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Representation of Chinese Citizens in Primary School Social Studies Textbooks under the Leadership of President Xi Jinping

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Abstract: This study explores the representation of Chinese citizenship in the nationally unified primary school textbooks Morality and Rule of Law (Grades 1–6) under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. The study, using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework and Stuart Hall's theory of representation, applies Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine the corpus of twelve volumes of textbooks. The analysis shows that citizenship is represented as a spiraling, cumulative configuration of seven overlapping dimensions, rather than a linear progression from behavioral obedience to democratic autonomy: moral personhood, family and community responsibility, public rules, legal consciousness, structured participation, national identity, and ecological or global responsibility. The curriculum does not promote unstructured autonomy; rather it frames civic engagement as "bounded or structured participation" within legitimate institutional and state-sanctioned channels. The textbooks allow scope for negotiation and critical evaluation of inappropriate behavior, although preferred readings are dominant. This study documents the specific civic subject positions made available by the curriculum, underscoring that these textbook representations do not automatically reflect actual student reception or political effects in classroom practice.

Keywords: Representation of Chinese Citizens, Social Studies Textbooks, Primary School of China, Classroom practice, Curriculum

1. Introduction

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has radically changed its domestic policy around the ideology of the "Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation," an idea that extends beyond the trauma of the "Century of National Humiliation" and positions China as a promising great power with a more assertive global role (Mazuelos, 2022). China has tried to boost its economic and diplomatic influence and has also sought soft power and discursive power to portray the "China model" as a competitor to Western democratic values (Lee, 2016) and to promote the Belt and Road Initiative to accomplish its home and international strategic goals (Zeng, 2019).

But while trying to become a superpower, the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China (CPC) have encountered significant domestic challenges, especially from the younger generation. (Svensson, 2023) claims that the current generation of Chinese young people has grown up in an era of globalization, making them more individualistic and subject to extreme economic pressures, leading to a wave of silent resistance, such as "lying flat," which rejects competition and is contrary to the state's expectation that young people should work for the nation.

Existing research places contemporary ideological and political education within broader discussions on youth values, social changes, and national educational goals. However, this study does not directly examine youth attitudes, classroom acceptance, policy implementation, or political stability. Therefore, this article treats the above discussion only as research background and not as evidence directly derived from textbook discourse. The empirical focus of this study is limited to how the selected primary school textbooks represent citizenship, values, responsibilities, rights, and forms of participation. Recent scholarship also emphasizes that citizenship education in China is distributed

across school, family, and community settings and involves continuing tensions between collective moral expectations and individual self-development (Hämäläinen & Wang, 2024).

In the process of political socialization, "textbooks" serve as the state's primary tools and mechanisms for creating the desired "representation of citizens." (Li, 2018) explains that Chinese textbooks and history museums are used to create a collective memory that reinforces the image of victimhood from past invasions by Japan and Western countries, to stir nationalism and legitimize the Communist Party as the nation's savior. At the same time, textbooks also centralize ethnic diversity. (Yan & Jackson, 2024) find that politics and civics textbooks construct ethnic minorities as patriotic Chinese citizens whilst emphasising the party-state's legitimacy as the harbinger of progress for minority groups. Furthermore, Zhao, Kennedy, and Yang (2024) found that China's "new era" education policies aim to integrate nationalism with the development of an international vision for students through a Marxist framework adapted to the Chinese context (Sinified Marxism).

Despite the numerous studies examining the role of education management and textbooks in China, a significant research gap remains. Most research tends to focus on evaluating the policy of ideological cultivation at the higher education or university level (Svensson, 2023), studying the portrayal of minority groups in middle and high school textbooks (Yan & Jackson, 2024), or analyzing only the construction of international political discourse and historical memory (Mazuelos, 2022; Li, 2018). However, the academic community still lacks in-depth, holistic studies of the construction of the image of Chinese citizens in primary school social studies textbooks, even though primary education is considered a crucial period for socialization. Moreover, it remains unclear which discursive strategies primary school textbooks employ under Xi Jinping's governance to reconcile the apparent tension between cultivating cosmopolitan citizens capable of serving China's great-power ambitions and instilling an intensely nationalist ideology demanding unconditional loyalty to the nation and the Party (Zhao *et al.,* 2024). More recent research on unified moral-education materials has examined the renewed centralization of textbook policy, the organization of children's lived experience in Morality and Law, and the relationship between textbook design and classroom mediation (Gao & Zhang, 2022; Tang, 2022; Ye, 2022). Studies of contemporary Chinese citizenship education have also investigated legal socialization, national identity, and the relationship between official civic discourse and citizen formation (Hsu *et al.,* 2022; Naftali, 2022; Zheng & Cherng, 2020).

Therefore, this study examines how the Xi Jinping-era primary school textbook "Morality and Rule of Law" represents Chinese citizenship. This article does not treat the textbook as evidence of students' actual political attitudes or behavioral outcomes but rather analyzes which discourse resources are used to present civic meanings such as moral character, family and community responsibility, legal awareness, national identity, public participation, ecological responsibility, and global orientation to students. Thus, the study aims to reveal the continuity and tension among these representational dimensions and to clearly distinguish between curriculum representation, reader acceptance, and political effects.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework is used to investigate how language reveals power in discourse. (Fairclough, 1995, p. 59) sets out this idea with a three-part model consisting of text, discursive practice and social practice. The three parts work together to demonstrate how meaning is constructed and how it is linked to broader social structures.

The first part is the textual dimension. It includes surface features of language such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and rhetorical devices. By studying these elements, it is possible to understand how texts are constructed, and how meaning is made through certain language choices.

The second part is the dimension of discursive practice. It examines the production, distribution and reception of texts. It focuses on intertextuality, different kinds of discourse, and the relationship between texts and their social contexts. It also considers who the author of the text is, what his/her goals are, and how the audience may respond to it.

