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(IJMOE)**www.gaexcellence.com/ijmoe**CONSTRUCTING INTERCULTURALITY: A MULTIMODAL
ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS IN A
BEGINNER-LEVEL MANDARIN TEXTBOOK**Nur Syifa' Saari¹, Rafidah Sahar^{2*}, Guojun Dong³¹Department of English Language, Kulliyyah of Sustainable Tourism & Contemporary Languages,
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Abstract:

The growing demand for Mandarin as a foreign language (MFL) among non-native speakers highlights the need for instructional materials that promote intercultural learning alongside linguistic competence. However, existing research on MFL instructional materials primarily focuses on cultural content with limited attention to how interculturality is constructed through multimodal resources. This study examines intercultural representation in a beginner-level Mandarin textbook used in a Malaysian university through a multimodal analytical lens. Applying Cortazzi and Jin's cultural framework and Byram's intercultural communicative competence (ICC) model, a multimodal content analysis was utilised to investigate how verbal texts and visual images construct intercultural meanings and support ICC development. Results reveal a strong emphasis on learners' source culture with limited representation of target and international cultures. The results indicate integration of two ICC components, namely knowledge and attitudes, which provide foundational knowledge and dispositions needed for intercultural development. However, higher-order cultural components such as interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness and intercultural interaction are absent across both textual and visual, suggesting that cultural learning is largely knowledge-oriented with limited opportunities to develop the interpretive, interactive, critical skills necessary for effective ICC. While visual resources are used extensively throughout the textbook and may establish contextual

familiarity and enhance the presentation of cultural knowledge, they offer limited support for higher-order intercultural learning without critical or reflective activities. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of multimodal intercultural representation in MFL instructional materials, highlighting the significance of moving beyond cultural exposure towards reflective, critical and meaningful intercultural learning in foreign language education.

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Keyword:

Intercultural Communication Competence, Mandarin As A Foreign Language, Multimodal Content Analysis, Beginner-Level Textbook



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Introduction

Mandarin has emerged as one of the most widely studied foreign languages at universities worldwide (Murtadhoh & Arini, 2023). The growing cohort of non-native speakers pursuing Mandarin as a Foreign Language (MFL) suggests that multilingual proficiency is viewed not solely for personal development but also as an important asset for expanding global marketability and professional mobility (Chien et al., 2021). As language learning environments become more diverse, mastering grammatical and lexical mechanics is no longer sufficient. Instead, learners' ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries has become increasingly significant for fostering mutual understanding and collaboration in multicultural contexts (El Allame et al., 2020). Existing research emphasises that language education plays a central role in developing intercultural competence (IC) as it involves not only linguistic proficiency but also critical and active engagement with cultural norms and practices (Tran & Duong, 2018; Nadeem et al., 2020).

Despite the importance of IC, a significant pedagogical gap remains in how cultural elements are integrated into foreign language textbooks. As the primary source of classroom input, language textbooks have significant influence on how learners conceptualise diverse cultural realities (Tomlinson, 1998). Previous studies have consistently highlighted that MFL textbooks often reduce cultural references to superficial static depictions instead of fostering deeper intercultural awareness (Hoe, 2016; Chan et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2020). Studies found that textbooks imported from China tend to overlook local cultural realities and the specific intercultural needs of second language learners (Wang, 2016) while local textbooks in multicultural contexts such as Malaysia, often rely heavily on source culture localisation to simplify learning for learners, especially at a beginner's level (Rohmana, 2023). While this

makes initial learning easier, it tends to minimise exposure to target and international cultures, leaving learners unprepared to engage with global viewpoints.

While broader foreign general language textbook research has recognised the need for multimodal analysis (Huang & Song, 2024), studies on Malaysian L2 Mandarin textbooks have yet to adopt a multimodal lens, leaving a significant methodological gap in evaluating visual-textual cultural representations (Chan et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2020). This empirical gap is especially pertinent in highly diverse and complex higher educational settings such as Malaysia, where there is an increasing number of non-native Mandarin speakers pursuing MFL as professional mobility (Chien et al., 2021) along with local Chinese students seeking to formalise their proficiency in standard Mandarin for academic credentials (Ting & Puah, 2017). To address this gap, the present study adopts the Multimodal Content Analysis (MMCA) framework to investigate the cultural representations embedded across the intersecting textual and visual images of an MFL textbook used in a Malaysian university setting. The study addresses two main objectives: 1) to identify the types of cultural content represented in the Mandarin textbook based on Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) cultural framework; and 2) to evaluate the extent to which Byram's (1997) ICC components are embedded in the Mandarin textbook. This study hopes to inform the importance of developing culturally responsive teaching materials that support both linguistic proficiency and ICC in foreign language education.

