

## **Comparing the Cultural Contents of Mandarin Reading Textbooks in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

In China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, Mandarin Chinese is considered the official language (or one of the dominating languages). The four geographical areas have been organized around relatively independent political and administrative systems for the past century. Even after Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, the special administrative area has maintained a level of autonomy in many aspects, including its educational system. This paper has two primary aims: first, to analyze the reading curriculum and textbooks that are employed in these four locales and explore to the extent to which the same language, Mandarin, is taught differently in each educational system; and second, to investigate and discuss how the design of the reading curriculum and textbooks differentially reflects core aspects of the society, culture, and political ideologies in each setting.

### **Introduction**

The Mandarin Chinese language has become a widely used language around the world. Currently there are more than 1.3 billion people who consider Mandarin Chinese as their native language (United Nations, 2011). The dominance of China in economic, political, military, and cultural developments over the past decade makes it a “rising dragon” in the world. In addition to China, there are three other areas—namely, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan--where Mandarin Chinese is considered as one of the major/official languages. Together these four areas play important roles in current world economy, especially in East Asia. As a result, the importance of language skills in Mandarin Chinese has drawn much attention among observers in the world.

Even though all four areas share Mandarin as their common official language, each has its own unique history and is operated under very different political systems, which lead to different cultural environments. Moreover, the educational systems also vary. As many have noted, to think about the curriculum is to contextualize, since the curriculum is “connected to the cultural, political, and economic institutions of the larger society” (Beyer & Apple, 1998).

Thus the question arises: to what extent, if any, do political, economic and cultural characteristics affect the design and contents of the Mandarin reading textbooks used in

these four Mandarin Chinese speaking areas? To address this question, this paper will, first, note several important historical and cultural distinctions as well as basic differences in each area's political and educational systems, which help shed light on contemporary patterns and trends (Bray & Lee, 2001). Second, the paper will briefly introduce relevant literature and research methods for the study. Third, the main research findings will examine how different Mandarin language textbooks are designed and organized in these four geographical locales. Lastly, the paper will discuss the study's main findings as well as several lessons to be learned.

## **Same Language Under Different Systems**

### *Political Systems*

China has long been recognized as a combination of “socialism” economics and “totalitarian” politics. Before the economic reforms starting in the late 1970s, the Chinese government used a strong arm in leading the country to accomplish the ideal of Marxism and Communism. Since these reforms took root, the government has re-directed the country toward market economy (Bray & Lee, 2001). While the economic orientation shifted, the Chinese government still tightly controls political activities and ideologies. As the Chinese economy continues to rapidly develop over the past decade, the country increasingly resembles a “semi-capitalism” economic structure. And while the government is reluctant to openly admit it, the shift of economic orientation has resulted in the modification of social values. The government now attempts to tackle many new growing problems—for example, corruption, prostitution, and counterfeiting—which are thought to be linked to these value changes (He, 1998; Liu, 2005).

Before Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, it had been a British colony since 1841 (colonized briefly by Japan during the Second World War). During the colonial period, the British government set up strong political and economic foundation to govern Hong Kong. Politically, the British government allowed Chinese residents to participate in administrative affairs and be appointed to political positions. The British government also treated Chinese (around 95% of the population according to the 2006 census) and non-Chinese equally under the Law. Economically, Hong Kong was positioned by the British government to be a financial and trade center (Luk, 1991). After 1997, the Chinese government promised to keep Hong Kong as it has been in most aspects during the next fifty years and ruled Hong Kong under the principle of “one country, two systems” (Morris, Kan, & Morris, 2001). Politically, Hong Kong becomes the “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HK-SAR)” which enjoys considerable political autonomy, although the Chief Executive is still appointed by the Chinese government (HK-SAR, 2011). Economically, Hong Kong remains a vibrant capitalist market. As a result, the Hong Kong system is more similar to the English system rather than to the Chinese one.