The third dimension is the social practice dimension. This dimension examines how broader social factors such as power, ideology, and culture shape discourse. It is instructive to recognize the importance of language in systems of control, and how it can be used to reinforce or change social structures.

Discourse is an important means of reproducing and transforming social power relations and ideology (Fairclough, 2003). Discourse does not reflect reality as a neutral mirror, but helps construct reality in ways that serve those in power. Critical discourse analysis must therefore reveal the mechanisms by which discourse legitimizes social inequalities.

In addition to the three-dimensional framework, Fairclough (2003) identifies other concepts of critical discourse analysis:

- *Intertextuality:* the way in which one text refers to other texts, and derives meaning from those references.
- *Assumptions:* what a text takes for granted and how those assumptions affect people's conceptual frameworks.
- *Genre:* the communicative form of the text and how this form influences the construction of meaning and the relationship between sender and receiver.
- *Discourse*: the beliefs and practices that a text reflects and which produce understanding about the world.

2.2 Hall's Concept of Representation

Representation, according to (Hall (1997, pp. 15–28)), is a process of making meaning through language. The view is opposed to two traditional views: the reflective or mimetic view, which sees language as simply mirroring a pre-existing reality, and the intentional view, which sees meaning as residing solely in the speaker's personal intention.

The Constructionist Approach: Hall argues for the constructionist approach, which says that meaning is not in the objects themselves but is created by social actors through systems of representation. Meaning is built upon two systems that refer to each other:

The Conceptual System: This system refers to the concepts or conceptual maps held in the mind that classify and organize the world into meaningful categories. Communication is possible because members of the same culture share broadly similar conceptual maps.

The Sign or Language System: This system involves the translation of concepts into signs, such as words, images, or sounds, that can be shared and understood. Codes and the Arbitrary Nature of Signs: Codes, which are social and linguistic conventions, link the conceptual system and the sign system by determining the relationship between concepts and signs. Hall emphasizes that signs are arbitrary; there is no natural or inevitable connection between the signifier, such as the word tree, and the signified, the concept of a tree. Meaning is fixed by the code and is relational, as it depends on differences between signs within a system.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation transformed the understanding of meaning production by asserting that meaning is socially and culturally constructed through dynamic systems of signs and codes. The shift toward a discursive perspective, which links representation with power and knowledge, enables analysis of broader social practices. This approach is applicable to the study of Chinese textbooks as a discursive formation that exercises power in shaping meanings and constructing the identities of new generations of citizens. Textbooks create subject positions in service of the state's regime of truth, illustrating that representation is not merely a form of communication but a process with significant social and political implications. A three-dimensional discourse framework is a necessary theoretical basis. The text dimension reveals the linguistic characteristics present in curriculum standards, which lead to discursive practices that produce and create meaning from the ideologies embedded in the text. Social practice reflects the systematic manifestation of state practices in curriculum arrangements. This conceptual framework supports the research objectives of collecting and analyzing representations of Chinese citizens in primary school social studies textbooks under President Xi Jinping's administration.

2.3 Integrated Conceptual Framework

Hall's representation theory and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis perform different but complementary analytical functions in this study. Hall's constructivist representation is used to analyze how language and visual symbols produce citizenship meaning, providing students with specific subject positions; Fairclough's framework is used to track how these representations are realized through textual selection, organized through genre and intertextual relationships, and connected to broader social practices. The order of analysis includes symbolic resources, represented actors and actions, the positioning of the citizenship subject, patterns of textual and discursive practice, and cautious interpretation of broader social significance. The chain does not assume a causal relationship in which "representation inevitably leads to students' internalization"; instead, it views the textbook as a meaningful field where multiple civic meanings can coexist, mutually reinforce each other, or create tension.

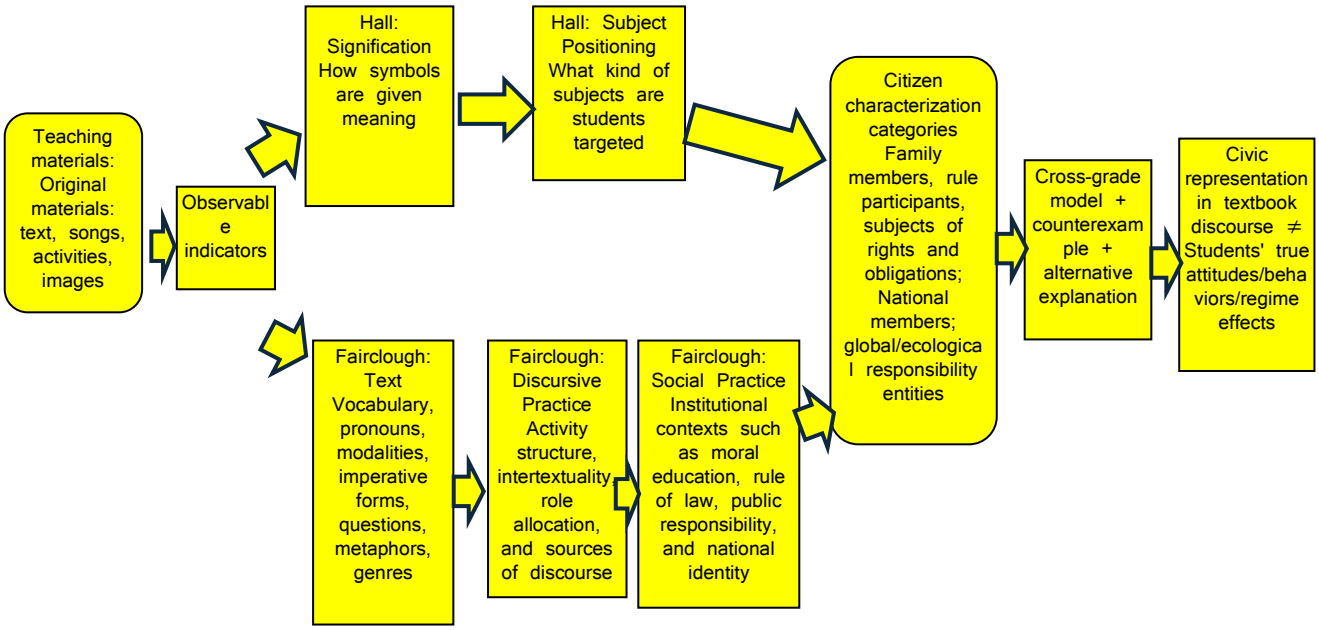


Figure 1. The Fairclough × Hall Conceptual Model and Analytical Framework

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative single-case research design using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) to examine representations of Chinese citizenship in the nationally unified Morality and the Rule of Law (Morality and the Rule of Law) textbooks for Grades 1–6. The textbooks were treated as an integrated curriculum corpus in which written language, visual representations, classroom activities, and pedagogical instructions jointly construct particular understandings of citizenship.

