technology, to national unity and cultural confidence.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, the covers of Chinese language textbooks for secondary schools were mainly dominated by graphic design patterns. After the 21st century, they have diverged into two categories: cultural relic photos and ancient famous paintings. Both of them, composed of distinctive traditional Chinese cultural elements, serve as effective carriers for infiltrating excellent traditional culture education, and have a profound impact on cultivating students' cultural aesthetic and cultural confidence (Li, 2023). From the 1970s to the 1990s, the covers of senior high school textbooks were mainly dominated by ink wash paintings. After the 1990s, they shifted to paper-cutting. After the 21st century, they are mainly dominated by photos of cultural relics, calligraphy posts, ancient

paintings and domestic real-scene photos. Traditional cultural symbols are incorporated into the institutional curriculum framework through cover images, and become cultural capital recognized by the state that needs to be passed on to the next generation. These features collectively illustrate what the abstract identifies as secondary-school covers' emphasis on traditional cultural infiltration (via cultural relics, ancient paintings, and calligraphy) and national ideological symbols (via the state-endorsed cultural capital passed on to students).

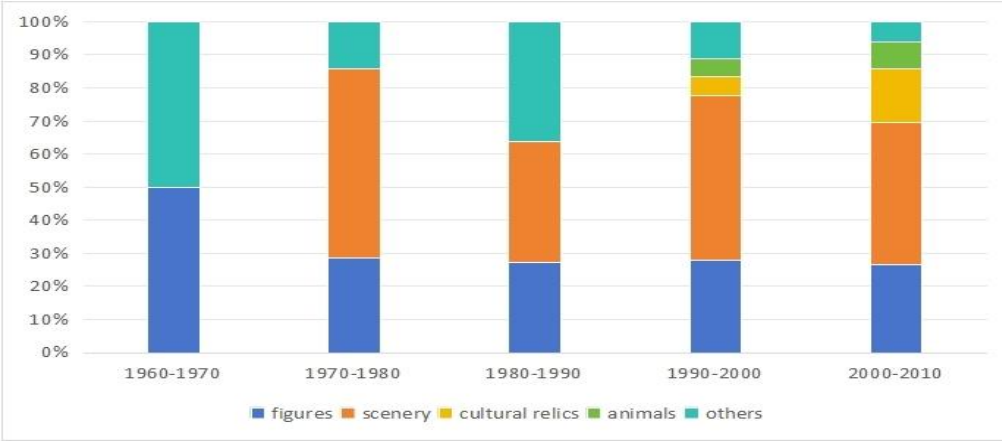

Fig. 4. The proportion of themes on the cover of Chinese textbooks in different periods

5.5. Layout Characteristics of Image and Text

The layout of textbook covers is divided into two types: complementary layout and integrated layout. In complementary layout, text and images are independent systems, and the complementary covers of the same set of textbooks follow a unified layout with fixed text positions. In integrated layout, text is part of the image, and its position is relatively flexible.

"From the perspective of meaning coordination, the function of composition is to act as a link connecting representational meaning and interactive meaning." (Wang, 2022, p.140) Studies have found that primary school textbooks mostly adopt integrated layout, which enhances visual appeal through the integration of

image and text; secondary school textbooks mainly adopt complementary layout, in which text and images are separated and independent, reflecting the standardization and seriousness of knowledge transmission. This difference in layout essentially reflects different strategies for information hierarchization and visual logic construction in cover design: integrated layout creates an immersive reading experience by eliminating the boundary between image and text, while complementary layout helps students quickly obtain key information through clear hierarchical distinction (He & Ye, 2026). This divergence in layout thus constitutes a defining character of the visual grammar operative at each school stage: immersive integration for primary education versus hierarchical separation for secondary education.