Singapore shared a common British colonial history with Hong Kong since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was also ruled by Japan during World War II. In the 1950s, Singaporean society was filled with deep ethnic and linguistic segmentation. Unlike Hong Kong, the composition of the population is more heterogeneous: about 70% are ethnic Chinese (as of 2010), the remaining population consists of Malays, Indians, and others. In the past, different ethnic groups have fought over their own political identity and the government was challenged to control the simmering conflicts (Gopinathan, 2001). Later in 1965, the British power allowed Singapore to become independent and withdrew its political involvement from Singapore. From then on, the government began to promote and implement a clear value of “multilingualism” and “multiculturalism” to the society. The political system is also similar to the British Parliament system in which most of the seats are still dominated by the People’s Action Party (PAP).

Taiwan was ceded to Japan as a colony from 1895 until the end of the Second World War. In 1949, the Communist Party took over Mainland China. Chiang, Kai-shek, who was the national leader at that time, moved the government to Taiwan, hoping to realize the ideal of reunification soon in the future. Since then, the sovereign debate between China and Taiwan has long been a sensitive and unsolvable ideological issue in the island and internationally. After almost four decades of development, in 1987, the Taiwanese government removed the Marshall Law. The process of a democratic political system has been blossoming through regular direct elections of legislators, mayors and a president. The two major political parties on the Island are Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In the 2000 presidential election, Taiwan experienced the first shifting of power (from KMT to DPP) and the ruling party alteration occurred again in the election of 2008 (from DPP to KMT).

### *Compulsory Schooling and Language Policies*

In China, the official compulsory education is nine years since 1986. Mandarin classes (語文) are offered from Grade 1 to Grade 12. It is also one of the major subjects tested in all levels of entrance examinations. It is mandated that Mandarin (Putonghua 普通話) be the official language as well as the instructional language of teachers (普通話是教師的職業語言). All the Mandarin language learning needs to be based on the foundation of Marxism (馬克思主義) and the respect of scientific teaching approach (科學的教育原則) (Ministry of Education, 2002).

In Hong Kong compulsory education is also nine years. Like China, Mandarin classes are offered from Grade 1 to Grade 12. After Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, the language policy has become “bi-literate (English & Mandarin) and trilingual (plus Cantonese)” (兩文三語). Therefore, Mandarin is also tested as a subject in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE, 香港中學會考) since 2000. Teachers are required to teach in Mandarin during classes. In order to promote the concept of “reading for pleasure and for learning,” the Hong Kong government has begun to implement a

series of literacy programs in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, including the establishment of classroom libraries and central libraries in every primary school (Kam, 2007).

In Singapore everyone should receive at least six years of compulsory education. English is the instructional language in classrooms. Since Singaporean society is heterogeneous with several major languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) being used, the government has long implemented the Compulsory bilingual language policy started in 1966 at the primary level. In 2005, the National Library Board also launched an annual nationwide reading campaign in different languages to promote good reading habits and a friendly reading environment in all families across all ethnicities (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007).

The Taiwanese government recently decided to prolong the compulsory education period from nine years to twelve years, starting from 2014. In Taiwan, Mandarin (國語) is the official and classroom instructional language. Even though the population component in Taiwan is homogeneous (98% Han, 2% others and the aboriginal tribes), different mother tongue dialects are used. In order to preserve different cultures and languages, starting in 2001, the language policy has become “Mother tongue first, then Mandarin, later English (先母語、後國語、再英語).” As a result, Mandarin classes are offered from Grade 1 to 12, along with mother tongue classes. One of the primary policies of language learning is: To form literate citizens who can think independently and have self-esteem (Ko, Chang, Ting-Ya, & Chiu, 2007). There are many volunteered groups who do storytelling to primary school students each week. In addition, the Ministry of Education also sponsors many websites and museums for children’s reading club, such as Openbook and Children’s Literacy Museum.