The analytical framework was primarily informed by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), consisting of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. In this study, the framework was extended multimodally so that both linguistic and visual resources were analyzed as meaning-making practices. This multimodal extension is consistent with recent critical multimodal research that treats linguistic and visual resources as interacting ideological meaning-making systems in educational texts (Smith, 2023; Zhang & Smith, 2024).

3.2 Population and Data

The research corpus consisted of twelve volumes of the nationally unified Morality and the Rule of Law textbooks used in Grades 1–6, comprising the first- and second-semester volumes for each grade. The textbooks were developed under the organization of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and published by the People's Education Press.

The Ministry of Education centrally organized the compilation of the nationally unified textbooks for Morality and the Rule of Law, Chinese Language, and History. The new textbooks began to be introduced nationally from the entry grades in 2017 and were subsequently expanded to cover all grades of compulsory education by 2019. Consequently, the corpus was treated as a specific set of nationally authorized textbook editions rather than as an undifferentiated collection of all editions published during the Xi Jinping period.

For methodological transparency, a bibliographic database was created for the twelve analyzed volumes. Each record documented the following information: complete textbook title, grade and semester, publisher, publication or edition date, ISBN, curriculum-standard basis, national implementation status, identifiable revision information, acquisition source, date of acquisition, and total number of pages.

This distinction was important because different printings, revised editions, and later versions cannot automatically be assumed to contain identical material. Accordingly, the conclusions of this study refer specifically to the twelve editions actually coded and analyzed and do not assume complete textual or visual equivalence across all historical or subsequent editions of the textbooks published during the Xi Jinping period.

3.3 Research Instruments and Analytical Database

The primary research instrument is a researcher-developed MCDA coding framework and analytical database based primarily on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model and supplemented by multimodal indicators and Hall's encoding/decoding framework.

The database was designed to maintain a clear distinction between source information, observable evidence, analytical coding, automatically generated descriptive statistics, and interpretative commentary. Four functional types of cells were used.

Analysis input cells contained the primary analytical information entered by the researcher, including original Chinese text, English translation, image characteristics, observable linguistic and visual indicators, initial codes, and interpretative categories.

Calculated-statistics cells contained automatically generated information such as frequencies, distributions, cross-volume comparisons, and category counts. These descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns within the qualitative corpus rather than to convert the study into a quantitative content analysis.

Reference or background cells had bibliographic and source information such as textbook title, grade, semester, page number, publication details, curriculum basis, and original Chinese descriptions.

Analytical memo cells were used to record interpretative reflections, contradictory evidence, translation decisions, emerging patterns, alternative explanations and points that needed further verification.

3.4 Data Collection

The twelve textbook volumes were collected from authorized or verifiable sources, including materials made available through the People's Education Press, official educational platforms, and other traceable publication sources. Curriculum standards and relevant policy documents were obtained from official Ministry of Education sources wherever possible.

The textbooks were then reviewed systematically from beginning to end. Potentially relevant material was identified at the page and activity levels. The researcher retained both verbal and visual material where it contributed to the representation of citizenship.

The unit of analysis was defined as a citizenship-relevant meaning unit occurring at the page or activity level. An eligible unit could consist of a sentence, paragraph, dialogue, question, activity prompt, illustration, or integrated text – image activity representing one or more dimensions of civic identity.

Units were included when they addressed themes such as interpersonal and collective responsibility, rights and obligations, rules and law, national belonging, moral conduct, family responsibility, community participation, environmental responsibility, public institutions, democratic participation, cultural identity, or relationships between China and the wider world. Rather than extracting only passages that appeared to support predetermined citizenship

categories, potentially contradictory and ambiguous examples were also retained. This procedure reduced the risk of constructing the findings solely from confirmatory examples.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

The unit of analysis was defined as a citizenship-relevant meaning unit at the page or activity level. An eligible unit consisted of a sentence, paragraph, activity prompt, image, or integrated text–image activity that represented civic identity, interpersonal or collective responsibility, rights and obligations, rules or law, national belonging, public participation, ecological responsibility, or global relations

Coding proceeded in two stages. First-cycle coding remained descriptive and recorded observable features before assigning higher-level citizenship interpretations. Textual indicators included lexical choice; pronouns and represented social actors; agency and transitivity; modality; imperative, interrogative, and declarative forms; evaluation; metaphor; quotation and intertextuality; genre; and activity structure. Discursive-practice indicators included source and voice, explicit or implicit intertextuality, recontextualization of legal, political, traditional, or pedagogical discourse, genre mixing, and the role allocated to the pupil. Social-practice interpretations were developed only after a pattern was supported by multiple units and were kept analytically distinct from unobserved claims about policy effects, student reception, or political outcomes.

During second-cycle analysis, initial codes were compared within and across volumes and grouped into higher-order representational categories. Negative and contradictory cases were retained rather than discarded and were used to qualify grade-level interpretations. The audit matrix in Appendix X links each analytic claim to the volume and page, original Chinese source, English translation, source mode, observable feature, initial code, Fairclough dimension, Hall subject position, higher-order category, and final citizenship interpretation.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness was addressed through methodological transparency and systematic documentation rather than through unsupported claims of researcher neutrality.

