

Constructing dimensions of literary comprehension and interpretation among international students in China—taking contemporary Chinese literature as an example

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Abstract. This study focuses on the construction of a dimensional framework for international students' literary comprehension and interpretation abilities. Based on an analysis of the current state of literary pedagogy research in international Chinese education and the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature, it draws upon Byram's model of cross-cultural communication competence, Deardorff's model of cross-cultural competence, as well as the "Outline for the Chinese Proficiency Test in International Chinese Education", the "Grading Standards for Chinese Reading in International Chinese Education" (Adults), and the "Reference Framework for Teaching Chinese Culture and National Conditions in International Chinese Education", this study proposes and substantiates a three-dimensional competency framework comprising the "Comprehension Layer—Processing Layer—Interpretation Layer." The Comprehension Layer focuses on the identification of culture-laden words and the activation of cultural schemas; the Processing Layer emphasizes the inference of literary themes and cross-cultural comparisons; and the Interpretation Layer aims at grasping deep cultural connotations and creative output. The study further clarifies the influence mechanisms of literary discourse feature variables (transparency of culture-laden words, explicitness of literary themes, and clarity of cultural connotations) and individual learner variables (ethnic background and cultural distance) on the three dimensions. Based on these findings, the study proposes a tiered text selection mechanism, a "three-stage" progressive instructional design, and multi-level assessment methods to facilitate a systematic shift in literary instruction within international Chinese language education from "language skills training" to "the cultivation of literary comprehension and interpretation abilities."

Keywords: literary comprehension and interpretation skills, dimensional construction, contemporary Chinese literature, cross-cultural competency standards

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In the complex context where global civilizational dialogue coexists with ideological competition, constructing a credible, likable, and admirable image of China has become a strategic imperative for national

development. In light of the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee and the objectives of the 15th Five-Year Plan, Xi Jinping Thought on Culture provides guiding principles for the high-quality development of international Chinese language education in terms of educational philosophy, content, and methodology. At the 2026 National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference sessions, delegates and committee members emphasized the need to focus on promoting the high-quality development of Chinese language education, enhancing the quality of training, and better integrating study abroad programs with employment opportunities [1]. It is evident that international Chinese language education has gradually shifted from merely teaching Chinese language and culture courses toward building a Chinese language brand system and optimizing policy support.

Today, international Chinese language education serves not only as a bridge for language dissemination but has also become a vital vehicle for conveying China's voice and promoting mutual learning among civilizations. The content of international Chinese language instruction is rich in knowledge, embodies the Chinese spirit, and encapsulates Chinese wisdom, with Chinese culture serving as a key symbol and hallmark of this endeavor. While imparting language skills, continuously optimizing the provision of cultural content and disseminating Chinese culture constitute the dual objectives of talent cultivation in international Chinese language education. This helps international students enhance their research capabilities and professional competence while mastering and applying local ideas and concepts, offering valuable insights for cultivating international students in China who possess a deep understanding of, friendship toward, and affection for China, as well as cross-cultural communication skills.

1.2. Research objectives

Currently, there is a consensus within the academic community that research on cultural instruction in international Chinese language education should be strengthened to promote dialogue and mutual learning among civilizations. However, in the practice of cross-cultural communication, narrative systems rooted in the Chinese context often face challenges such as cultural discounting, loss of meaning, or misinterpretation, which directly impact the deep-level communicative effectiveness of cultural education. How to effectively translate China's development path, value concepts, and cultural essence across cultures—ensuring they retain their spiritual core while being understood and embraced by learners from diverse cultural backgrounds—has become a critical bottleneck in enhancing the quality and influence of international Chinese language communication.

The "Syllabus for Teaching Chinese to International Students in Higher Education Institutions (Long-Term Programs)" clearly stipulates that literary works not only embody the richness of Chinese culture but also possess significant linguistic and cultural value [2]; students at the higher education level should study texts of various themes, genres, styles, and registers that reflect contemporary Chinese social life and the distinctive features of Chinese culture. Therefore, offering Chinese literature courses is particularly crucial in international Chinese language education. However, research on the teaching of literary works in this field remains superficial, and there has long been a lack of practical recommendations and competency-based evaluation systems. For example, issues include the selection of appropriate textbooks, criteria for screening literary works in textbooks, the selection of teaching content, the determination of teaching methods, professional requirements for instructors, and the establishment of evaluation standards and systems for course learning. In current teaching practice, the most glaring issue is that the design of literature courses is neglected, unstandardized, and underdeveloped. Not only do there exist significant disparities in the offering of literature courses across universities—with a lack of unified syllabi and curriculum frameworks—but instructors' expertise in literary pedagogy also needs improvement. In domestic universities, literature appreciation

courses account for an extremely small proportion of total class hours, and the content selection tends to focus on classic and traditional literary works. This not only lacks specificity but also leads to international students lagging behind in their understanding of the image of contemporary China and the development of Chinese literature. Consequently, they struggle to form a comprehensive picture of current social development and daily life in China, which hinders the construction of a comprehensive and multidimensional national image of China through cross-cultural exchange.