In sum, Mandarin Chinese is spoken as an official language in all four geographical areas. However, the way the language is taught in school and the abilities that Mandarin Chinese students are expected to develop and cultivate vary from one school system to the next. As Keith (1981) mentioned in the “politics of textbook selection”, the selection of textbook contents can be highly political and often involves the legal, ideological, economic, and political aspects. Apple and Christian-Smith (1991) echoed this point by noting that textbooks “signify and form a particular construction of reality and knowledge in the society.”

## Literature Review

### *Social Construction verses Institutional Construction*

There are generally two approaches of forming social values and citizen behaviors. One is through the naturally social-constructed process, and another is through the systematically institutional-constructed approach. Berger and Luckmann (1967), in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, centralized the “common sense knowledge” and believed that the validity of our everyday knowledge is taken for granted by everyone due

to common human interactions. Since these interactions occur naturally in daily settings, socially constructed knowledge and meanings may not be perceived as a way of using values or ideology to control society.

In the institutional-construction approach, formal institutions (e.g., government ministries or schools) are the most familiar ones. However, the two institutions may be defined differently in their levels of social controlling. In general, as the government tries to set up policies and regulations to restrict citizens' behaviors, citizens may consider those as "political controlling" mechanisms which attempt to impose certain values into individual minds (Liu, 2005). For citizens, these policies and regulations are not "socially constructed;" instead, they are deemed as "coercively accepted." As a result, the formal policies and regulations are most likely to be categorized as "institutional constructed" assets.

By contrast, the education system is set up in a way that usually eliminates the "sense of the coercive". Schools are typically established as student-centered environments. Because of this, the school system is often excluded from the list of social control mechanisms in the minds of citizens. However, as Beyer and Apple (1998) depict, curriculum design and policies are connected to cultural, political, and economic institutions. One of the major purposes of public schooling is also social and the textbooks "define what counts as valid knowledge" (Bernstein, 1975; Heyneman, 2006). Therefore, "what/whose knowledge is of most worth" raises the debate of social legitimacy (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). "What should be taught; why it should be taught; and how to teach it" has become part of a political propaganda, which is controlled by a group of people with real interests (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). Williams (1989) also addresses that textbooks are a form of "selective tradition" because they are "someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimacy knowledge and culture." And this "someone" usually is the group who holds the political power (Crawford, 2000).

Based on the literature, a hypothesis is formulated: The dominant rationale in the language curriculum and in the reading textbooks will be designed to serve each geographical area's political system, even though these four societies share a common Chinese culture.

### *Curriculum and Textbook Design*

One of the goals of education is to create "good citizens." When schooling and textbooks involve this specific purpose, it is unavoidable that all the involved activities and participating personnel are part of a broader set of "political acts" (Apple, 2004). Especially in a centralized educational system (which these four areas all belong to), the design and content of the curriculum and textbooks lay out the blueprint of the government's ideology and serve the purpose of the government's "standard" of being a "good citizen." Curriculum and textbooks not only serve as cultural artifacts, which preserve and represent specific local cultures, they are also the "vehicles of ideas" in

the era (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). Therefore, for instructors who grow up in the system, even though they may wish to remain neutral and distant themselves from the ideological-given business, the long-term socially and institutionally instructed ideology in their minds eventually may still sub-consciously surface in their instructions (Sung & Yang, 2009).

In China, the political and market environments have merged to a new era. Regardless, the curriculum design is still under quite strict governmental scrutiny. The political content is pronounced in textbooks because textbooks hold the responsibility of delivering and reiterating the governmental political ideologies (Kwong, 1985). For example, in the Chinese national curriculum, it is clearly depicted that the purpose of the language curriculum is not only to cultivate the basic language skills, but also to make sure students acknowledge Chinese nationalism under the guidance of Marxism and Socialism (Ministry of Education, 2011). Therefore, the education in China is a more overt expression of political indoctrination designed to serve the specific purpose of government, and that changes in content are “a reflection of changes in political leadership and policies” (Fairbrother, 2004; Li, 1990).