First, an explicit audit trail was maintained throughout the study. Each major analytical claim could be traced back to the relevant textbook volume and page, the original Chinese source, the English translation where applicable, the textual or visual mode, the observable feature, the initial code, the Fairclough dimension, the Hall interpretative position where relevant, the higher-order representational category, and the final citizenship interpretation.

Second, negative and contradictory cases were retained during coding and interpretation. Evidence that did not conform to emerging patterns was examined rather than removed, and such cases were used to refine or qualify grade-level and cross-grade conclusions.

Third, reflexive analytical memos were maintained throughout the coding process. Recorded decisions include translation, modification of code, category boundaries, ambiguous examples, visual interpretation, and the relationship of observable data to higher level interpretation.

Fourth, the analytical database was composed of original Chinese material and English translations. The Chinese source text was the primary basis for interpretations, while the English translations were used for reporting and presentation. Translation decisions that could potentially alter modality, agency, evaluative meaning, or political terminology were documented in analytical memos.

Finally, the database structure maintained a clear distinction between source evidence, descriptive coding, calculated summaries, and interpretative claims. This structure allowed the analytical process to move systematically from observable textbook features to higher-order citizenship representations while preserving the possibility of tracing and reviewing each interpretative decision.

Through these procedures, the study sought to establish a transparent and reproducible analytical process appropriate to qualitative Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis while avoiding claims that extended beyond the evidence available in the textbook corpus.

3.7 Translation and Researcher Positionality

Since the unified textbook is written in Chinese, the analysis is strictly based on the Chinese source text. The analysis proceeded by first identifying and coding material in the original-language context and then translating relevant excerpts into English for reporting and presentation. This sequence was used to reduce the risk that translation choices would prematurely shape the coding or obscure microlinguistic features important to critical discourse analysis, such as modality, agency, evaluative resources, pronouns, and political terms.

The database contains Chinese and English bilingual texts. It keeps the original Chinese for key terms that can not be fully conveyed by a single English word, along with explanations. A reflective memorandum records all translation decisions that may change the implications of responsibility, obligation, agency or ideology. Here translation is conceived as a part of qualitative interpretation, and not as a mechanical and neutral technical transcription.

The researcher's background in Chinese culture, language, and education is an important contextual resource, enabling the researcher to recognize and interpret institutional terms, cultural allusions, idiomatic metaphors, and historical intertextuality in the teaching materials more sensitively, including meanings that may be difficult for readers unfamiliar with the context to identify.

This high degree of local familiarity also involves methodological risks: insiders may regard specific educational norms, political symbols, and institutional arrangements as self-evident, which could weaken the critical scrutiny and deconstruction required by the analysis.

Researchers do not claim absolute insider authority or absolute objective neutrality, but rather transform their positionality into continuous methodological reflection.

The whole chain from "original Chinese corpora, multimodal evidence, descriptive coding, reflection memos, to higher-order representation" exposes the entire process of language proficiency, cultural sensitivity and translation decision-making to the readers, thus ensuring the transparency, verifiability and academic reliability of the research conclusions.

4. Results

The analysis of the twelve Morality and the Rule of Law textbooks identified 96 citizenship-relevant meaning units across Grades 1–6, with 16 coded units for each grade. The findings indicate that citizenship does not follow a single developmental trajectory from obedience to participation. Rather, textual, visual, and pedagogical resources progressively broaden the social spaces, institutional relationships, and forms of responsibility that position pupils as civic subjects.

4.1 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 1

The concept of citizenship is introduced in the first grade, where it is not taught in political or legal terms but rather through the body, the "body."

- *Self-restraint embodied*: Safety, punctuality, and orderly movement are early versions of civic self-restraint. The textbook simplifies the complex rules of public space into actions that children can perform directly through their bodies via traffic safety rhymes in "On the Way to School" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016a, p. 18, G1S_06), such as "Red light stop, green light go, walk on the right."
- *Bodily Discipline of Institutional Space*: The arrangement of classroom space (neatly arranged desks, teachers being in elevated positions, rules on the wall, and national flag above blackboard) in texts such as "Going to School (Happily off to school)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016a, pp. 4-5, G1S_02) not only visually announces the establishment of a new identity, but also tightly binds this institutional membership.
- *Embodied rituals of national belonging*: In "Raising the National Flag (Raising the national flag)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016b, p. 26, G1S_08), national identity is produced through the coordination of sound (the national anthem), space (the towering flagpole), and physical actions

(standing at attention, saluting), making the feeling of national belonging an embodied experience that is visible, audible, and imitable. Meanwhile, the textbook guides students to do value assessment by comparing unsafe behaviors with safe games (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016b, pp. 28-31, G1S_09), which shows that civic rule education for lower grades is not only about unconditional obedience.

Table 1. Grade 1: Embodied Rules and Socialization

Analysis dimension	**Empirical research coding and content performance**
Core theme	Embodied rules, school belonging, interpersonal socialization, safety, early exposure to national symbols.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 6 text dimensions, 6 discourse practices, 4 social practices; 12 preferred/dominant readings, 3 negotiated readings, 1 oppositional stance.
Text and discourse features	• Rules are transformed into short, action-oriented, and easy-to-remember language. • Use repetition and parallelism, such as the traffic safety rhyme in "On the Way to School " (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016a, pp. 18-19, G1S_06). • Discourse practices are not limited to commands but also include allowing students to independently judge whether behaviors are appropriate (e.g., the "10-minute class break " question about climbing dangerous behaviors). (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016a, p. 28-31, G1S_09).
Multimodal and visual resources	• Environmental Visualization: Regulations are written into everyday scenes like crosswalks, traffic lights, and warning signs. • Spatial Order: "Go to school happily (Happily off to school)". rows of desks, blackboard rules, the national flag above, implanting the identity of 'elementary school student' in an organized system. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016b, pp. 4-5, G1S_02). • Embodiment of National Ceremonies: The vertical lines of the flagpole, the common gaze and synchronous body postures in the flag-raising ceremony in "Orders on Campus. (Commands on Campus)" make the sense of national belonging a multimodal embodied practice. (G1S_08, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016b, p. 26).
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	Early civic subjects: Positioned in embodied self-restraint, safe participation in shared spaces, a sense of belonging to the school community, and initial recognition of national symbols.

