

Research on the Application of Illustrations in Ministry-Compiled Primary Chinese Textbooks for Aesthetic Education

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Abstract: As a form of visual art, textbook illustrations complement written texts in Chinese language teaching by reinforcing memory of key knowledge points and fostering students' aesthetic abilities, including aesthetic perception and aesthetic emotions. This study adopts an interview-based approach to examine the current use of the aesthetic-education functions of illustrations in the Unified Edition (nationally compiled) primary Chinese textbooks in classroom teaching. The findings reveal several issues: insufficient teacher attention to, or understanding of, the aesthetic value of illustrations; the absence of clearly designed aesthetic-education objectives for illustrations; and inadequate exploration of illustration-based aesthetic-education resources. These problems can be attributed to the persistence of traditional instructional models and teachers' limited aesthetic literacy. To address these challenges, this paper proposes strengthening teacher training and disseminating illustration-based aesthetic education, establishing systematic mechanisms for curriculum design and evaluation, developing a diversified pool of educational resources, and building a more comprehensive evaluation system to better leverage the aesthetic-education potential of textbook illustrations in Chinese language teaching.

Key Words: textbooks; illustrations; aesthetic education; primary Chinese language teaching

Aesthetic education is a form of education in aesthetic appreciation, moral cultivation, and spiritual development; it also enriches imagination and fosters innovative awareness. The 2022 Chinese Language Curriculum Standards notes that, in the process of Chinese language learning, students should cultivate patriotic feelings, socialist moral values, and healthy aesthetic sensibilities; develop individuality; nurture a spirit of cooperation; and gradually form a positive outlook on life and sound values. Illustrations in primary Chinese textbooks are characterized by vivid colors, lively images, and diverse styles, and thus contain abundant elements conducive to aesthetic education. Teachers should therefore attach greater importance to textbook illustrations,

make full use of their aesthetic-education function, and evoke students' emotional resonance through the beauty of images.

I. The Aesthetic-Education Functions of Illustrations in the Unified Edition of Primary Chinese Textbooks

(1) Aesthetic Perception

Aesthetic perception, consisting of aesthetic sensation and aesthetic cognition, is a crucial component of aesthetic education. Textbook illustrations enable students to perceive the beauty of a text more directly: the distinctive aesthetic qualities and artistic styles of the text are translated into visual experiences that can immediately engage students' senses. In doing so, illustrations help cultivate students' sensitivity to beauty and their perceptual abilities, support the construction of imagination, and stimulate more individualized interpretations of aesthetic meaning. In the Unified Edition of primary Chinese textbooks, aesthetic education elements are reflected in aspects such as color coordination, shape design, and line use. For example, an illustration in the Grade 1, Volume 2 lesson *Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter* depicts a blue sky, green grass, a stream, and a river (Figure 1). The palette is dominated by light blue and fresh green, creating a sense of freshness and a relaxed, pleasant mood.



Figure 1: *Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter*

(2) Aesthetic Imagination

Aesthetic imagination, grounded in aesthetic perception, refers to the process of transforming and reworking perceived objects to create new images and meanings. Illustrations serve as an important source for developing students' imagination. Textbook illustrations can encourage free imaginative thinking, broaden and diversify students' modes of thought, and facilitate the

formation of aesthetic imaginative capacity. In the Unified Edition of primary Chinese textbooks, aesthetic-education elements related to imagination are reflected in creative composition and the selection of imaginative subject matter. For instance, an illustration in Grade 4, Volume 2, Lesson 28, *The Little Mermaid*, depicts the mermaid princess, various undersea fish, and a royal palace (Figure 2). The image presents a vibrant yet mysterious underwater world, inspiring boundless imagination.



Figure 2: *The Little Mermaid*

(3) Aesthetic Emotion

Aesthetic emotion refers to an individual's subjective emotional and aesthetic experience in response to a text. Textbook illustrations can stimulate students' interest in reading, strengthen their comprehension, and foster a sense of closeness to the content and greater emotional engagement. Thus, illustrations contribute to students' emotional understanding and expressive abilities. For example, in Grade 5, Volume 1, Lesson 14, *The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace*, the illustration uses a real photograph of the Dashiufa ruins of the Old Summer Palace (Figure 3). This image serves as a visual reminder of history, calling on readers to remember the past and strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.