Literature Review

Foreign language education has become a core component of higher education, with the global market for language learning is projected to grow 20% annually between 2024 and 2032 (Murtadhoh & Arini, 2023). Foreign language education programmes aim to equip students with communication skills extending beyond their native language, typically structured around the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and progressing from beginner to advanced levels. The programmes are built to prepare students with the ability to comprehend various cultures and viewpoints which will advance both global citizenship and national interests. Malaysia, a multicultural and multilingual nation, reflects this global trend by actively integrating foreign language initiatives into its education system to support multicultural identity and nurture globally competent citizens. The national multilingualism agenda is consistently promoted in official statements and the media as a means of enhancing global competitiveness and national development among citizens. While Bahasa Malaysia remains the national language and main medium of instruction, English is taught as a compulsory second language in all primary and secondary schools across nation. At tertiary level, many universities have started to offer additional languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Arabic, Japanese, among others, depending on program availability, resources and community as well as economic needs.

Cultural Representation in Foreign Language Textbooks

In foreign language classrooms, textbooks are central resources as they provide linguistic and cultural guides to both students and instructors. Textbooks expose students to multicultural notions and assist instructors as a starting point for developing intercultural abilities (Achieng, 2023). However, foreign language textbooks often lack the incentive for students to venture beyond simplified depictions of culture, presenting language users as identical rather than dynamic, and the degree to which textbooks successfully reflect IC varies considerably (Berti, 2020). For example, Kerkache (2023) found that EFL and FFL textbooks in Algeria prioritised

national identity over intercultural engagement, exhibiting essentialism, banal nationalism, and a cautious approach to global citizenship. Similarly, Torresin's (2023) analysis of four Russian textbooks revealed sparse, often essentialist depictions of Russian culture, with few exercises designed to foster ICC and cultural content mainly subordinated to grammar. İltar (2021) reported that while Turkish cultural components were included in TFL textbooks, ICC was fostered in only approximately 7–8% of activities, suggesting insufficient attention to intercultural development. The inclusion of only superficial cultural items risks producing a shallow and ignorant understanding of the target language culture among learners (Gerfanova, 2022).

Existing research found that some textbooks tend to minimise learners' own culture while disproportionately foregrounding the target culture. Karakuş (2021) found that while target culture materials are integrated in EFL textbooks through topics, images, and activities, materials highlighting local cultures are either often inadequate or absent. Alshenqeeti (2019) reported similar findings in a prominent Saudi Arabian EFL textbook, in which target and foreign cultures dominated while the source culture was under-represented. James and Aziz (2020) found that Malaysian students perceive MFL textbook as heavily weighted toward the target culture.

These patterns raise some concern because, although target-culture integration can increase global awareness, neglecting local cultural aspects may compromise students' sense of self. Uzum et al. (2021) showed that Arabic, French, and German textbooks offered narrow and stereotypical portrayals of both target and source cultures, which oriented toward tourism and market logics rather than nuanced identity representation. Such cultural imbalance suggests that although multiple cultures may appear in textbooks, their mere presence does not automatically foster intercultural competence. To resolve this, a structured IC framework in textbook is therefore essential to ensure that cultural representations genuinely contribute to students' critical cultural knowledge rather than reinforcing oversimplified or ideologically prejudiced portrayals.

Mandarin as a Foreign Language in Malaysia

Mandarin holds a uniquely strong position in the Malaysian educational landscape. While Mandarin has historically been maintained by the local Chinese community, universities are now seeing increasing enrolment rates from students from non-Chinese backgrounds who are taking Mandarin as a foreign language. The non-Chinese students often pursue recognised certification in MFL, such as the internationally standardised Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) (Peng et al., 2020), as part of their future employability strategies. This growing educational demand for MFL is primarily driven by Malaysia's deep trade relationships and increasing foreign direct investment from China. This results in learning Mandarin as no longer being viewed as a mere cultural interest but as a critical tool for career mobility. Non-Chinese graduates who possess Mandarin proficiency are increasingly perceived as having a distinct competitive advantage when applying for high-value roles in multinational corporations, regional logistics, and international supply chains (Kamalruzaman et al., 2023). The growth of Malaysia as a central hub for Chinese language education in Southeast Asia is further reinforced by the rapid expansion of institutional platforms, such as Confucius Institutes, established across local universities to support the massive influx of non-Chinese learners (AlSaqqaf et al., 2024).