4.2 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 2

Second graders' civic representation has shifted from "individual school norms" to "shared public space and responsibility."

- **Participation within limits or framework:** In "Classroom Life Has Rules (There Are Rules for Class Life)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, p.23, G2S_03), students are no longer simply the enforcers of rules but the main subjects negotiating and formulating them. This participation, however, takes place in a particular institutional context—the curriculum defines the parameters of the discussion, the acceptable aims, and the rules of engagement. This activity is a "bounded procedural democracy simulation."
- **Understanding the boundaries of micro-authority:** In "I am on duty today (It's my turn to be on duty today.)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, p. 26-28, G2S_04), the textbook illustrates situations in which class monitors abuse their small powers (e.g., wearing monitor badges, using

commanding gestures, and taking confrontational body postures to demand compliance from classmates), resulting in conflicts. The scene is coded as a "counter-position" to help students to keenly discern the demarcation between "performing duties" and "abusing privileges" and thus cultivate an independent critique of inappropriate power.

- **Building ecological citizenship across scales:** Environmental awareness is first mediated by emotions, for example, personifying water resources as crying "little water droplets" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017b, pp. 35-36, G2X_04) and establishing moral empathy. In the later air protection course (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017b, pp. 38–40, G2X_05), the textbook compares the image of wearing masks in smog with the abstract environmental protection clauses in the Constitution, upgrading micro-level personal good habits to law-abiding citizen behaviors with public regulatory attributes and macro-level institutional responsibilities.

Table 2. Grade 2: Shared Spaces and Bounded Consultative Participation

Analysis dimension	Empirical research coding and content performance
Core theme	Shared public space, jointly negotiated rules, a sense of responsibility for public resources, early ecological citizenship.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 7 text dimensions, 5 discourse practices, 4 social practices; 13 dominant readings, 2 negotiated readings, 1 oppositional stance.
Text and discourse features	• Visualization of Negotiation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, p.23, G2S_03) Students sitting together chatting and hand-writing rule cards in an image from "Class Life Has Rules" (There Are Rules for Class Life) more strongly points to the collective process. • Use the language of "discussion," "suggestion," and "reaching consensus" to guide the joint formulation of rules for the class. • To understand the limits of power and authority, exposing the contradiction between responsibility and privilege (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017a, pp.26-28,G2S_04).
Multimodal and visual resources	• Environmental Visualization: Crosswalks, traffic lights, and warning signs turn regulations into everyday recognizable scenes. • Emotionalization of the environment: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017b, pp.35-36, G2X_04) "The Story of a Water Drop (The Story of a Little Water Droplet)"The water drops cry and are injured, against the black waste, hoping to inspire the love of the people. • Institutionalized Juxtaposition: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017b, pp.38-40, G2X_05) "Clean Air Protection War (The battle to defend clean air)" juxtaposes daily experiences such as smog and masks with environmental protection clauses in the Constitution.
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	Citizens of public space: participating in the negotiation of shared rules, bearing emotional and legal responsibilities for the common environment, and beginning to recognize the boundaries of micro-power.

4.3 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 3

The big breakthrough in the third grade is the central role of the Inquirer and the beginning of the explicit talk about the rule of law.

- *Exploring the Campus as a Micro Public Institution*: In "What Departments Does the School Have" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018a, p. 29, G3S_04), students are not simply the listeners in the classroom. Their work has been divided and done together and visits to the site (principal's office, teaching office, Young Pioneers) have been made, and their status has been changed from "residents" to "observers and investigators."
- *Existence with legal rationality and emotionality :* Legal discourse has not ruled out emotional mediation. For example, in (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018a, p. 42, G3S_06), the abstract legal statement "the right to compulsory education" is confronted by a historical black-and-white photo of a girl who wants to go to school. The stark visual contrast gives the cold legal text emotional tension, providing context for learners to understand what "rights being violated" means in historical and real-world terms.
- *The ethical transformation of the public property* : In the textbook "Treat our 'friends' well" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018b, p. 54, G3X_04), public benches are illustrated with blue tears, thus turning the legal norms for the protection of public property into an interpersonal, empathy-generating moral and ethical relationship.
- *In the Communication Freedom course:* the textbook elevates the daily activities of writing and sending letters to the level of "communication privacy and freedom (Freedom and Secrecy of Communication)" protected by the Constitution and the Criminal Law (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018b, p. 89, G3X_08), subtly integrating the concept of the rule of law into daily life.

Table 3. Grade 3: Investigating the Emotional Mediation Between Inquiry Orientation and Legal Awareness

Analysis dimension	**Empirical research coding and content performance**
Core theme	Inquiry, institutional understanding, public facilities, legally articulated rights.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 6 text dimensions, 5 discourse practices, 5 social practices; 13 dominant readings, 3 negotiated readings.
Text and discourse features	• The discourse of inquiry ("investigation," "division of labor," "report") and legal discourse ("rights," "legal provisions") has significantly increased. • Introduce the concept of statutory rights and obligations (such as the Compulsory Education Law and the provisions on freedom and secrecy of communication in the Constitution). • The structure of activities shifts toward information collection and analysis of institutional functions.
Multimodal and visual resources	• Inquiry Scenario: Group investigation of school departments by students (principal's office, academic affairs office, etc.) with notebooks and survey forms (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018a, pp. 26-27, G3S_04). • History juxtaposed with legal provisions History juxtaposed with legal provisions (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018a, p. 42, G3S_06) juxtaposes the compulsory education law with black and white historical photos of girls who could not attend school in the old society. • Property personification: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018b, pp. 50-54, G3X_04): The damaged benches or mailboxes are "public friends (Mutual friend)," shedding blue tears and feeling wronged.
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	Participants with legal awareness and an inquiry-oriented approach: They are able to observe, describe, and investigate school systems in public and institutional life, understand certain legal rights, and engage in simulated inquiry practices.