Figure 3: *The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace*

(4) Aesthetic Understanding

Aesthetic understanding is the process through which individuals, on the basis of aesthetic perception, imagination, and emotion, come to recognize new meanings by revealing connections among things. As a supplement to textual meaning, illustrations help enrich curricular content and enhance students' reading experience. At the same time, they can improve students' ability to think deeply and analyze texts, as well as strengthen problem-solving competence, thereby playing an important role in the formation of aesthetic sensibility. In the Unified Edition of primary Chinese textbooks, elements of aesthetic understanding are reflected in the information and values conveyed by illustrations, which can deepen students' understanding of both the text and its background. For instance, beneath the first passage, *Learning to Play Weiqi (Go)*, in Grade 6, Volume 2, Lesson 14, Two Classical Chinese Texts, there is an illustration depicting two students playing a board game while an elderly man observes (Figure 4), based on the account in Mencius (Gaozi I). With its strong Confucian cultural grounding, the image conveys traditional Chinese values.



Figure 4: *Learning to Play Weiqi (Go)*

(5) Aesthetic Creativity

Aesthetic creativity refers to producing an unprecedented and innovative image in accordance with aesthetic principles; it can be understood as the ultimate goal and culmination of aesthetic psychology. In the process of teaching-oriented aesthetic education, textbook illustrations can foster students' hands-on creative ability and encourage the development of individual expression, while also enabling them to gain personal emotional experiences through creation. In the Unified Edition of primary Chinese textbooks, the aesthetic-creative dimension of illustrations

is reflected in how they stimulate children's creativity and imagination, and cultivate their pursuit of, and affection for, beauty. For example, in *Chinese Language Garden* VIII in Grade 1, Volume 1, there are three pictures, one of which is intentionally incomplete, featuring only a question mark (Figure 5). This design encourages students to identify coherent clues across the surrounding images and construct their own visual narrative, thereby activating creativity and imagination.

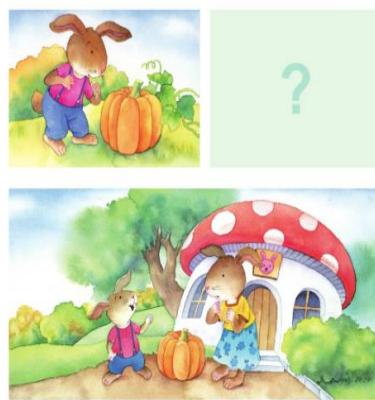


Figure 5 : *Chinese Language Garden*

II. Problems and Causes in the Use of Illustrations in the Unified Edition of Primary Chinese Textbooks for Aesthetic Education in Chinese Language Teaching

(1) Existing Problems in Practice

- a. Insufficient teacher attention to, and understanding of, illustration-based aesthetic education

The pictures and illustration materials included in the Unified Edition of primary Chinese textbooks can effectively enhance students' reading comprehension and aesthetic cognition. However, teachers vary in how they perceive the role of illustrations in aesthetic-education-oriented instruction. Some regard illustrations merely as auxiliary tools for learning the text; others prioritize the educational value of the written text over the artistic value of illustrations. A proportion of teachers lack a deep understanding of aesthetic education as a whole. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen dissemination and professional learning regarding the functions and value of illustrations in aesthetic education, so as to improve teachers' awareness and competence in this area.