1.3. Research questions

As a dual vehicle for language and culture, literary works serve as a vital means for international students to understand contemporary China and improve their language proficiency. However, when introducing Chinese literature, teachers tend to focus primarily on interpreting traditional classics and classical literature—such as the oft-discussed authors Lu Xun, Lao She, Ba Jin, and Cao Yu, as well as works like "Dream of the Red Chamber" "Blessing", "Teahouse", and "Home". Yet, most international students lack the ability to deeply comprehend the historical context of modern and contemporary China [3]. When reading these texts, they often first use their own cultural background as a reference point, "discovering" meanings within the text that relate to their own culture. Consequently, they face difficulties in recognizing cultural symbols, misunderstand literary themes, and struggle to accurately grasp cultural connotations. These issues not only affect reading comprehension but also hinder the development of their ability to interpret and analyze literature. Therefore, the selection of teaching materials for contemporary literature should not merely focus on the "exemplarity" of the works' language; rather, it should seek to uncover educational value within comprehensible texts, with the goal of enhancing students' reading and writing proficiency.

In previous research, studies on cultivating literary interpretation skills have primarily focused on the instructional level, often employing methods such as questionnaires and interviews to identify the difficulties international students encounter during the learning process. Some scholars have proposed teaching strategies such as "close reading," "supplementing cultural context," and "cross-cultural comparison." [4] However, a review of existing research reveals that studies on contemporary literature are scarce; moreover, most are empirical summaries that lack an examination of international students' comprehension and processing processes, as well as a systematic framework for assessing their capabilities. Therefore, how to scientifically select teaching texts and design instructional activities based on the cognitive characteristics of international students to achieve the goals of cross-cultural understanding and communication is an urgent issue in literary education that requires a systematic solution.

Building on previous research, this study aims to construct a dimensional framework for the literary comprehension and interpretation abilities of international students in China, providing a theoretical basis for literary education, and focuses on the following three questions:

I. What dimensions constitute the literary comprehension and interpretation abilities of international students in China? What progressive relationships and internal logic exist among these dimensions?

II. How do discourse-level variables (transparency of culturally loaded words, explicitness of literary themes, and clarity of cultural connotations) and learner-level variables (ethnic background and degree of cultural distance) influence their performance in comprehension and interpretation across different dimensions?

III. Based on this, how should the selection criteria for contemporary Chinese literature and the tiered teaching strategies be designed?

1.4. Significance of the study

First, existing research has largely focused on traditional classics and classical literature, with insufficient attention paid to contemporary literature that reflects modern Chinese social life. Contemporary literature, with its vivid language and close connection to everyday life, serves as a vital window for international students to understand modern China; its rhetorical devices, double entendres, and imagery possess distinct characteristics. Focusing on contemporary literary texts addresses international students' cognitive needs regarding modern China and provides scientific support for the construction of a framework for second-language reading proficiency.

Second, by examining international students' reading comprehension processes of contemporary literary texts, investigating how different textual features influence comprehension and processing, and revealing the developmental patterns of their literary interpretation abilities, this research can offer new perspectives for constructing learner-centered theories of competency development and, consequently, propose targeted teaching strategies. This "from phenomenon to mechanism" research approach will help advance the depth of literary teaching research in international Chinese education.

Furthermore, current Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language literature textbooks suffer from issues such as inconsistent selection criteria, a low proportion of contemporary literary works, and slow content updates. Moreover, they often rely on "classic status" as the sole basis for selection, lacking systematic consideration of the cognitive characteristics of international students at different proficiency levels. Revealing the impact of literary discourse features on international students' comprehension and processing can provide a basis for the scientific selection of contemporary literary teaching materials, offer practical recommendations for differentiated instruction, and promote the transformation of cultural education from "knowledge transmission" to "competency development." The research findings will help advance the development of cultural curricula according to the classifications proposed in the "Reference Framework for Teaching Chinese Culture and National Conditions in International Chinese Education", thereby achieving the organic integration of cultural elements into classroom teaching while enhancing its quality and effectiveness.

Finally, the current HSK examination focuses on assessing language proficiency but lacks quantitative indicators for cross-cultural communication and cultural comprehension. Describing and explaining the cognitive and output processes of international students can provide theoretical references for developing cross-cultural assessment tools [5]. By establishing dimensions of literary comprehension and interpretation for international students, this research offers a scientific basis for teachers to design literary teaching activities, ultimately promoting the establishment of a "cultural competency standards" system in international Chinese education.

2. Current status of research on literature education in international Chinese language education

In recent years, research on the teaching of Chinese culture and literature to international students in China has expanded from language skills training to multidimensional areas such as literary reception, curriculum development, cross-cultural communication, and innovative teaching models, forming a research trend that shifts from "instrumental rationality" to "value rationality."