However, past studies on MFL textbooks in Malaysian higher education demonstrate significant pedagogical and structural limitations. For example, when evaluating local university textbooks, Lin et al. (2020) revealed a substantial imbalance in cultural representation where the instructional materials heavily favour explicit Big 'C' cultural facts while neglecting small 'c' sociocultural norms. The study also found that source-culture content is disproportionately centred on Malay customs to the exclusion of other local ethnic groups. Kwan et al. (2026) in their study observed that imported textbooks or internationally standardised textbooks fail to account for local Malaysian Mandarin variations, regional dialects, and informal expressions, creating a noticeable disconnect between classroom materials and authentic sociolinguistic practice. As a result, conventional teaching practices that rely on repetitive vocabulary drills may fail to align with tertiary learners' preferences for interactive and scenario-based cultural instruction (Loh et al., 2021). These material deficiencies in textbook may directly affect learners' development of ICC as Chan et al. (2018) in their study documented a clear disconnect between polytechnic MFL students' attitudes and functional competence. In the study, although non-native students demonstrated high curiosity and positive attitudes toward the target culture, their actual cultural knowledge and practical interaction skills remained low. Such outcome may be a result of institutional instruction and formal assessments that are overwhelmingly focused on basic linguistic mechanics such as Pinyin, vocabulary acquisition, and grammar rules which in turn, may constrain adequate inputs for learners to analyse cultural perspectives critically or to manage real-world intercultural encounters (Chan et al., 2018; Loh et al., 2021).

Theorising Multimodal Intercultural Model for MFL

In literature, Intercultural Competence (IC) has been conceptualised across various disciplines to explain cross-cultural development and inform language pedagogy. General interdisciplinary frameworks offer foundational insights into cognitive, behavioural, and sociological dimensions of intercultural interaction. For example, Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) proposes ICC as a cognitive continuum from ethnocentric to ethnorelative mindsets. Deardorff's (2006) model structures intercultural development hierarchically, positioning foundational attitudes, such as openness and curiosity, as prerequisites for acquiring cultural knowledge, internal empathy, and effective behavioural outcomes. On a macro-sociological scale, Hofstede's (2001) Cultural Dimensions Theory distinguishes comparative national cultural patterns, such as individualism versus collectivism.

While these ICC frameworks outline individual psychological growth and macro-cultural variations, they may lack specific analytical tools for evaluating foreign language instructional materials directly. To address this limitation, this study adopts three complementary frameworks to analyse language learning materials. Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework is selected to identify the types of cultural content presented, categorising whether the materials draw on source culture (learners' cultural background), target culture (culture associated with the target language), or international culture (broad global contexts). Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model is applied to evaluate how deeply this content supports learning across five key dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, interpreting and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness. Finally, Serafini and Reid's (2019) multimodal framework is adopted to examine how visual and textual relations work together. Combining these three frameworks ensures that the study

systematically evaluates cultural content that is presented, and how both text and visual modes support the development of ICC (See Figure 1).

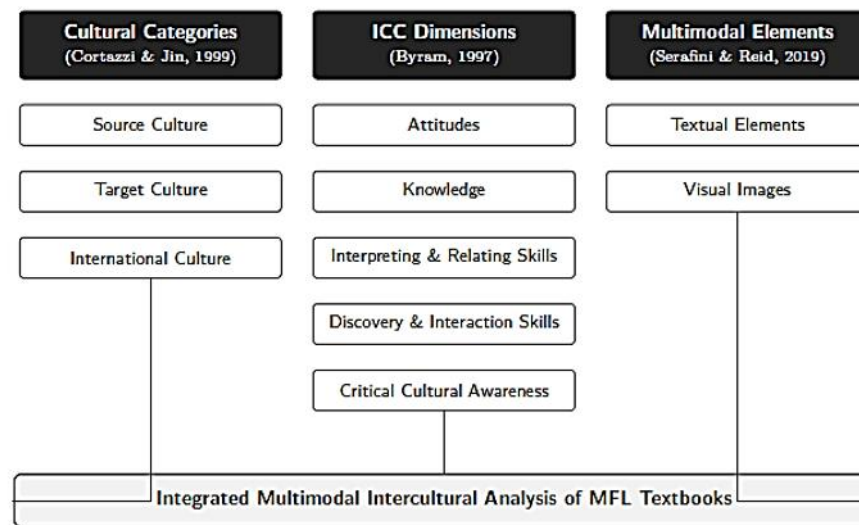


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Integration for MFL Textbook Analysis