4.4 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 4

Fourth grade citizenship has a unique feature of "rational judgment". It not only pays attention to daily rules, but also emphasizes evaluative reasoning and social horizontal connections.

- **Critical thinking within a specific domain and with boundaries:** The textbook highly encourages skepticism and evidence checking in "Ubiquitous advertising" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 64, G4S_06). Students are depicted as overseers, complete with magnifying glasses, to ascertain the validity of advertising claims. This quality of criticality is formally established as a necessary quality for citizens, but in the spheres of political and social systems it is limited within compliant and reasonable institutional channels and appears as rational skepticism in specific areas.
- **Rational Conflict Negotiation:** It shows rational citizenship in the resolution of interpersonal conflicts (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, p. 20-21, G4X_02). The textbook juxtaposes the tense angry body with the relaxed dialogic body to communicate that "rationality" is not just a word for students, but also about controlling one's own emotions, listening to what others have to say, and repairing relationships.

Table 4. Grade 4: Critical Rationality and Social Dependency Narratives

Analysis dimension	Empirical research coding and content performance
Core theme	Critical judgment, interpersonal negotiation, social interdependence, interpretation of social change.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 4 text dimensions, 7 discourse practices, 5 social practices; 13 dominant readings, 3 negotiated readings.
Text and discourse features	• Introduce critical discourse to distinguish "truth and falsehood (Real and False)", "advertising claims", and "rational consumption" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 68-69, G4S_06). •When dealing with conflicts, promote interpersonal negotiation phrases such as "apologize", "control emotions (Control one's emotions)" and "put yourself in someone else's shoes" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 20-21, G4X_02). • In "Thank them for their hard work" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 68-69, G4X_06), the dignity of labor and interdependence are highlighted.
Multimodal and visual resources	• Critical metaphor: Students are shown with big magnifying glasses to closely examine newspapers and information on packaging, visualizing critical discernment (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, p. 64, G4S_06) • Embodied negotiation involves a mix of frustrated expressions and accusatory gestures, characterized by a tense body, alongside relaxed postures and dialogue, which together demonstrate how these contrasting elements reflect the control of emotions (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, p. 20, G4X_02). • Social dependency visualization: Hard work of sanitation workers, couriers, and medical workers during snow days and rainy nights, compared with thanks and respect from beneficiaries (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, p. 68-69, G4X_06). • Contrast of progressive narrative colors: the black and white colors and dim spaces of the past in my hometown against the high saturation, bright modern bridges and facilities of today. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, pp. 91-92, G4X_08).
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	Judgment-oriented, socially interdependent public entities: possessing the ability to evaluate information, engage in rational consultation, respect diverse labor, and interpret the complexities of modernization.

- *Decentralizing the dignity of labor:* "The Demeanor of Workers" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 68-69, G4X_06) brings the hard work of sanitation workers, delivery personnel, and other occupations to the limelight for the smooth functioning of social life. Respectful gestures of service personnel in the textbook eliminate the idea of social hierarchy, positing equality and the dignity of labor.
- *The visual framing of the narrative of the progress of modernization: The* difference between the past and the present is realized by multimodal design as shown in "The Development of the Hometown (The Development of My Hometown)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019b, p. 91-92, G4X_08). The past hometown is depicted in low saturation, black and white tones, and a dull, chaotic manner; the modernized hometown is rendered in vibrant, bright, and tidy colors. This visual contrast of colors and spaces strongly and silently conveys to students the narrative of national development that "modernization equals progress."

4.5 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 5

Grade 5's double trajectory: the careful simulation of micro-democratic processes and the grand extension of the time and space dimensions of family and nation.

Table 5. Grade 5: Procedural democracy simulation and the broadening of national and familial scales

Analysis dimension	Empirical research coding and content performance
Core theme	Procedural participation, intensified historical-territorial representation of the nation.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 5 text dimensions, 3 discourse practices, 8 social practices; 14 dominant readings, 2 negotiated readings.
Text and discourse features	• Election procedure discourse: a complete set of procedures including candidate speeches, ballots, secret voting, and public counting (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019c, pp. 30-31, G5S_04) • National Geography and Historical Discourse: Territory, Sovereignty, Maps, Historical Narratives, and Collective Memory. • Intergenerational communication negotiation: Allow expressions of parents' lack of understanding and the restriction of absolute obedience, shifting toward "empathy" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019c, pp. 2-3, G5X_01).
Multimodal and visual resources	• Visual representation of the procedural ritual: highlighting the handwriting of the ballot, putting it in the sealed ballot box and speaking at the podium, emphasizing the sacredness and objectivity of the procedure (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019d, p. 31, G5S_04) • National Territorial Spatialization: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019d, pp. 44-45, G5S_06) uses large-scale maps, the outline of China, majestic mountains, and broad aerial views to construct a three-dimensional image of the "motherland." • Enriching national history: The setting for the founding ceremony at the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2019d, pp. 76-78, G5X_07) was awash with waving red flags and large crowds, with historical documents and declarations, and a great sense of historical community identity being built.
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	A composite subject that combines procedural participation with national historical identity: both a simulator of procedural democratic autonomy in the classroom and a responsible member of the grand national geographical and historical community.

Embodied simulation of procedural participation: The textbook "Class Committee Election Procedures (There is a procedure for electing class committee members)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019c, pp. 29-31, G5S_04) describes a very complete and detailed election process. Through close-ups of ballot boxes, polling stations, campaign speeches, and public vote counting, students are no longer passive recipients of predetermined choices but active participants in procedural regulations. Although this process is limited to the class collective, it physically and mentally rehearses the procedural norms of public politics.