In the fields of cultural courses and education on national conditions, Feng Lingyu and Jiang Chenxi (2024) indicate that since the 21st century, research on the concept of "language-culture integration" has evolved from initial discussions on the relationship between language and culture to the gradual construction of specialized theoretical frameworks, such as cultural syllabi [6]. Lü Zhaoge (2025) systematically traced the

three-stage evolution of Chinese cultural courses since the founding of the People's Republic of China—from an instrumental orientation to the construction of cultural identity, and from marginalization to systematization—revealing a composite driving mechanism comprising national policies, shifts in educational philosophy, changing demands of international students, and advances in educational technology. From the perspective of the "emotional turn, [7]" Mu Lei and Wu Yongyi (2025) propose that emotion serves not only as the goal and content of national conditions education but also as a pathway to it; they argue that teaching effectiveness in courses such as "Overview of China" can be effectively enhanced through an empathetic discourse system, spaces for emotional experience, and channels for emotional expression [8]. Su Jianing (2024), however, criticizes the current national conditions education for placing too much emphasis on ancient content and lacking sufficient contemporary relevance. He advocates centering the curriculum on the social development of the past 40-plus years since the Reform and Opening-up, breaking free from the mental frameworks of "dividing the past and present" and "opposing China and the outside world," and incorporating contemporary symbols such as mobile payments and high-speed rail [9]. Zuo Xiaomei (2023), in her interpretation of the *Reference Framework for Teaching Chinese Culture and National Conditions in International Chinese Education*, established four-dimensional objectives—cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, cross-cultural awareness, and cultural attitudes—along with a spiral-level classification system, thereby demonstrating the systematic and practical nature of cultural education [10].

In the teaching of Chinese literature, researchers generally focus on the selection of teaching materials and the reception of literary works. Fang Xiajuan (2023), Ren Ruihua (2024), and others have pointed out that current Chinese literature textbooks for international students suffer from structural flaws such as a low proportion of contemporary literature, inconsistent selection criteria, and inappropriate control of language difficulty. Furthermore, the teaching content largely follows the model used in domestic Chinese language and literature departments, lacking systematic adaptation to the language proficiency and cultural backgrounds of international students [11]. Through a long-term follow-up survey of international students at a university in Shanghai, Yang Rongrong (2022) found that these students' reception of modern Chinese literature is characterized by a universal humanistic perspective, a prioritization of social cognition over aesthetics, and the influence of cultural values on comprehension. The literary history they construct is not a coordinate system organized chronologically by time and authors, but rather a "collective landscape" composed of diverse characters and styles [12]. Regarding teaching methods, traditional lecture-based instruction remains dominant, but some scholars are actively exploring innovative models: Pu Qilu and Guo Liandong (2021) introduced the "third space" theory and constructed a three-step teaching process—"pre-reading thematic presentation—pre-reading discussion—reading and post-reading discussion," to help students establish a reflective "third space" between their own culture and the target culture, thereby achieving the dual goals of language learning and humanistic growth through cross-cultural dialogue [13]. Zhang Qinfeng and Li Bing (2021), drawing on reception aesthetics theory, examined international students' reception of Chinese literary classics and found that students tend to interpret works from a "universal human perspective," transcending historical limitations and focusing more on the works' depictions of Chinese society rather than on literary techniques. Although cultural differences may lead to "misinterpretations of the text," the universal elements of emotion and humanity within the works still resonate with readers. It is recommended that teaching select works with strong emotional resonance and emphasize contextual explanations to enhance international students' literary comprehension and cross-cultural communication skills [14]. Zhang Hong (2018) introduced the seminar model into literature classes for international students, establishing a "co-teaching and discussion-based" approach that significantly enhanced student engagement and literary appreciation [15]; Zhang Ao (2025), using *The Biography of Li Shizhen* as an example, validated the feasibility of CBL and PBL teaching

methods in the education of classical medical texts [16]. Furthermore, Jiang Xue (2021), addressing the issues of international students' limited familiarity with Chinese literature and the insufficient internationalization of Chinese literature education in higher education institutions, proposed a teaching model based on "plot summary—character portrayal—graded input" for Chinese literary works, anchored in courses on Chinese general studies [17]. Sun Jingjing (2025), using works such as "Leaving Home at Eighteen" and "The Lily" as examples, carried out teaching practices ranging from macro-level unit design to micro-level classroom implementation, providing practical models for literary instructional design [18].

Theories of cross-cultural communication and the development of communication systems provide a macro-level framework for the aforementioned teaching practices. Yu Xiaozhi (2023) reviewed the evolution of cross-cultural communication research since the 20th century—from its origins in the West to its localization in China—and emphasized that Chinese academia should move beyond "cultural centrism" to construct an independent theoretical framework [19]. Li Baogui (2024, 2025) further elaborated on the unique role of international Chinese language education in the exchange and mutual learning among civilizations—building bridges of linguistic communication at the instrumental level, bridges of mutual understanding and trust at the value level, and bridges of civilizational exchange at the strategic level—and proposed implementation pathways such as "Chinese + X" curricula, technology-enabled approaches, and collaboration among government, industry, academia, and research institutions [20]. Wang Min and Wang Lingyao (2020), through interviews with 50 international students from eight major cultural regions, revealed "structural biases in the transmission and reception" of China's narrative: while transmitters emphasize economic achievements and current political and national conditions, recipients are drawn to foreign cultures and the genuine emotions of ordinary people; international students in China, as an intermediary group, can influence the effectiveness of this transmission by correcting these biases and strengthening identity [21]. Furthermore, Zheng Yanqun and Wang Yan (2025) constructed a theoretical model of the structure and process of Chinese reading comprehension based on a literature database, summarizing reading knowledge, reading approaches, and ten reading skills and strategies, thereby providing a systematic foundation for reading instruction [22].