Due to the special historical status of Hong Kong, the concept of national identity among Hong Kong residents remained weak (Lee, 2004). Also, textbooks were not “allowed” to express too much political opinion and overt ideologies (Morris & Sweeting, 1991). After 1997, the “de-political” orientation of textbooks has been overturned to an orientation seeking to strengthen the national identity of Hong Kong students and youth. One of the major foci has been a shift to education for national identity, which is somehow a “competition” between two very different schools of political ideologies, “human rights/democracy” and “nationalism/patriotism” (Lee & Sweeting, 2001; Morris et al., 2001). In the handover speech on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997, the new Chief Executive openly proclaimed the following agenda for the new Hong Kong era: “the promotion of traditional Chinese values, the avoidance of confrontation, a focus on the obligations and responsibilities of individuals towards the country and community, moral “correctness” and a stress on societal values.” In this case, “nationalization means the identification with the People’s Republic of China rather than with the much smaller unit of Hong Kong” (Bray & Lee, 2001).

In Singapore, a former colony and now a multi-cultural/multi-racial society with mostly immigrants from other Asian countries, the issue of national identity is even more salient. With a large Chinese migrant population, Singapore’s educational development was substantially influenced by the Chinese educational and ideological systems (Gopinathan, 2001). The difference is that the Singaporean government expects its citizens not only to identify themselves as Singaporeans, but also to make an effort to preserve their family culture and language (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007). In other words, even though the Singaporean government is deemed as a strong-armed administration, it strives to preserve a level of cultural and political autonomy among the various racial/ethnic groups (Gopinathan, 2001). Overall, Singapore



has successfully achieved a “tight coupling” between its education and the economy, which allows education to have a more direct impact on its economy activities (Gopinathan, 2001).

Taiwan, which still struggles with questions of national identity, both internally and internationally, draws little explicit attention to national identity issues (Chang, 2007; Yu, 2005). Before 1988, when the Marshall Law was still in effect, all political, cultural, educational, and social activities were under strict governmental control. During that era, all school activities and personnel, including schoolteachers and professionals, were under strict supervision. The official textbooks were edited and published by the National Institution for Compilation and Translation under the Ministry of Education. Once the Marshall Law was lifted, many restrictions were gradually loosened up, including the design and contents of school textbooks. Since 1996, the government began approving the adoption of private publishers’ textbooks on campus. Therefore, school teachers are now allowed to choose which versions of textbooks they want to use in their classes (Su, 2006). Due to the inconsistency of national identity across different groups in the island, the concept and the discussion of national identity rarely appear in the curriculum and textbooks. Rather, the editors pay more attention to issues of local and cultural identities to avoid the long-standing and sensitive debate over national identity.

Two hypotheses for curriculum and textbook design can be developed:

- 1) *The level of “ political involvement” in the curriculum and textbook design in each of these four Mandarin-speaking areas vary depends on the political system.*
- 2) *The frequency of political content appeared in textbooks depends on the political system.*

## Methodology

The official curriculum guidelines were collected from the Ministry of Education websites in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Relevant textbooks were obtained via local informants or purchased online. There are two levels of content analysis and two kinds of materials that are analyzed in this paper. The *first level* analyzes the national reading curriculum guidelines in these four areas, identifying and comparing the major themes and foci of the Mandarin Chinese curriculum. The *second level* analyzes the contents of Mandarin Chinese textbooks in each jurisdiction, to better understand whether, and in what ways, the contents of the lessons met the themes and foci specified by the national reading curriculum. At this second level, the unit of analysis is a “lesson.”

This study analyzed Mandarin Chinese textbooks for Grade five and Grade six, which were published and in use during the period 2006-2009 (see Table 1). In each jurisdiction the academic year is organized according to semesters, with one textbook for each semester. Thus the analysis involved looking at two reading textbooks for each academic year.

In China, the People’s Education publisher is the dominant textbook publisher.