5.6. Cultural Significance

After 1990, the visual design of Chinese language textbook covers for secondary schools underwent a fundamental reconfiguration: rather than merely reflecting changing aesthetic preferences, this shift from plain functional patterns to imagery dense with traditional cultural symbols visually embodies a state-endorsed educational ideology that defines cultural heritage as the legitimate core of national identity formation. This change is not accidental; rather, it is the concrete projection of national cultural strategy in the field of basic education, and constitutes a sophisticated technique of national cultural governance. Through the selection and combination of visual symbols, the cover demarcates what constitutes legitimate cultural knowledge worth rendering visible within the educational field. From the perspective of critical curriculum theory, such visual transformation exemplifies how the state embeds its preferred cultural narratives into the everyday materials of schooling, thereby shaping students' national identity and aesthetic dispositions without explicit instruction. One of its operating mechanisms is to convert screened traditional cultural resources into objectified

cultural capital that can be distributed on a large scale, and then reconstruct these resources. Through the multimodal coordination of fonts and images, it transforms abstract cultural confidence into tangible and visible daily educational practices, gradually converts objectified cover symbols into the cultural habitus of student subjects, and implants a cognitive anchor of "what is Chineseness" in the visual experience of adolescents. Empirical studies show that visual images can significantly change learners' perceptions and attitude tendencies (Li & Wen, 2013). It is precisely this psychological effect that enables cultural confidence to transform from an ideological proposition into a perceptible emotional identity. The reason why images possess such constructive power lies in that their formal elements, such as color, have accumulated deep social semantics: red not only inherits the folk auspicious meaning, but also carries the political symbolism of revolution and national rejuvenation in the modern context (Niu & Li, 2026). This strategy can also be observed in the cover design of biology textbooks in Taiwan, China: editors integrate specific local cultural symbols such as red-crowned cranes and blue magpies to "enhance social responsibility and cultural pride" (Wang, 2025). Against the background of globalization, this approach both responds to the anxiety over cultural subjectivity and constitutes an attempt to reconstruct cultural identity.

6. Conclusion

Through multimodal corpus analysis of the covers of Chinese primary and secondary school Chinese language textbooks from 1959 to 2026, this study draws the following conclusions:

First, there are significant differences in the theme, painting style, color saturation and layout design of Chinese language textbook covers across school stages. The covers of primary school textbooks are characterized by high color saturation, integrated image-text layout, and the predominance of highly abstract

or anthropomorphic visual elements—features that collectively define the visual character of this educational stage. The covers of secondary school textbooks are characterized by medium-to-low color saturation, complementary image-text layout, and visual compositions centered on realistic depictions of cultural relics and ancient paintings, thereby establishing a rational order of cultural contemplation.

Second, the visual evolution of textbook covers accurately maps the shift of contemporary aesthetic trends and national cultural governance. Cover themes have evolved from labor education to symbols of science and technology such as rockets, and then to multi-ethnic symbols and traditional cultural symbols, which is highly consistent with contemporary policies and cultural strategies. In particular, the increase in the proportion of cultural relics and ancient paintings since the 21st century marks the deep establishment of confidence in traditional culture in the field of basic education through visual symbols, which is an important sign of the expansion of cultural inheritance from a text-centered approach to a multimodal field.

Third, textbook covers serve as a crucial visual carrier for educational ideology and cultural transmission. "In the process of designing textbook covers, ideological and political elements must be fully embodied, positive energy promoted, students' love for the Party and the country cultivated, and the major strategic deployment of 'educating people for the Party and nurturing talents for the country' actively implemented." (Li, 2024, p.76) Analysis based on cultural capital theory shows that cover design is not purely a work of art editing, but a process in which the state legitimizes specific cultural resources (cultural relics and heritage, traditional art, national symbols) and institutionalizes them into educational capital. It completes the intergenerational transmission of cultural

capital through subtle influence, and deepens the cultural capital recognized by the state into a part of individual culture in society.

This study expands the application of multimodal discourse analysis in the field of textbook research and provides empirical evidence for understanding the semiotic functions of textbook covers. Future research can further incorporate a cross-cultural comparative perspective to explore the multimodal differences and cultural logics of native language textbook covers in different countries. From the perspective of critical curriculum theory, these cover designs function as a "hidden curriculum" that silently conveys which cultural values are deemed legitimate at different historical moments. The observed shift from labor scenes to technological symbols and then to traditional cultural icons reflects changing state priorities embedded in the language arts curriculum.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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