Although significant progress has been made in the aforementioned research, notable gaps remain. First, there is a lack of systematic guidelines and overarching design. Currently, there are no official guidelines for teaching contemporary Chinese literature to international students; the selection of textbook passages, teaching content, and assessment methods vary from institution to institution, and standards for teachers' professional competence are also lacking. Second, there is a severe shortage of differentiated teaching strategies. Most existing research treats international students as a homogeneous group, with very few studies designing tiered teaching plans tailored to learners from different cultural backgrounds or with varying levels of Chinese proficiency; the impact of cultural differences on learning outcomes has not been adequately addressed. Third, there is a lack of instructional design that deeply integrates affective and cognitive dimensions. Although theoretical frameworks such as the "Three Pathways of Affect" exist, there is a shortage of replicable classroom implementation models and quantitative assessment tools for affective objectives, and the interactive mechanisms between affect and cognition lack empirical support. Fourth, systematic research on contemporary literature instruction is weak. Compared to modern literature, research on the teaching of contemporary literature since 1978—particularly works by internationally influential authors such as Mo Yan, Yu Hua, and Liu Cixin—as well as emerging genres like online literature and science fiction, is virtually nonexistent. Fifth, scientific tools for evaluating teaching effectiveness are lacking. Existing research largely relies on satisfaction surveys or post-class quizzes, with a shortage of standardized cross-cultural competence scales and long-term tracking studies, making it difficult to assess the ongoing evolution of cultural identity. Sixth, technology-enabled teaching innovation remains in its infancy. Practical applications of technologies

such as VR/AR and generative AI in literature and culture education are extremely rare, and the effectiveness of deep integration between online and offline learning has not been comparatively evaluated. These shortcomings underscore the necessity of this study.

In this study, "contemporary Chinese literature" refers to literary works created after 2000 or those that reflect contemporary Chinese social life. Sources include contemporary fiction and nonfiction, among others, and the content covers social issues relevant to international students, such as education, healthcare, employment, technological development, and family ethics.

3. Constructing the dimension of literary comprehension and interpretation

3.1. Conceptual definition and theoretical basis of literary comprehension and interpretation

The Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model proposed by Michael Byram in 1997 is one of the most influential theories in the fields of international Chinese language education and foreign language teaching. Its core consists of a static description of five dimensions of competence, transcending mere linguistic ability and emphasizing the cognitive, affective, and skill-based elements required in intercultural encounters [23].

This competency model identifies "social knowledge" and "attitudes" as core elements, providing a theoretical foundation for the dimensions of "issue understanding" and "emotional resonance," with "critical awareness" serving as the core competency objective. An updated Delphi study conducted in 2020, integrating the perspectives of 65 scholars in the field of cross-cultural studies, posits that cross-cultural competence is a dynamic, iterative process. It emphasizes that attitudes serve as the prerequisite foundation for competence development; changes in external behavior depend on prior shifts in internal reference frames; and external outcomes can provide feedback that further deepens adjustments at the attitudinal level [24].

In China, according to the "Outline for the HSK (Level 3.0)", the "Grading Standards for Chinese Reading in International Chinese Education (Adults)", and the "Reference Framework for Teaching Chinese Culture and National Conditions in International Chinese Education", the reading proficiency requirements for the advanced stage (Levels 7-9) expect students to move beyond the surface level of language and enter a stage where they can grasp deeper meanings [25]. These requirements can be broken down into the following three dimensions, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Domestic reading proficiency indicators for advanced-level international students

Competency Dimensions	Specific indicators	"Outline of the HSK (Test of Chinese as a Foreign Language) 3.0 (Levels 7–9)"	"Graded Reading Standards for International Chinese Education" (Adults)	"Reference Framework for Teaching Chinese Culture and National Conditions in International Chinese Language Education"

The Process of Reading Comprehension	Theme and Genre	Be able to understand language materials covering a wide range of topics, including social, cultural, philosophical, and scientific subjects, as well as complex genres such as contemporary literature, academic papers, and critical essays.	Be able to read a variety of formal and informal texts; understand more complex narrative structures and argumentative writing.	Be able to perceive and understand various themes and genres that reflect contemporary Chinese social life and the distinctive features of Chinese culture.
	Thinking habits	Possesses language comprehension skills comparable to those of a native Chinese speaker and is able to grasp the unique patterns of thought and expression found in Chinese language materials.	Be able to grasp the unique textual logic and rhetorical thinking of the Chinese language, and identify figurative language such as metaphors, puns, and allusions.	Be able to understand how uniquely Chinese ways of thinking, such as "implicit expression" and "the concept of family and nation," are reflected in the text, and identify cultural patterns. (The framework does not specify a
Reading Behavior	Reading speed	Reading speed should be no less than 200–240 characters per minute.	At the advanced adult level, reading speed is comparable to that of native speakers, and students can read various types of texts fluently.	reading speed target, but requires learners to be able to read cultural texts at the appropriate level independently and fluently.)

