Tang-Song Monopoly and Image Narrowing: A Study on the Historical Coverage Issues of Multi-Dynastic Chinese Poetry Textbooks

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Abstract: Amid growing demand for China's national image communication, international Chinese classical poetry textbooks play an increasingly critical role as cultural carriers. Current textbooks differ in positioning: some focus on a single dynasty (e.g., Selected Tang Poetry), while others are multi-dynastic (e.g., Reciting Ancient Poems to Learn Chinese, Between Mountains and Waters). Using content and comparative analysis, this study examines these three textbooks to address: "Why do multi-dynastic textbooks concentrate on the Tang and Song dynasties, causing insufficient historical continuity of the 'traditional China' image?" With single-dynasty textbooks as a reference to verify perspective integrity, the study aims to provide targeted suggestions for optimizing textbooks and constructing an authentic, three-dimensional traditional China image.

Keywords: international Chinese classical poetry textbooks, historical perspective integrity, traditional China image

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has prioritized national image construction and communication, advocating "Chinese stance, international expression" to present a real, comprehensive China globally.Scholar Zhao Hongbo put forward the viewpoint that "cultural textbooks determine the quality of cultural teaching" in 2005 [1], which indicates the importance of the quality of ancient poetry textbooks.Existing ancient poetry textbooks fall into two categories: single-dynasty (e.g., Lu Tiepeng's Selected Tang Poetry)[2]and multi-dynastic (e.g., Reciting Ancient Poems to Learn Chinese[3], Between Mountains and Waters [4]). This study's core question is: Why do multi-dynastic textbooks still focus on the Tang and Song dynasties, leading to insufficient historical continuity of the "traditional China" image? It also uses Selected Tang Poetry to analyze how single-dynasty textbooks achieve intra-dynasty perspective integrity.

2. The Current Situation of the Lack of "Cross-Dynastic Perspective" in International Chinese Classical Poetry Textbooks

2.1 Single-Dynasty Textbook Selected Tang Poetry: Intra-Dynasty Perspective Integrity

Selected Tang Poetry selects poems by Tang stages (Early: 618-712; High: 713-765; Mid-Late: 766-907): Early Tang: 4 poems (7.69%), representative Farewell to Prefect Du on His Posting to Shu (scholarly ambition, initial civilization); High Tang: 28 poems (53.85%), representative Leaving Bai Di Cheng at Dawn (scholarly spirit, civilized prosperity); Mid-Late Tang: 20 poems (38.46%), representative The Official of Shihao (war trauma, social reflection).

From the data, though the textbook centers on the High Tang, it doesn't neglect Early Tang's foundational role and Mid-Late Tang's transformational nature: Early Tang includes works by Wang Bo (e.g., "A bosom friend afar brings a distant land near") and Chen Ziang, showing scholars' spiritual awakening; Mid-Late Tang's 20 poems (nearly 40%) reflect post-An Lushan Rebellion changes. It thus builds a complete Tang narrative of "from prosperity to transformation," avoiding simplifying it to a "High Tang-only mirror." Early Tang poems capture post-Zhenguan nascent ethos—Wang Bo shows territorial confidence, Chen Ziang literary innovation, laying groundwork for High Tang. High Tang's 28 poems multi-dimensionally present its spirit (e.g., "How can one bow to power" for scholars' freedom, "The moon shines through pines" for man-nature harmony), painting "enlightened politics and cultural prosperity." Mid-Late Tang breaks "Tang = golden age" stereotype: poems depict official-citizen conflicts and decline roots, extending imagery to "reflection on decay" in line with history.

2.2 Multi-Dynastic Textbooks: Limitations of Historical Perspective in Reciting Ancient Poems to Learn Chinese and Between Mountains and Waters

Sorting out the appendix poems of two multi-dynastic textbooks reveals a prominent "Tang-Song monopoly": Reciting

Ancient Poems to Learn Chinese (16 poems total: 14 Tang, 1 Song; non-Tang-Song 6.25%) and Between Mountains and Waters (30 poems total: 21 Tang, 7 Song, 1 Ming; non-Tang-Song 3.33%). Non-Tang-Song poems are only embellishments, narrowing traditional China's image to a "Tang-Song mirror." Missing are core civilized traits like Han-Wei Yuefu's simplicity, Yuan qu's folksy charm, and Ming-Qing poetry's secularization — directly causing "historical discontinuity" in traditional China's image.