Apart from schools in Beijing and Shanghai, all schools in China use the same reading textbooks, which are published by People's Education Publisher. In Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, schools have some autonomy in choosing textbooks from different publishing companies. By and large, publishers in all three jurisdictions design their textbooks according to the national curriculum guidelines.

**Table 1: Information on Textbooks and Total Reading Lessons Per Grade**

	<b>China</b>	<b>Hong Kong</b>	<b>Singapore</b>	<b>Taiwan</b>
<b>Publisher</b>	People's Education Publisher	Pearson/ Longman Education Asia	People's Education Publisher (Pan-Pacific version)	Han Ling Publisher
<b>Total lessons</b>	116	76	47	63
<b>Lessons in each grade and printed year (exclude optional reading)</b>	<u>Grade 5:</u> 66 lessons (2009/2008)	<u>Grade 5:</u> 39 lessons (2006/2008)	<u>Grade 5:</u> 20 lessons (2009)	<u>Grade 5:</u> 30 lessons (2009)
	<u>Grade 6:</u> 50 lessons (2009/2008)	<u>Grade 6:</u> 38 lessons (2006/2008)	<u>Grade 6:</u> 27 lessons (2008)	<u>Grade 6:</u> 33 lessons (2009)

## Analyses and Findings

### *National Language Curriculum Guidelines*

In the national guidelines announced by the Chinese government (Ministry of Education, 2002), there are three sections describing the framework of the Mandarin language curriculum. The first section presents the basic elements of the language curriculum. The Ministry of Education (MOE) states that the objectives of the Mandarin Chinese reading curriculum are to: 1) increase students' language abilities; 2) develop students' comprehensive understanding of the Chinese language; 3) promote the good attitude and habit of self-learning; and 4) cultivate a self-perpetuating learning mechanism.

The second section discusses in greater detail the purposes of the language curriculum in different learning stages. In the beginning of the section, three fundamental cultural principles are mentioned. They describe how the language curriculum should be designed to cultivate the emotion of nationalism; the quality of socialism; and to understand, recognize, and respect the traditional Chinese culture and other cultures. The remainder of this section is skill and technically oriented. Following these overall purposes, the curricular guidelines describe the detailed aims of each grade stage (Grades 1-2; Grades 3-4; Grades 5-6; Grades 7-9). The guidelines portray how the basic four language abilities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing ought to be taught and evaluated.



The third section provides specific suggestions about how textbooks and instructional materials need to be arranged and designed. As in the previous section, the text of the guideline first recalls the concept of Marxism. The guideline also reiterates the importance of recognizing the Chinese culture and nationalism. In addition to these ideological reminders, the guideline also suggests that the curriculum be developed in ways that can be practically applied in the students' daily lives and be integrated with the learning of other subjects.

Overall, the content of the Chinese language curriculum guidelines are two-folded. One is to direct the political, ideological, and cultural perspectives of the language classroom. Another is to guide the technical aspect of learning the language. Therefore, the guideline not only attempts to communicate how the language should be taught technically, but also what should be taught in the classroom in terms of textbook content.

The Guideline of the Elementary Chinese Language Curriculum of Hong Kong (Council of Curriculum Development, 2008) categorizes the elements of Chinese classes into two sections. One focuses on the basic knowledge and skills of the language, and the other suggests the learning goals and contents of the classroom. As expected, the text notes how listening, speaking, reading, and writing are fundamental abilities. As in China, the guidelines in Hong Kong emphasize an appreciation of the Chinese literature and culture, a cultivation of good virtue and characters, and an interest in self-learning. The Hong Kong curriculum never emphasized the special cultural or national recognition during the 1980s (Morris, et al., 2001). Only in the late 1980s, and in anticipation of the power transition set for 1997, relevant curricula begin to include contents about the history of Hong Kong and the concept of nationalism. In general, the curriculum guideline in Hong Kong is similar to the one for China. However, it does not allocate space to the re-conformation of socialism and Marxism.