Table 1. Continued

Reading Strategies and Assessment	In-depth understanding	Be able to understand and master the conventions of Chinese expression and the Chinese way of thinking in word choice and sentence construction; identify deeper pragmatic functions in the text, such as metaphors and irony.	Be able to understand and master the conventions of Chinese expression and the Chinese way of thinking in word choice and sentence construction; identify deeper pragmatic functions in the text, such as metaphors and irony.	Be able to identify the deeper cultural implications of culturally loaded words and understand the historical context and values they embody.
	Comprehensive Skills	Be able to comprehensively apply analytical, evaluative, and logical reasoning skills to verify the information in a text and assess its ideas and viewpoints.	Be able to apply a variety of reading strategies, such as skimming, close reading, inference, summarization, and evaluation; distinguish between facts and opinions.	Be able to apply cross-cultural comparison strategies to analyze and contrast the content of a text with one's own cultural experiences.
	Meaning Construction	Not only can they grasp the literal meaning, but they can also comprehend the ideas and sociocultural implications of a text, and evaluate and creatively interpret the text's arguments.	Be able to construct a personal understanding of the text and form well-founded responses to it; make the transition from "information extraction" to "meaning construction."	Be able to internalize cultural knowledge and understanding, develop cross-cultural awareness, express and interpret ideas appropriately, and engage in cultural dialogue.

Table 1. Continued

Cultural Interpretation Competency Objectives	Cultural Knowledge and Understanding	Acquire knowledge of contemporary Chinese society and culture relevant to advanced-level topics, and be able to activate relevant cultural schemas while reading to perform basic decoding.	Be able to interpret texts on contemporary Chinese social life and identify the cultural symbols and imagery within them.	Cultural Knowledge Level: Possess a basic understanding of contemporary Chinese social life; Cultural Understanding Level: Be able to comprehend the historical and value-based logic underlying cultural phenomena. Cross-cultural awareness: Recognizing cultural differences and engaging in dialogue with an open and respectful attitude; Cultural attitude: Maintaining a positive and understanding attitude toward Chinese culture.
	Cross-Cultural Awareness and Attitudes	By gaining an understanding of Chinese cultural narratives, one can develop sensitivity to cultural differences and avoid reinforcing cultural stereotypes.	Demonstrate sensitivity to and tolerance of cultural differences; be able to view Chinese cultural phenomena and values from an objective perspective.	

In light of the above theories, internationally, Byram's framework focuses on addressing "which competencies are included," while Deardorff's framework focuses on addressing "how competencies develop." In contrast, domestic standards related to reading proficiency address "what level should be achieved." Both domestic and international reading proficiency indicators reflect a progressive development from the internalization to the externalization of cultural knowledge, namely, cultivating international students' ability to interpret literary texts by penetrating the surface level of language, grasping the spiritual essence of literature, and engaging in cross-cultural dialogue. In light of this, this study conceptualizes literary comprehension and interpretation ability as three dynamically evolving dimensions: the comprehension layer, the processing layer, and the interpretation layer. When reading literary texts, international students first identify cultural symbols, social backgrounds, and historical contexts to activate cultural schemas. Subsequently, they comprehend the implications of social issues within their cultural contexts, grasp the author's narrative intent and stance, conduct comparative analyses with their own cultural frameworks, and actively verify and refine their understanding of the text during the dynamic reading process, thereby

developing the ability to construct personal meaning. Ultimately, they form fair cultural interpretations in cross-cultural settings, transcending simple retelling to achieve creative cultural interpretation.

Literary comprehension and interpretation skills are an essential component of cross-cultural communication competence and a key indicator of international students' reading literacy.

3.2. Factors influencing the dimension of literary comprehension and interpretation

3.2.1. *Transparency of culturally loaded words*

Culture is not a static set of symbols, but rather a process of negotiating meaning. Language and cultural thinking coexist and evolve together. Hu Fanzhu and Hu Yiming (2024) argue that language is not only a "system of symbols" but also a "social institution"—and one of the most important social institutions.

In his article "Culturally Loaded Words and English Language Teaching," Xu Guozhang (1980) first introduced the concept of "culturally loaded words." These are words, phrases, and idioms that signify elements unique to a particular culture, reflecting the distinctive ways of life accumulated by a specific ethnic group over the course of history that set them apart from other ethnic groups. He pointed out that such vocabulary carries specific cultural information and constitutes a key obstacle to cross-cultural understanding. The transparency of culturally loaded words refers to the degree to which their meanings can be understood within a text [26]. Hu Wenzhong (1999) further emphasized in "An Introduction to Intercultural Communication" that understanding culturally loaded words requires the activation of cultural schemas in the target language. In the reading of contemporary literary works, culturally loaded words with high transparency have literal meanings that closely align with their cultural meanings; international students can infer these meanings from the text or understand them through common sense. Conversely, culturally loaded words with low transparency require in-depth knowledge of the cultural background for accurate comprehension. This variable can be used to predict the degree of difficulty international students face during the lexical decoding stage. The lower the transparency, the more cognitive resources learners must invest in lexical decoding, leaving fewer cognitive resources available for the processing and interpretation stages; the opposite is also true.