Research Method

To avoid the logocentric bias of traditional content analysis, the study adopts a multimodal content analysis (MMCA) framework to systematically examine how meaning is co-constructed across multiple semiotic modes such as written text, visual images and typography within contemporary instructional materials (Serafini & Reid, 2019). MMCA provides an interpretive framework to analyse both individual semiotic modes and their intermodal relationships, rather than relying on traditional text dominant or quantitative frequency counts.

Corpus and Unit of Analysis

Using purposive sampling, the beginner-level textbook *Mandarin for All: Book 1 (Second Edition)* (Yong & Cheng 2018) was selected as the research corpus. In MMCA research, using a single textbook as a qualitative case study allows for deep semiotic analysis of visual and textual elements rather than surface-level quantitative breadth (Serafini & Reid, 2019). The textbook was selected based on four main criteria: 1) its target audience of beginner tertiary learners in Malaysia; 2) active institutional use at a Malaysian public university; 3) full alignment with HSK Level 1 and CEFR standards, and 4) structural and pedagogical suitability that provides rich multimodal data for analysis. The textbook received the 2017 National Book Award for Best Education Book and strictly aligns with HSK Level 1 benchmarks, constituting a representative case of introductory L2 Mandarin materials in Malaysian higher education. Following MMCA procedures for bounding the case, the object of analysis encompasses all multimodal ensembles across the textbook's ten thematic units (Serafini & Reid, 2019). Specifically, the corpus consists of two main semiotic modes: The linguistic mode consists of 20 primary conversational dialogues, and the visual modes comprise 32 photographs, illustrations and cartoons depicting cultural artefacts, characters and settings.

Data Collection and Analytical Template

A categorisation scheme was created to examine the cultural elements in the textbook using Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) and Byram's (1997) cultural frameworks (see Table 1).

Table 1: Categorical Scheme of Cultural Content and Intercultural Competence Dimensions

Framework	Component / Dimension	Description
Cortazzi & Jin (1999) (Types of Cultural Material)	Source Culture	Materials drawing on the learners' own native or local cultural background.
	Target Culture	Materials representing the cultural norms, customs, and society where the target language is natively spoken.
	International Culture	Materials featuring a variety of non target global cultures and international contexts.
Byram (1997) (Intercultural Communicative Competence)	Attitudes (<i>Savoir être</i>)	Openness, curiosity, and readiness to suspend judgment regarding other cultures and one's own.
	Knowledge (<i>Savoirs</i>)	Factual knowledge of social groups, products, everyday practices, and interactional processes in home and target countries.
	Skills of Interpreting & Relating (<i>Savoir comprendre</i>)	The ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, explain it, and relate it to one's own culture.
	Skills of Discovery & Interaction (<i>Savoir apprendre/faire</i>)	The ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and operationalize it under real time communication constraints.
	Critical Cultural Awareness (<i>Savoir s'engager</i>)	The ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices, and products in target and home cultures based on explicit criteria.

Source: (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Byram, 1999)

A multimodal analytical template was constructed to identify all verbal texts and visual images across the ten units in the textbook. The template structured data collection into three distinct modal categories: textual, visual and intermodal relation elements (see Table 2).

Table 2: Multimodal Analytical Template (Serafini & Reid, 2019)

Modal Category	Analytical Focus	Specific Elements / Features
Textual Elements	Verbal Content	Dialogues, social naming conventions, and conversational speech acts.
Visual Elements	Narrative Features	Depictions of actors, cultural attire, nonverbal gestures, and physical settings.
	Classificatory Features	Conceptual representations, including flags, logos, and cultural identity markers.
Intermodal Relations	Image and Text Interaction	The nature of the interaction, alignment, or dissonance between visual images and verbal text.