The stretching of geography and history in time and space means that national identity in the earlier lower grades was largely embodied experiences; that is, identity in the earlier lower grades was only embodied experiences like flag-raising. They are introduced to great spaces, including the map of China, the mountains and rivers of each province, and the borders (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019c, pp. 44-45, G5S_06). They are also introduced to important historical timelines, including the founding of New China and various historical documents (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019d, pp. 76-78, G5X_07). Through grand perspective and high-angle visual presentations, the nation is constructed as a historical and geographical entity that goes beyond family, school, and individual.

The negotiation of non-absolute obedience occurs within the family domain. The Family Life class is outlined in the textbook published by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2019d (pp. 2-3, G5X_01). The textbook fearlessly speaks to the autonomy of children. In the first-person dialog box, the girl complains, "Mom and Dad always treat me like a child and don't understand my thoughts." This directly breaks the moral constraints of absolute filial piety and blind obedience to parents in traditional Confucianism. The textbook does not directly suppress such complaints but instead encourages "empathy" and "proactive letter writing" to guide both parties in the conflict toward interpersonal negotiation and mutual understanding.

4.6 Analysis of Multimodal Critical Discourse Based on Morality and Rule of Law Textbooks for Primary School Students of Grade 6

Grade 6 is the zenith of legal education in elementary school, capable of imparting the most abstract and institutionalized national systems and transnational frameworks in a multimodal, concrete way.

The natural metaphor of constitutional hierarchy and the national system: Legal relations are generally dry and profound. The textbook's innovative application of the "big tree metaphor" in "The constitution has the highest legal effect (The Constitution has supreme legal force)" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019e, p. 17, G6S_04). The roots of the tree are firmly planted in the ground, labeled "Constitution"; the branches are lush, labeled "Criminal Law," "Civil Law," and other departmental laws. This multimodal visual design embeds the profound principle of "the Constitution is the fundamental law of the state and the legislative basis for other laws" into students' cognition in an intuitive way.

Realistic national-level interactive simulation Compared to the lower-grade class rules formulation (G2) and school surveys (G3), the sixth-grade "We are the 'representatives' outside the field (We are off-site representatives')" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019e, p. 61, G6S_07) offers students a real political participation miracle: elementary school students submit written suggestions on environmental protection or This illustration places "children" against "responses from the highest legislative body," clearly showing the state's system of taking in and responding to the voices of its citizens, projecting a sense of political efficacy and formal channels of participation to the macro national level.

High-dimensional integration of morality and rule of law Some studies show that higher grades only pay attention to law and ignore morality. But this study proves otherwise. The sixth-grade "Respect others" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, pp. 9-10, G6X_01) redefines interpersonal respect as "dignity and equality" in the wider context of the rule of law. In the illustration, children with disabilities in wheelchairs, delivery workers and regular students are shown standing at the same height, eye to eye. This "de-visual hierarchy" + warm colors design elevates daily ethics to a level of social inclusivity with constitutional dignity.

International Scale, Multidimensional Responsibility. In We love peace (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, pp. 74-75, G6X_07).

Table 6. Grade 6: The Supremacy of the Constitution and Global Reflection on a Transnational Scale

Analysis dimension	Empirical research coding and content performance
Core theme	Constitutional law, state institutions, formal channels of participation, international relations, and peace education.
Encoding distribution	16 coding units: 7 text dimensions, 7 discourse practices, 2 social practices; 13 dominant readings, 3 negotiated readings.
Text and discourse features	• A rigid and high-density legal discourse system (constitutional authority, functions of state institutions) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019e, p. 13, G6S_03). • Formal political participation discourse: legislative proposals, official written responses, and other national-level feedback. • Discourses of transnationalism and multilateralism (United Nations, international law, win-win cooperation) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, pp. 66-73, G6X_06). • Integrating ethics and the rule of law: Reconstructing ethics such as 'everyone deserves respect' within the larger framework of dignity and equality.
Multimodal and visual resources	• Metaphorization of Legal Authority: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019e, p. 17, G6S_04) uses the "Tree of Life Diagram", in which the Constitution is the unshakable "root", and ordinary laws are its derived "branches". • System Feedback Visualization: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, p. 61, G6S_07) juxtaposes the legislative proposal submitted by the students to the National People's Congress and the official red-headed document response obtained with the children while they were reading. • Equal Dignity Visual De-hierarchization: (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019e, pp. 9-10, G6X_01) shows children with disabilities, delivery workers, construction workers, professors and students on a completely equal visual plane, with warm colors. • International Roundtable: Representatives of Different Multinational Backgrounds UN Badge Discussion Questions (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, pp. 68-69, G6X_06) • The dark colors of war ruins and casualty statistics: combining war photos in black and white, casualty statistics, and destroyed scenes to evoke thoughts of peace (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019f, pp.74-75, G6X_07).
Positioning as the Citizen Subject	The citizen subject of constitutional awareness and institutional orientation: a subject that seamlessly integrates micro-level ethical equality, meso-level national rule of law feedback, and macro-level global cooperation and shared human destiny responsibility.

The textbook not only introduces the United Nations emblem and the roundtable negotiations of various national leaders but also combines the devastating ruins of the Black-and-white wars with the This multimodal sequence transforms "peace" from a mere slogan into a profound moral and legal judgment based on reflections on the historical suffering of humanity, ultimately creating a civic subject that embodies both patriotism and a global perspective on humanity's fate.

4.7 Cross-Grade Pattern of Citizenship Representation (Grades 1–6)

Grade 1 - Citizenship: Personal Safety, School Routines, Cooperation, Participation in Early National Ceremonies in Grade 2, these expectations are extended to include common places, negotiated classroom rules and ecological responsibility. In Grade 3, there is inquiry into institutional environments, public facilities and explicit legal rights. Grade 4 foregrounds critical evaluation, interpersonal negotiation, labor dignity, and interpretations of social development. Grade 5 combines procedural classroom participation with a much more prominent territorial and historical national narrative. Grade 6 concentrates on constitutional and institutional knowledge while extending civic responsibility towards dignity, international organizations, and peace.