3.2.2. *Explicitness of literary themes*

The explicitness of literary themes refers to the degree of clarity with which social issues are expressed in contemporary literary texts. Highly explicit themes are presented directly, requiring little or no inference; less explicit themes are embedded in the narrative, symbolism, or character dialogue, and require inference based on cultural background and context. Jauss's theory of reception aesthetics introduces the concept of the "horizon of expectation"—the extent to which a reader understands a text depends on the degree of alignment between their prior experience and the text. When an author directly states a literary theme (high explicitness), the reader's horizon of expectation is easily satisfied; when the explicitness of the theme is low, the reader must draw upon additional cognitive resources to infer its meaning. Iser, on the other hand, introduced the concept of the "implicit reader," emphasizing that the "gaps" and "uncertainties" within a text stimulate the reader's active participation and meaning-making. Drawing on the core insights of Jauss and Iser, the reader, as a cultural mediator, occupies a central position in literary reception; that is, prior to reading, the reader forms preconceptions and expectations based on their own cultural background, aesthetic experiences, and life experiences.

This factor leads students to develop different interpretive pathways and emotional responses when engaging with contemporary literary texts compared to Chinese readers, resulting in variations in their ability to interpret social issues and the author's intentions. This corresponds to the processing stage that international students undergo after grasping culturally loaded words. This variable is also closely related to the learner's

cultural background. If a particular issue is implicitly expressed in the target language culture but has a corresponding explicit expression in the learner's native language culture, this discrepancy in expectations is a major cause of comprehension errors at the processing level.

3.2.3. Clarity of cultural implications

Based on speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and hermeneutics (Gadamer), the identification of discursive intent is key to comprehension. Literary reading comprehension is a process of integrating the reader's horizon with the text's horizon; readers must go beyond the literal meaning to grasp the text's deeper implications, such as the cultural values and spiritual pursuits it conveys. The clarity of cultural implications serves as an indicator of the ease or difficulty of this integration. In texts with high clarity, cultural connotations and discursive intentions can be grasped directly or inferred from simple contextual clues; in texts with low clarity, understanding the cultural connotations requires readers to possess relevant cultural background knowledge and engage in interpretive effort (e.g., the philosophy of "endurance" in "To Live"), while discerning the discursive intentions demands pragmatic inference (e.g., irony). This variable corresponds to the "interpretive layer" in the cognitive process and is used to measure international students' ability to grasp the deeper meaning of a text and the author's intent; it is the core manifestation of literary comprehension and interpretive ability.

3.2.4. Individual learner factors

In addition to textual features, learner-related factors may also influence performance across the three dimensions of literary comprehension and interpretation.

In terms of ethnic background, the group is divided into two categories: Chinese international students and non-Chinese international students. Due to the cultural heritage passed down through their families, Chinese international students often possess a certain reservoir of Chinese cultural schemas and may demonstrate a relative advantage at the comprehension level (recognition of culturally loaded words); however, the complexity of their cultural identity and the tension between their two cultural identities may sometimes lead to unique interpretive approaches to literary themes. Non-Chinese international students, on the other hand, face a greater overall cultural distance, encountering relatively uniform challenges across all three dimensions, but are also more prone to a "novelty-driven" curiosity effect. The systematic differences in these ability dimensions between the two groups serve as an important reference for classroom grouping and differentiated assessment.

Based on relevant theories in cross-cultural psychology (Hofstede, Berry), cultural distance refers to the degree of difference between the culture of an international student's home country and Chinese culture. Learners with high cultural distance (such as international students from Western cultural circles) face greater obstacles to "horizon convergence" at the interpretive level; whereas learners with relatively low cultural distance (such as international students from East and Southeast Asian cultural circles) may have certain advantages in grasping cultural connotations due to their shared Confucian ethical value systems. However, cultural distance and depth of understanding do not exhibit a simple negative correlation. Research indicates that learners with high cultural distance sometimes engage in more proactive inquiry due to a strong sense of unfamiliarity and achieve breakthroughs in "horizon fusion" under teacher guidance; conversely, learners with low cultural distance may misinterpret the distinctiveness of the target language culture due to excessive analogies with their own culture. Therefore, instructional design must be adapted regionally and segmented according to learners' national backgrounds. Zhou Xiaobing (2022) points out that international Chinese language teachers should connect with audiences from different regions, countries, and groups to promote the global, regional, and segmented expression of Chinese stories and perspectives. To further implement the requirement to "strengthen regional and country-specific studies and enhance the effectiveness of international

communication," we must promote tailored, segmented education for different regions and countries. This requires instructors to select and stratify teaching content and methods based on students' nationality, age, and learning abilities, paying particular attention to how cultural distance—whether great or small—can either hinder or facilitate students' comprehension and interpretation.