Source: (Serafini & Reid, 2019)

Data Analysis

Following MMCA (Serafini & Reid, 2019) procedures, the analysis was conducted systematically combining quantitative distribution counts with qualitative semiotic interpretation (Serafini & Reid, 2019). Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, a manifest analysis was performed to record the frequency and distribution of cultural content types (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) and ICC components (Byram, 1997) across textual and visual modes. Second, a latent qualitative analysis was applied to examine the intermodal relations between the conversational texts and visual graphics, interpreting how these visual-textual ensembles co-construct cultural meaning beyond mere numerical counts.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure qualitative rigour, this study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through researchers' prolonged engagement with the textbook materials (Shenton, 2004) and strict adherence to established theoretical frameworks. The textbook corpus was purposively selected using explicit inclusion criteria. To ensure coding validity, two researchers independently coded 10% of the dataset. Any coding discrepancies were reviewed and resolved through peer debriefing, achieving an inter-coder agreement rate exceeding 90%. Contextualised textual and visual examples were then integrated to ground the interpretations directly in the source data. Dependability and confirmability criteria were addressed by using a stable data source which is a commercially printed textbook that remains unchanged over time and accessible for independent audit. This is complemented by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting coding decisions, operational definitions, and

analytical templates to ensure the findings authentically reflect the source materials rather than personal bias (Elo et al., 2014; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Transferability was established by providing rich contextual descriptions of the research setting and target learner demographics, and by using analytical templates (Bryman, 2008; Yin, 2014). Given the curricular homogeneity of introductory Mandarin courses across local public universities, the findings offer applicability to similar beginner-level foreign language textbooks in multicultural contexts.

Results

To address the first research question, the textbook content was analysed using Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) framework to evaluate the distribution of cultural categories across identified thematic codes and semiotic modes. Table 3 presents a cross-tabulation of the quantitative findings across the ten analysed lessons.

Table 3: Distribution of Cultural Content Categories Across Thematic Codes and Semiotic Modes

Cultural Category	Thematic Category (Codes)				Semiotic Mode		Total (N)
	Customs & Traditions	Places & Geography	Clothing / Attire	Identity	Textual	Visual	
Source Culture	12	13	12	9	19	27	46
Target Culture	1	0	2	4	5	2	7
International Culture	4	1	0	0	2	3	5
Total Frequency	17	14	14	13	26	32	58

In total, 58 cultural contents are identified across the textbook. In terms of cultural categories, the results demonstrate a clear predominance of source culture throughout the textbook, accounting for 46 of the 58 identified cultural occurrences (79.3%). It is followed by target culture which accounts for 12.1%. International culture is the least represented in the textbook with 8.6% of the content. The source culture in this context refers to learners' own culture which includes broader customs, values, social practices, and norms associated with Malaysia. Within this category, places and geography emerged as the most prevalent theme (n=13), featuring frequent references to specific Malaysian locations such as Pahang, Kuala Lumpur, Kuantan, and Universiti Malaysia Pahang (e.g., Lesson 1, p. 9; Lesson 10, p. 176). This is followed by content related to Malaysian customs and traditions (n=12) which include culturally significant practices such as Indian traditional dance. Next, clothing and attire content (n=12) can be found in the textbook in the form of visual images of traditional garments, including the *baju Melayu*, *saree*, *songkok*, *hijab*, and national school uniforms (Lesson 5, pp. 88–91) (see Figure 2). Content related to national identity (n=9) can also be found in character names such as "*Rosnah and Hussien*", as well as in explicit references to ethnic communities in Malaysia, such as Malay and Indian.

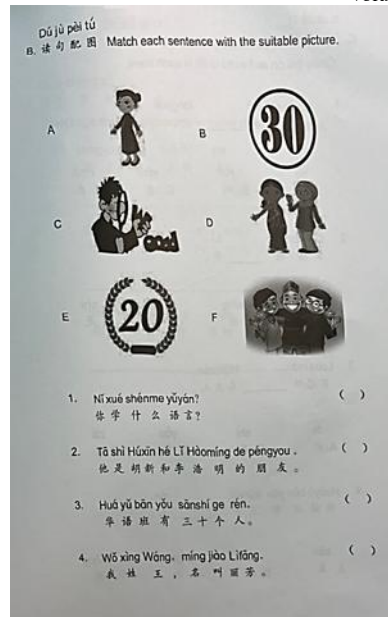


Figure 2: Example of Visual Image representing Source Culture

Source: (Yong & Cheng, 2018)

The analysis of cultural categories shows that the target culture and international culture content are minimally represented. Target culture, which refers to cultures of Mandarin-speaking societies outside Malaysia, is largely restricted to linguistic identity markers ($n=4$) such as Chinese personal names, (e.g. *Li Haoming*, *Wang Lifang*) and formal titles (*Yong 老师*). Throughout the textbook, there are two visual images of narrative features in the form of traditional attire of target culture (*cheongsam*) (see Figure 3) and a single instance of a cultural practice, which is the practice of bargaining while shopping (Lesson 10, p. 178).