3. Deep-Seated Reasons for the Lack of Cross-Dynastic Perspective

Zhong Shulin's The Language Messenger with Dual Color Wings: A Review of Wang Zuoliang's Recite Ancient Poems and Learn Chinese (2014) offers significant reference value for the analysis in this thesis, particularly in terms of its review approach and conclusions regarding Wang Zuoliang's Recite Ancient Poems and Learn Chinese.[5]First, there is a long-standing "Tang-Song-centric" inertia in compilation, coupled with cross-cultural adaptability compromises. The academic and textbook fields generally regard Tang poetry (seen as "magnificent") and Song ci (as "reason-emotion blended") as the "peaks" of classical verse, while Han-Wei Yuefu ("simple but obscure"), Yuan qu ("popular but non-mainstream"), and Ming-Qing poetry ("reflective but cumbersome") do not fit TCFL textbooks' need for "aesthetic priority and easy comprehension." Meanwhile, to adapt to overseas learners' limited Chinese proficiency and cultural background — avoiding the high cost of explaining complex historical contexts for non-Tang-Song works — compilers prioritize Tang-Song poems (understandable via literal meaning, e.g., homesickness or frugality). This dual factor makes "Tang-Song centricity" an industry "safe option," leading to the exclusion of other dynasties' works. Second, there is a cognitive bias in constructing the traditional China image. Some compilers hold a "black-and-white" view: textbooks must convey a "positive and glorious" narrative, so they avoid poems from war-torn periods (e.g., Han-Wei) or "declining eras" (e.g., Yuan, Ming, Qing) for fear of "negative" information. This conceals social contradictions and historical predicaments, violating traditional China's real logic of "prosperity coexisting with decline." For example, Zhang Yanghao's Sheep on Tong Pass: Meditating on the Past (revealing "dynastic changes bring people suffering") is excluded from all three textbooks. Such avoidance reduces traditional China to an "idealized symbol," stripping it of historical depth and lowering the image's credibility.

4. Optimization Suggestions: Constructing a "Cross-Dynastic Continuous" Image of China

Regarding how to grasp the difficulty level of the content in ancient poetry textbooks, Wu (2004) has put forward relevant discussions. He argued that various types of language materials may have problems of being excessively biased or difficult in terms of language, content, and cultural background; moreover, the excessively biased or difficult content beyond the syllabus will gradually increase as learners' Chinese proficiency improves. Therefore, in textbooks and teaching, more short, concise, and excellent works should be selected to help literary works play their strengths and avoid weaknesses, thereby achieving teaching objectives .[6].To balance learning burden and image integrity, expand poems by "few but refined"—add core gap dynastic works: Han-Wei (Cao Cao's Song of the Hao Li, Northern Dynasties' Poem of Mulan), Yuan (Guan Hanqing's Injustice to Dou E), Ming-Qing (Gong Zizhen's Miscellaneous Poems of the Jihai Year). Cross-dynastic intertextuality retains Tang-Song values, shows traditional China's ideological evolution, and helps grasp civilization continuity. Existing textbook interpretations focus on individual poems' literal meaning and superficial culture, lacking cross-dynastic links. Add a "Dynastic Mirror" column — each unit sets a comparative theme (e.g., "Patriotic Inheritance: From Mulan to Going to the Frontier"), comparing Mulan's "family responsibility" with Wang Changling's "frontier responsibility" to explain "family-state homology" evolution. Control interpretations to ≤300 words, add "keyword annotations" to balance rigor and readability, avoiding extra burden. Compilers must break the misunderstanding that "positive image = avoiding predicaments"—traditional China's resilience lies in reflecting on difficulties. Take Li Yu's Yu Mei Ren (sorrow over national fall, conveying prosperity-decline cognition) as an example. Add a "Historical Reflection" column in "Cultural Background" to interpret such texts' value, making traditional China's image both "respectable" and "credible."

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes three textbooks: single-dynasty ones achieve perspective integrity via key dynastic stages; multi-dynasty ones narrow traditional China to a "Tang-Song mirror" due to Tang-Song inertia, adaptability compromises and image limitations—causing historical discontinuity and cognitive bias. The proposed optimization (supplement Han-Wei/Yuan/Qing core poems, strengthen cross-dynastic interpretation, balance authenticity and positivity) responds to one-size-fits-all textbook issues and guides dynamic civilization image building. Future research can deepen via expanding samples or integrating teaching feedback, helping international Chinese textbooks convey authentic, 3D Chinese culture via historical

continuity to support cross-cultural communication.

References

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