3.3. The correspondence mechanism between variables and ability dimensions

Based on the above analysis, this study proposes a mechanism whereby literary characteristic variables and learner-specific variables jointly influence the three-dimensional competency framework. There is a primary relationship between the three characteristic variables and the three competency dimensions, which is also moderated by learner-specific variables. The corresponding mechanisms are illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 1:

Table 2. Mapping of variables to the three-dimensional competency framework (1)

Competency Dimension	Discourse Variables	Cognitive Tasks	Learner Variables	Teaching Focus
Comprehension Layer	Transparency of culturally loaded words	Recognition of cultural symbols; activation of cultural schemas	The Influence of Ethnic Chinese and Non-Chinese Backgrounds on Schema Reserves	Vocabulary Explanations; Cultural Background
Processing Layer	Explicitness of literary themes	Topic Inference; Cross-Cultural Comparison	Cultural Distance Influences Expectation Horizons and Inference Pathways	Deep semantic analysis; discussion of cross-cultural issues
Interpretation Layer	Clarity of cultural connotations	Understanding of meaning; recognition of intent; construction of meaning	Dual moderation by ethnic background and cultural distance	Rhetorical Analysis; Critical Expression Training

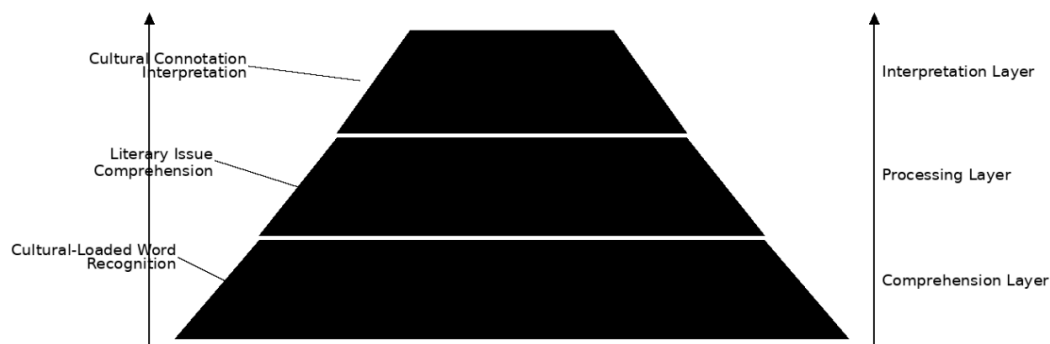


Figure 1. The correspondence mechanism between variables and three-dimensional abilities (2)

4. Implications for teaching based on the dimension of literary comprehension and interpretation

4.1. Establish a tiered selection mechanism

Based on the three-dimensional competency framework and its influencing variables proposed in this study, the selection of contemporary literary texts should balance the dual criteria of "literary value" and "cognitive accessibility." A distinction should be made between Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) literature courses and domestic Chinese literature courses, avoiding the direct replication of native-language teaching models, and emphasizing the pedagogical focus on cultural education and cross-cultural understanding.

The recently released HSK 3.0 Syllabus adheres to the principle of integrating language and culture. It has expanded the vocabulary list to include a large number of terms related to contemporary Chinese national conditions and outstanding traditional culture, and has added cultural-specific proper nouns—such as dynasties, surnames, and traditional festivals—to the special vocabulary list. Furthermore, the number of special vocabulary items increases progressively with each level. The syllabus also includes new terms that have emerged over the past decade, such as "scan the QR code," "like," and "share," while removing words from the 2.0 version that are rarely encountered in contemporary social life, such as "public notice" and "note." These timely revisions ensure the relevance of the vocabulary and reflect the narrative function of cultural symbols in contemporary society. It is evident that vocabulary carrying core cultural connotations is the first step for international students in correctly understanding and processing sentences and texts. During the initial stages of literary exposure and reading, instruction should begin with linguistic form, guiding students to identify cultural keywords, infer the general meaning of the text, and develop a preliminary understanding of literary discourse.

For teaching stages primarily focused on developing comprehension skills, priority should be given to texts featuring high transparency in culturally loaded words and moderate visibility of literary themes—such as colloquial passages closely reflecting contemporary life found in the works of authors like Ma Boyong and Shuang Xue Tao. The cultural symbols in such texts are highly accessible, helping international students establish a cultural foundation at the lexical level and providing entry points for cross-cultural comparison. For teaching stages primarily focused on training at the processing and interpretation levels, texts with lower transparency of culturally loaded words and less explicit cultural connotations can be gradually introduced. Examples include passages from Yu Hua's "The River's Mistake" that focus on deeper themes such as endurance and fate, or passages from Mo Yan's "The Crocodile" that use animal imagery to metaphorically represent desire and corruption. While such texts present a higher interpretive challenge, they serve as crucial materials for training international students to "penetrate the surface of language and grasp the spiritual essence of literature."

In addition, the selection of texts should take full account of learners' ethnic backgrounds and differences in cultural distance: for international students from Europe and the United States, where cultural distance is relatively high, supplementary materials providing background knowledge can be used to reduce cognitive load at the comprehension and processing levels; for international students from East Asia, where cultural distance is relatively low, the emphasis on training at the interpretation level can be appropriately increased to help them overcome cognitive biases.