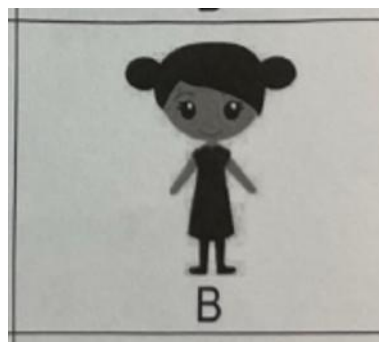


Figure 3: Example of Visual Image representing Target Culture

Source: (Yong & Cheng, 2018)

In the textbook, content related to international culture can be found in four instances of general customs and traditions, which feature international practices such as workplace diversity, handshaking, and traditional family structures (Lesson 3, pp. 45–46). There is only a single visual reference to a foreign national flag under the places and geography theme (Lesson 5, p. 88) (see Figure 4).

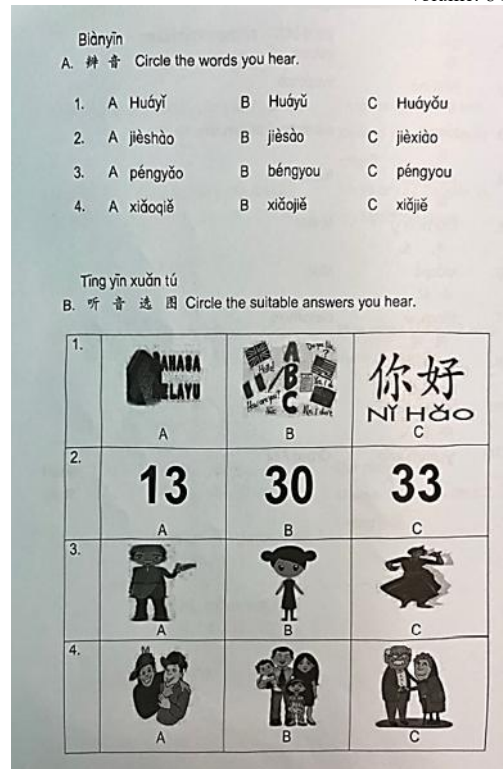


Figure 4: Visual Image of International Culture

Source: (Yong & Cheng, 2018)

Evaluating ICC Components in the Mandarin Textbook

To address the second research question, the textbook content was evaluated based on Byram's (1997) ICC model. The framework encompasses five core dimensions: knowledge (*savoirs*), attitudes (*savoir-être*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). Table 4 below shows the analysis of intercultural components that are presented in the textbook based on Byram's (1997) ICC model. Results indicate a total of seven intercultural occurrences across the textbook, with visual images dominating over the textual representations. Throughout the textbook, there is an exclusive representation of lower-order ICC components. Among the identified cultural components, knowledge (*savoirs*) is the most prominent, accounting for 71.4%, which is followed by the attitude (*savoir être*) component, which accounts for the remaining 28.6%. However, the results illustrate that higher-order ICC components are absent from the textbook. No instances can be found for skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) or skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*).

The results illustrate that knowledge cultural components are present predominantly across custom and tradition themes. These are presented mostly in visual images, for example, the act of 'salam', which is a traditional greeting commonly practised in Malaysia as a gesture of respect and humility (see Figure 5). Moreover, there is a single instance of a textual dialogue that refers to bargaining practice, a common cultural practice in many Asian countries where buyer and seller negotiate the price of goods in places like traditional market (*xiǎofàn*) (Lesson 10, p. 178). Within the themes of identity and socioeconomic status, knowledge of cultural

elements is presented through visual images of civil service emblems (JPA) and FELDA settler classifications (*kěnzhi mín*) (Lesson 3, p. 40). Apart from visual images, knowledge elements can be found in a single instance of written text on cultural diversity in the classroom (Lesson 5, p. 85). The attitude (*savoir être*) components appear in two instances in the textbook. These are mediated entirely through visual illustrations depicting non-verbal portrayals of camaraderie, such as national multiethnic unity (Lesson 5, p. 76). While the visual image implies behaviours of tolerance and mutual understanding in a multicultural society like Malaysia, there is no accompanying dialogues or explanatory texts (see Figure 6).