- b. Lack of clearly designed aesthetic-education objectives for illustrations

From the perspective of aesthetic education, using illustrations to cultivate students' aesthetic sensibilities, personal character, and cultural literacy, alongside broader humanistic competencies, is of long-term significance. However, primary Chinese textbooks do not explicitly specify aesthetic-education objectives for illustrations. Without concrete guidance, teachers may find it difficult to recognize the pedagogical importance of illustration-based aesthetic education. In the most recently revised *Primary Chinese Language Curriculum Standards*, aesthetic education objectives tend to confine the aesthetic function primarily to aesthetic creativity, emphasizing the aesthetic value of language and literary works while failing to articulate the aesthetic-education potential of illustrations as an important instructional resource. As a result, illustration-based aesthetic education lacks an independent and clearly defined status.

c. Insufficient exploration of illustration-based aesthetic-education resources

In many cases, teachers do not adequately consider how to integrate pictorial or multimedia resources with classroom instruction in a pedagogically meaningful way. For example, in teaching the lesson *Sunrise at Sea*, some teachers may simply display several images in slides to capture students' attention and invite them to share their impressions. However, such use often overlooks the deeper exploration of aesthetic-education resources embedded in illustrations and fails to guide students to identify and appreciate their aesthetic value.

d. A limited range of instructional approaches for illustration-based aesthetic education

When using illustrations in teaching, many teachers repeatedly rely on large numbers of similar images or fixed templates. This can make instruction overly uniform and may diminish students' interest as well as their creative engagement. In teaching the lesson *The Little Gecko Borrows a Tail*, for example, the illustration may be used only to support students in retelling the storyline, rather than as a resource for aesthetic exploration. Therefore, when implementing illustration-based aesthetic education, teachers should experiment with more varied ways of combining and using images, and incorporate more novel and distinctive designs to stimulate students' imagination and creativity.

e. Weak evaluation of the effectiveness of illustration-based aesthetic education

In classroom practice, teachers often find it difficult to fully explore the pedagogical potential of illustrations, and they may rarely examine the illustrator's intent or the socio-cultural background of the artwork. A key underlying reason is that aesthetic education is not granted the

same status as intellectual education. In many schools, evaluations of teaching effectiveness tend to focus on basic teaching skills, lesson planning, and instructional delivery, while evaluations of learning effectiveness emphasize students' classroom performance, participation in activities, and attainment of predefined objectives. Even when some teachers incorporate aesthetic education through textbook illustrations, it is often driven more by immediate instructional needs or personal preference than by a systematic pedagogical rationale.

(2) Analysis of the Causes of These Problems

a. The neglect of aesthetic education under traditional instructional beliefs

First, Insufficient emphasis on aesthetic education in primary schooling. Within the broader context of China's basic education, key educational stakeholders tend to prioritize examination performance in subjects such as Chinese and mathematics, which results in relatively limited attention to aesthetic education. On the one hand, neither textbooks nor relevant education policies provide explicit specifications for illustration-based aesthetic-education objectives, leaving teachers without clear guidance for effective implementation. On the other hand, traditional teaching approaches shape teachers' perceptions, reducing their awareness of, and attention to, the aesthetic-education value of illustrations.

Second, Practical difficulties faced by teachers when teaching with textbook illustrations. In practice, many teachers report that the most significant challenges in using textbook illustrations effectively are their own limited aesthetic literacy and the perceived lack of appeal of the illustrations themselves. Aesthetic education often requires the integrated use of knowledge from multiple fields. Without interdisciplinary collaboration among individuals, departments, or institutions, it becomes difficult to meet these demands, let alone to design diversified approaches to illustration-based aesthetic education.

Third, A lack of integration and sharing of illustration resources. Insufficient integration of illustration resources can leave teachers uncertain about where to access high-quality materials or how to share resources efficiently. The absence of well-developed websites or databases, or the incompleteness of existing platforms, forces teachers to spend substantial time searching for appropriate illustrations, resulting in unnecessary costs in time and effort. Regular updating of illustration resources is also essential, since new visual materials can better reflect contemporary social themes, aesthetic trends, and emerging cultural forms.

b. Insufficient aesthetic literacy among teachers

First, Constraints in teachers' professional preparation. Teachers' professional backgrounds are an important factor shaping their aesthetic literacy. If their pre-service education and in-service training do not include systematic knowledge and practice related to aesthetic education, teachers may struggle to fully understand the role and value of illustrations in aesthetic-education-oriented instruction. When teachers rely mainly on personal preference or immediate impressions, they are less likely to identify the latent artistic qualities and distinctive merits embedded in textbook illustrations. In turn, it becomes difficult to support students in developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of the linguistic knowledge and cultural meanings conveyed in Chinese language learning.