Singapore has long been an "importer" of educational systems from other countries. In the syllabus of the Chinese Language at Primary level (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007), the purposes of cultural preservation and cultural recognition are initially addressed. An emphasis on nationalism also appears in the syllabus. On the whole, the syllabus tends to be similar to the guidelines of China and Hong Kong. The only slight difference is the special attention given to the notions of respect and recognition in the multi-cultural society.

The national curricular guidelines for teaching Mandarin in Taiwan are probably the most "de-political" of the four. Although the concept of self-cultural recognition is mentioned, most of the sections of the guideline emphasize the technical-orientation of language learning. The guideline specifies the learning goals for each stage and how they should be attained.

Overall, the following common features of the national guidelines for the Mandarin Chinese curriculum can be noted. *First*, self-cultural recognition and preservation are stressed in all places. *Second*, the cultivation of good traditional virtues, values, and inter-personal relationships are also addressed. *Third*, the governments similarly hope

to develop motivations for self-learning and critical thinking through the language curriculum and integrate the language classes with other academic subjects at school. *Fourth*, all the language curriculum guidelines require “life lessons,” such as personal or inter-personal relationships, to be embedded in language textbooks.

The slight difference is the emphasis placed on ideological promotions, such as nationalism, socialism, and/or Marxism. Not surprisingly, these ideological ideas are stressed in Hong Kong after 1997. The design of the Mandarin Chinese curriculum also hopes to achieve the goal of having students not only use Mandarin at school, but also in their daily lives. Compared to pre-1997 era, the British colonial government in Hong Kong was more commercially oriented than political or culturally focused.

### *Comparing Textbooks*

Using an emergent coding scheme, each lesson in each textbook was coded into one of eleven categories depending on whether the written texts (found in the lesson) emphasized: 1) Chinese traditional culture (e.g. calligraphy); 2) a national or local cultural event (e.g. Local festival); 3) a legendary story (e.g. The Journey to the West); 4) nationalism/patriotism (e.g. National Day); 5) international culture (e.g. International travel journal); 6) character-building with life lessons (e.g. be caring, loving); 7) a role model (e.g. founding father(s)); 8) the importance of developing learning abilities (e.g. creativity); 9) developing a taste for nature, art and literature (e.g. appreciation of literature); 10) global or post-modern issues (e.g. environment); 11) others (e.g. personal daily journal). The percentage of lesson themes per category found in the Mandarin reading textbooks of each jurisdiction is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Percent Distribution of Lessons in Reading Textbooks by Topic**

Percentage of all lessons in each topic category:	China	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan
1) Chinese traditional culture	2	5	2	<b>11</b>
2) Local/cultural specific essay	7	9	2	<b>11</b>
3) Legendary story	0	4	6	0
4) Nationalism/patriotism related text	<b>16</b>	4	<b>15</b>	0
5) International culture	7	5	6	6
6) Virtue/character-building with life lessons	<b>20</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>29</b>
7) Role model	9	7	2	5
8) Developing one's ability in learning	<b>12</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>	6
9) Developing a static taste (in the nature, art, and literature)	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>	2	<b>16</b>
10) Global (post-modern) issue	5	8	2	8
11) Other topics	5	8	2	8
<b>Total number of lessons</b>	116 (100%)	76 (100%)	47 (100%)	76 (100%)

The analysis reveals that the most emphasized theme in reading textbooks in all four geographical areas is *virtue/character-building with life* lessons. This theme occupied more than 20% of all reading textbook lessons. This emphasis reflects explicit instructions in all national curriculum guidelines, requiring the cultivation of social values and ethical life lessons. For example, all textbooks include lessons about the good virtues of loving, helping, and caring. Clearly, where Mandarin is taught in the classroom, it is not only an occasion for learning to be proficient in a language, but also an opportunity to build good inter-personal qualities and character.