Table 4: Distribution of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Components in the Textbook

ICC Dimension (Byram, 1997)	Cultural Theme (Cortazzi & Jin)	Empirical Codes / Visual-Textual Indicators	Texts (n)	Pictures (n)	Total (n)	%
Knowledge (<i>Savoirs</i>)	Customs & Traditions	Post-prayer <i>salam</i> gesture, daily prayer routine (<i>qíddāo</i>), market price bargaining (<i>xíāofàn</i>)	1	2	3	42.9%
	Identity & Socioeconomics	Civil service emblems (JPA), FELDA settlers (<i>kěnzhi mín</i>), classroom ethnic composition	1	1	2	28.5%
Attitudes (<i>Savoir être</i>)	Identity & Visual Harmony	National multiethnic unity illustration, interethnic peer camaraderie embrace	0	2	2	28.6%
Interpreting & Relating Skills (<i>Savoir comprendre</i>)	None	None identified	0	0	0	0.0%
Discovery & Interaction Skills (<i>Savoir apprendre/faire</i>)	None	None identified	0	0	0	0.0%
Critical Cultural Awareness (<i>Savoir s'engager</i>)	None	None identified	0	0	0	0.0%
Total			2	5	7	100.0%

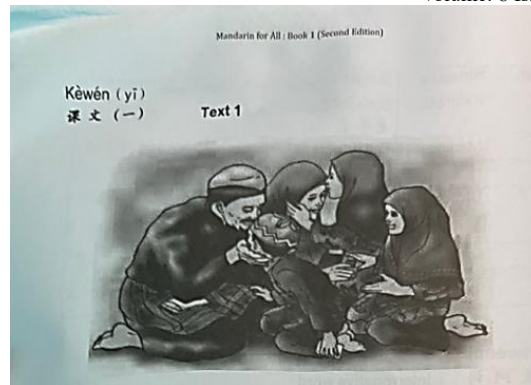


Figure 5: Visual Image representing Knowledge Cultural Component

Source: (Yong & Cheng, 2018)



Figure 6: Visual Images Representing Attitude Cultural Component

Source: (Yong & Cheng, 2018)

Discussion

The textbook illustrates a significant imbalance in the distribution of cultural content, with the source culture being heavily over-represented compared to target culture and international culture. This resonates with observations from existing studies that suggest current pedagogical MFL materials prioritise the ease of learning over providing meaningful, in-depth intercultural exposure (Chan et al., 2018; Kwan et al., 2026). This strong emphasis on source culture suggests a strategic approach to ground Mandarin lessons in familiar source culture (Malaysian contexts, norms and practices), especially at the initial stage, to lower affective barriers and enhance their engagement (Lin et al., 2020; Ratri et al., 2024). However, excessive incorporation of source culture content may come at the expense of exposure to the target culture and risks of fostering a narrow worldview, restricting exposure to broader intercultural situations.

From the findings, the textbook's representation of the target culture is minimal, confined to isolated symbolic markers, such as images of cheongsams, Chinese names, and a single cultural practice. This stands in sharp contrast to prior research (Yue et al., 2020), which demonstrates that MFL textbooks typically offer comprehensive coverage of the target culture, including

communicative norms, Chinese values, culinary traditions, or festivals. By integrating a limited materials of target cultural contexts within textbook design may constrain the pedagogical potential available for building authentic communicative familiarity in classrooms. While contextualised instructional materials improve lesson delivery, they could diminish learners' broader applicability of skills in authentic Chinese-speaking settings, where understanding target cultural norms is vital.

The international cultural component representations in the textbook are sparse and purely symbolic, which is characterised by a lack of explanatory or interactive tasks. The inclusion of international reference points within MFL language materials is crucial for nurturing global citizenship and fostering intercultural adaptability, particularly in multicultural societies like Malaysia (Sulistiyo et al., 2021). An over-reliance on source culture content at the expense of target and international dimensions in MFL textbooks may potentially restrict learners' ability to successfully navigate diverse intercultural encounters (Prihatiningsih et al., 2021). Such cultural imbalances in representation in the textbook resonate with Mekki's (2023) observations, which suggests that inadequate representation of cultures other than learners' own culture can create a disconnect from authentic sociolinguistic realities and limits engagement with global viewpoints (Morady & Tirnaz, 2023). The limited representation of target and international cultures in MFL textbooks may hinder the textbook's capacity to support ICC development during the delivery of lessons.