Second, A relatively narrow aesthetic horizon. Teachers' aesthetic horizons influence how they interpret, design, and enact aesthetic education within teaching processes. A limited aesthetic horizon may prevent teachers from maximizing the pedagogical potential of illustration resources and from responding effectively to students' diverse learning needs. Some teachers view aesthetic education as belonging exclusively to art-related subjects, which indicates a lack of interdisciplinary thinking and competence, as well as an insufficient exploration of how the nature of art connects with their own disciplinary teaching.

Third, A single instrumental view of textbook illustrations. In educational practice, illustrations are often positioned merely as tools or decorative elements, rather than as resources that can cultivate students' aesthetic abilities and creativity. Some teachers do not fully recognize the multiple functions of illustrations or their flexible pedagogical value. Consequently, their use of illustrations is frequently driven by immediate instructional convenience or personal preference, reflecting a relatively arbitrary stance toward illustration-based teaching.

III. Countermeasures and Recommendations for Applying Textbook Illustrations to Aesthetic Education in the Unified Edition of Primary Chinese Teaching

(1) Strengthen teacher training and capacity building for illustration-based aesthetic education

Schools can invite experts to deliver professional development courses and public lectures, enabling teachers to learn and master effective approaches to illustration-based aesthetic education

through practice. In addition, schools may integrate aesthetic-education elements related to illustrations into instructional design and activity planning. For example, in classroom teaching, teachers can use high-quality images to support the explanation of key concepts and knowledge points. In terms of campus cultural activities, schools may invite professional illustrators or student volunteers to conduct illustration creation, exhibitions, and other activities aligned with aesthetic education.

(2) Establish systematic curriculum design and evaluation mechanisms

Schools can develop locally adapted syllabi, assessment criteria, and classroom-based instructional experiments related to illustration-based aesthetic education. They may also conduct regular evaluations of the teaching staff and offer certificates and incentives to qualified teachers. For instance, in teaching the lesson *The Little Boat in Venice*, an additional aesthetic-education objective could be introduced: students develop aesthetic perception by appreciating the illustration beneath the text, and then engage in aesthetic imagination by connecting the image with the passage describing the Venetian boat as “twenty to thirty feet long, narrow and deep, somewhat like a canoe; with the bow and stern curving upward like a crescent moon hanging on the horizon; moving lightly and flexibly, like a water snake in an irrigation ditch” (Figure 6). This design can deepen students’ understanding of both Chinese traditional culture and world cultures, particularly their similarities and differences, and enhance aesthetic understanding.



Figure 6: *The Little Boat in Venice*

(3) Develop a diversified pool of educational resources

Relevant education authorities can establish a diversified resource pool and recommend it for teachers’ use. Schools can integrate a range of online resources and incorporate them into a shared resource bank accessible to teachers. In teaching the lesson *Sunrise at Sea*, for example, teachers may curate background information, images, and videos related to sea sunrises from the existing resource bank, and introduce basic knowledge about composition and viewing angles in sunrise

photography. In this way, students can be gradually guided to perceive the beauty of nature through visual materials and to further activate their aesthetic imagination (Figure 7).



Figure 7: *Sunrise at Sea*

(4) Build a comprehensive evaluation system

To address the weak evaluation of illustration-based aesthetic education, schools can establish a comprehensive system through integrated assessment and diversified evaluation methods. In classroom practice, schools may evaluate students' aesthetic learning outcomes through a combination of summative tests, classroom participation, and homework performance. For instance, end-of-term examinations may include illustration-based items closely aligned with the text to assess students' growth in aesthetic competence and creative thinking, encouraging them to perceive and interpret the aesthetic qualities of illustrations while analyzing textual emotions. Regarding classroom participation, schools can incorporate performance-based assessment and develop evaluation indicators that combine qualitative and quantitative measures to capture students' levels of understanding and emotional response to illustrations. In homework assessment, teachers should focus on students' ability to use illustrations effectively, including their capacity for image appreciation, information collection related to illustrations, and the presentation of creative design ideas.

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