In China and Singapore, the theme of *nationalism/patriotism* is found in more than 15% of the lessons in the Mandarin curriculum. As previously mentioned, the national guidelines for the Mandarin Chinese curriculum in China emphasize the importance of major ideological concepts, such as Marxism, socialism and nationalism. In fact, in the category of “*role model*,” many of the role models mentioned in the textbooks are closely related to those who were instrument in the establishment and development of the country, such as the founding father, Mao Tse-Tung, or ‘brave’ soldiers who devoted their personal interests or lives to the country. If the themes of role model and nationalism/patriotism are merged, the total accumulated percentage is about 25%. In Singapore, the government attempts to promote five core societal values: Nation as the first, society as the priority; Families as the roots, society as the foundation; Caring for the society, respect to individuals; Consensus building, conflict avoidance; Inter-racial harmony, inter-religion acceptance (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2007). Therefore, the Mandarin classrooms also become an effective place for strengthening the ideas of nationalism and patriotism in the students’ minds at an early learning stage. On this specific theme, interestingly and counter-intuitively, there are no lessons focusing on nationalism and patriotism in the Taiwanese textbooks. This appears to reflect the fact that the issue of “national identity” remains a sensitive one among the Taiwanese and among different political parties in Taiwan.

The theme of “*developing taste for the nature, art, and literature*,” is fairly strong in reading textbooks in China (17%), Taiwan (16%) and Hong Kong (11%). In the curricular guidelines of Taiwan and Hong Kong, this is listed explicitly as one of the major learning goals in Mandarin classes. The themes of “*Chinese traditional culture*” and “*national/cultural/local essay*,” are each found in 11% of Taiwanese textbooks, whereas this theme is given little emphasis in the reading textbooks of China, Singapore and Hong Kong. Since national identity continues to be a sensitive political issue in Taiwan, traditional, cultural, and local identities turn out to be neutral and “political correct” topics to include in reading textbooks. The theme of “*developing one’s ability in learning*,” such as creativity, and the ability to expressing one’s thoughts, is prevalent in 23% of the reading textbooks in Singapore, followed by Hong Kong (14%) and China (12%).

## Conclusion

This study seeks not only to acknowledge the different orientations of language curricula and textbooks in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, but also to explore the reasons of these differences. In addition to the common goal of mastering the Mandarin language, it is recognized that each system has its own educational, political, societal, and cultural uniqueness. Therefore, the curriculum guidelines and textbook contents seek to reflect these unique features. As Bray and Lee (2001) mention, “political transitions influence the size and shape of education; educational changes shape and contribute to political changes.” In China and Singapore, which are relatively “strong-armed” governments, the emphasis on political ideology and nationalism are clearly presented in all learning materials. Specifically, stories of individual national heroes appear frequently in Chinese textbooks as role models for the students. By contrast in Hong Kong and Taiwan, where issues of national identity remain sensitive ones for historical reasons, topics on political ideology and nationalism occupy much less of the explicit content in comparison to the Chinese and Singaporean textbooks.

Nevertheless, a common purpose embedded in all the Mandarin Chinese reading curricula is the development of an individual’s virtues and character. In all four areas more than 20% of the lessons focus on the importance of virtue and character building (what is sometimes known as moral education), which is the core of the Chinese Confucius culture. Despite differences in colonial and political history and ethnic composition, these areas share a deeply rooted Chinese culture.

In sum, the textbooks of these four Mandarin speaking areas represent in many ways the progress of social transition and national development (Kennedy, 2004). The language curriculum and reading textbooks serve the purposes of the abilities to learn, to understand, and to recognize their own culture in social and institutional constructive approaches (Curd-Christiansen, 2008). Undeniably, the “selection and organization of school knowledge is an ideological process, which serves the interests of particular classes and social groups” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). As a result, further research may be employed by analyzing other textbooks in additional grade levels to further understand how the four Chinese cultures implement these educational philosophies.

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