The textbook demonstrates a strong emphasis on linguistic proficiency, a focus that, while essential for the acquisition of Mandarin at a beginner level, suggests a significant pedagogical limitation in its construction of ICC. The textbook mostly integrates the foundational dimensions of interculturality namely, knowledge (*savoirs*) and attitudes (*savoir être*). The knowledge cultural components are situated within learners' source culture and primarily mediated through verbal texts concerning local customs, religious observances, and sociocultural norms. The cultural attitude components are represented solely through a single visual instance of interethnic handshaking and textual dialogues about familial and cultural obligations, which suggest openness, curiosity, and respect.

In the textbook, the higher-order intercultural components, namely interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*), are entirely absent. These components are crucial as they require students to engage with cultural dissimilarity through a critical analytical lens and their absence suggests that the textbook does not require learners to scrutinise, reflect upon, or critically engage with cultural information. The lack of higher order ICC components may be largely driven by the textbook's explicit alignment with CEFR A1/A2 and HSK 1–2 examination requirements, which prioritise fundamental linguistic mechanics, vocabulary acquisition, and basic functional communication over complex cross-cultural reasoning (Chan et al., 2018; Kravchenko, 2023; Loh et al., 2021). It can be proposed that by focusing mainly on knowledge-based cultural components, learners may miss opportunities for authentic intercultural learning, which requires more than superficial engagement and demands deep immersion in the target culture's complexities (Conti, 2025; Byram, 1997).

Visual images in textbook function as a significant semiotic mode for evaluating how intercultural components are represented within foreign language teaching materials. In the study, findings reveal that visual modality is used extensively in the textbook, with cultural references appearing more frequently in pictures than in text. This is aligned with past study

on beginner-level language pedagogy, where learners often rely on visual support to compensate for their limited linguistic proficiency in the target language. Although the images in the textbook serve as cultural representations, they function mostly in a denotative capacity rather than as active pedagogical mediators (Derakhshan, 2024). The lack of accompanying questions, discussion prompts, or reflective tasks for these visual cues suggests that learners may be missing opportunities to analyse cultural assumptions or evaluate alternative perspectives (Byram, 1997; Qi & Derakhshan, 2024). It can be suggested that without such tasks, these visuals remain unexamined and risked being reduced to a passive aesthetic background rather than being integrated as an active, dynamic component of language acquisition (Alexiou & Stathopoulou, 2021; Xiong & Peng, 2020). In order to address these risks, textbook materials can incorporate visuals with higher-order ICC skills tasks to facilitate active intercultural reflection alongside foundational language acquisition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study analysed the intercultural representation and ICC integration in a Mandarin textbook. The empirical findings demonstrate a heavily localised textbook dominated by the source culture, with minimal representation of target and international cultural dimensions. Multimodally, the material privileges lower-order ICC components, specifically knowledge (*savoirs*) and attitudes (*savoir être*), while completely omitting higher-order dimensions namely, skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). It can be proposed that while the textbook is effective at lowering affective filter barriers among non-Chinese beginner learners, the textbook functions primarily as a declarative language carrier rather than an active mediator of critical intercultural learning.

This study contributes to the foreign language education literature by extending Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) and Byram's (1997) frameworks to tertiary MFL materials in a non-Western, multicultural context such as Malaysia. Methodologically, the study highlights multimodal analysis as a valuable investigative lens with visual as a significant semiotic mode, for evaluating how intercultural components are represented within foreign language teaching materials. Based on the findings, there are several practical implications for textbook writers, curriculum designers, and language instructors in Malaysia. Firstly, while content on source culture can facilitate learners at a beginner level to adapt to a new language, there should be an appropriate balance between source, target, and international cultures. Strong emphasis on source culture may offer familiarity, but without input from the authentic target culture, learners' sociolinguistic adaptability in real-world Mandarin-speaking contexts may be restricted (Gheitasi et al., 2020). Secondly, textbook developers can embed reflective tasks and comparative questions that will activate higher-order ICC skills and move beyond presenting static cultural facts. Finally, language instructors can play active role in supplementing classroom materials by using authentic resources and guided discussions to help learners develop critical cultural awareness alongside basic linguistic competence (Uzum et al., 2021.)

Finally, there are several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the study was limited to a single textbook, limiting generalisability across higher proficiency tiers where complex ICC components may be more prominent. Second, the study focused on textual-visual representations without incorporating empirical feedback from teachers and students. Future research should examine a broader multi-institutional corpus across intermediate and advanced

levels, while integrating stakeholder perspectives to evaluate how textbook design influences real-world classroom interactions and intercultural development.

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