4.2. "Three-stage" progressive instructional design

When conducting literary instruction in the classroom, the task of the first stage is to activate the comprehension layer, specifically by introducing cultural keywords and supplementing schemas. Before reading, guide students to identify culturally loaded words in the text and, with the aid of vocabulary interpretation cards, short videos on cultural background, or cross-cultural comparison exercises, provide preliminary context for core cultural symbols. The focus of assessment lies in whether students can accurately explain the differences between the literal and cultural meanings of these culturally loaded words.

The task of the second stage is to deepen understanding at the processing level, specifically through the inference of literary themes and cross-cultural discussions. During the close reading phase, teachers guide students to shift from content comprehension to deep semantic analysis, focusing on the connection between narrative strategies and social issues, and conducting small-group cross-cultural comparative discussions (such as comparing Fu Gui's approach to suffering in "To Live" with Santiago's stance of resistance in "The Old Man and the Sea"). The assessment focuses on whether students can summarize the themes and propose culturally grounded comparative perspectives, rather than merely retelling the plot.

The most important task in the third stage is to complete the output at the interpretive level, namely, the construction of meaning and creative expression. In the post-reading phase, based on pre-designed critical interpretation tasks, teachers require students to provide well-founded cross-cultural interpretations of the text's core meaning in written or oral form, drawing on their own cultural perspectives. The assessment focuses on whether students can accurately use key vocabulary and expressions, put forward personal viewpoints with a cross-cultural perspective, and successfully transition from the role of "reader" to that of "interpreter."

4.3. Change the evaluation method

The current HSK exam primarily assesses language proficiency but lacks quantitative metrics for evaluating cultural comprehension and interpretation. Consequently, it cannot scientifically measure the depth of learners' understanding of Chinese culture, making it difficult to systematically verify the effectiveness of cultural exchange and limiting the advancement of international Chinese language education toward the goals of cultural understanding and civilizational dialogue. When evaluating students' ability to interpret and explain literary works, a core criterion is their capacity to accurately and deeply reveal and apply these underlying meanings in oral or written expression, rather than merely retelling the plot. Based on the three-dimensional competency framework developed in this study, we recommend introducing the following three-tiered assessment dimensions into teaching evaluations:

I Comprehension-Level Assessment (Vocabulary Level): Can the student accurately identify and explain culturally loaded words in the text, and explain the differences between their literal and cultural meanings? Can the student correctly apply relevant vocabulary in new contexts?

II Processing-level assessment (thematic level): Can the learner summarize the core social issues presented in the text? Can the learner draw upon their own cultural experiences to conduct preliminary cross-cultural comparisons and identify similarities and differences?

III Interpretation-level assessment (connotative level): Can the learner go beyond plot retelling to accurately express, in linguistic form, their understanding of the text's deeper cultural connotations? Can the learner propose culturally grounded critical perspectives, demonstrating the development of "critical cultural awareness"?

The core shift in this assessment framework lies in the transition from "whether one can understand" to "whether one can interpret," and from the evaluation of single-language proficiency to the integrated

assessment of language proficiency and cultural interpretation skills, thereby providing a reference tool for the establishment of a "cultural competence standards system."

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the construction of a dimensional framework for international students' ability to understand and interpret contemporary Chinese literature. Based on a systematic review of existing research gaps, it proposes and substantiates a three-dimensional competency framework comprising the "comprehension layer, processing layer, and interpretation layer." This framework draws theoretical support from Byram's model of cross-cultural communication competence, reception aesthetics, hermeneutics, and authoritative domestic and international standards such as HSK 3.0. From the perspective of the internal structure of these competencies, it addresses the core question: "What specific dimensions of competence do international students require to truly understand and interpret contemporary Chinese literature?"

Regarding the mechanism of influence, this study further clarifies how literary discourse feature variables (transparency of culture-laden words, explicitness of literary themes, and clarity of cultural connotations) and learner-specific variables (ethnic background and cultural distance) respectively facilitate or hinder the realization of these three dimensions, providing a practical basis for the scientific selection of contemporary literary texts and the design of tiered teaching strategies. In terms of pedagogical implications, this study proposes a "three-stage" instructional activity design and a multi-level assessment framework, aiming to facilitate a systematic shift in literature teaching from "language skills training" to "the cultivation of literary comprehension and interpretation abilities."

This study also has certain limitations. First, the current three-dimensional framework is primarily based on theoretical deduction and literature analysis and requires validation through empirical research, such as interviews on reading processes; Second, the mechanisms underlying the influence of individual learner variables require support from cross-cultural comparative data across different national groups; furthermore, quantitative tools for assessment at the interpretation level need further development and standardization. Future research could build upon this foundation to design specific experimental protocols for collecting cognitive data from international students on texts of varying difficulty levels, thereby validating, revising, and refining the three-dimensional framework. By applying this framework to develop a unified curriculum, create differentiated teaching strategies, expand contemporary literature teaching resources, and design standardized assessment tools, we can ultimately establish a scalable, tiered teaching system for contemporary literature. This will provide a more robust academic foundation for the overarching goals of international Chinese language education: "telling China's stories well" and "promoting mutual learning among civilizations."

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