This development should not, however, be described as a linear transition from "obedient citizen" to "democratic citizen." Three findings contradict such a model.

First, earlier forms of citizenship remain present in later grades. National belonging is visible from Grade 1, while interpersonal morality and everyday responsibility continue through Grade 6. Similarly, legal discourse appears before the final grade, although its density and abstraction increase substantially in Grade 6.

Second, participation becomes progressively more structured and institutionally differentiated rather than simply more autonomous. Pupils discuss classroom rules in Grade 2, investigate school organization in Grade 3, evaluate social and media situations in Grade 4, participate in class-election procedures in Grade 5, and encounter formal channels for public suggestions in Grade 6. Across these cases, participation is consistently situated within specified activities, rules, and legitimate channels. The pattern is therefore better conceptualized as bounded or structured participation.

Third, the MCDA demonstrates that the development of citizenship is also visual. Lower-grade citizenship is heavily communicated through bodily posture, movement, classroom arrangement, traffic spaces, emotional expressions, and collective ritual. Middle-grade materials increasingly incorporate investigation forms, legal boxes, comparison devices, public facilities, and visual tools of judgement. Higher-grade materials make greater use of maps, ballot boxes, historical ceremonies, constitutional diagrams, formal institutional documents, and international symbols. The growing abstraction of citizenship is therefore achieved not only through vocabulary but also through changes in the visual resources used to represent civic life.

Hall coding further complicates a simple obedience model. Preferred readings predominate across all six grades, particularly in representations of safety, institutional norms, national belonging, and legal order. Yet negotiated readings persist throughout the corpus, and the lower grades contain limited oppositional positions in which unsafe conduct or inappropriate uses of authority are displayed as behaviors to be rejected. The textbook therefore combines clear normative orientations with selected spaces for comparison, judgement, negotiation, and restricted critique.

Taken together, the results indicate that citizenship in the twelve analysed textbooks is constructed as a spiralling and cumulative configuration rather than a sequence of mutually exclusive citizen types. Everyday self-regulation, collective responsibility, national belonging, legal consciousness, structured participation, critical judgement and international responsibility are progressively layered across the primary years.

The central developmental movement is thus not from obedience to autonomy but from immediate and embodied civic practice towards increasingly institutionalized, legalized, historical, and transnational forms of civic understanding, while earlier moral and collective dimensions continue to operate within later representations.

Accordingly, the corpus constructs Chinese citizenship through the interaction of several overlapping subject positions: the self-regulating pupil, the responsible member of shared spaces, the inquirer into public institutions, the evaluative and negotiating social participant, the procedurally participating member of a national historical community, and the constitutionally and internationally oriented civic subject. These positions are mainly presented through preferred readings of the curriculum which leave limited but analytically important spaces for negotiation, comparison and rejection of inappropriate behavior.

Importantly, these findings concern the representations and subject positions offered by the textbooks. They do not demonstrate that pupils necessarily accept these preferred meanings, develop the corresponding attitudes,

or reproduce the civic behaviors represented in the curriculum. Establishing such effects would require evidence of classroom practice and student reception beyond the textbook corpus analyzed in this study.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that citizenship representation in the twelve Morality and the Rule of Law textbooks cannot be adequately explained as a single vertical progression from behavioral obedience in the lower grades to political or legal rationality in the upper grades. Such an interpretation would attribute most cross-grade differences to ideological intensification while underestimating the developmental architecture of the curriculum itself. A more appropriate interpretation is that curriculum development and citizenship representation interact: as pupils' expected cognitive capacities, social experiences, and fields of life expand across the primary years, different civic meanings are introduced, revisited, and reformulated at increasing levels of abstraction.

This interpretation is consistent with the official design of the unified Morality and the Rule of Law textbooks. The Ministry of Education describes the primary curriculum as progressing "from near to far," "from simple to more complex," and in a spiral manner. Its twelve volumes expand across six interrelated domains: personal growth, family life, school life, community and public life, national life, and the shared world. The same domain may reappear at different stages with increasing levels of difficulty. The textbooks are also explicitly designed around children's psychological development, cognitive characteristics, life experience, investigation, discussion, sharing, and practical activities.

Recognizing this developmental logic does not mean treating the curriculum as ideologically neutral. The official framework simultaneously specifies value guidance and the progressive organization of children's life worlds. Developmental sequencing is therefore better understood as an organizational mechanism through which normative meanings are made age-appropriate, rather than as an alternative to value or ideological formation. The analytical question is consequently not whether curriculum progression or ideology explains the findings, but how particular meanings of citizenship are selected, scaled, and multimodally represented within a developmentally sequenced curriculum.

This interpretation is also supported by Chinese scholarship on the unified textbooks. (Gao, 2018) argues that the textbooks are organized around learning activities and position pupils as subjects of learning rather than treating them simply as a body of propositions to transmit. (Tao, 2019) similarly describes the middle-primary textbooks as being organized around problem domains arising from children's activities and experiences, while combining explicit value orientation with opportunities for inquiry, dialogue, and expression. Zhang (2019) emphasizes children's real-life problems, social inquiry, emotional experience, rational understanding, and practical action as interconnected dimensions of textbook design. This interpretation is reinforced by more recent studies of the same textbook reform, which describe the compilation process as deliberately organizing, reconstructing, and mimetically representing children's lived experiences rather than relying only on abstract moral exposition (Gao & Zhang, 2022; Tang, 2022).

Against this background, the cross-grade findings are discussed through seven overlapping dimensions of citizenship representation: moral personhood; family and community responsibility; rules and public space; law and rights/responsibilities; participation and voice; national and political identification; and ecological and global orientation. These dimensions are cumulative rather than mutually exclusive. Earlier forms of civic positioning do not disappear when new forms are introduced; instead, they are repeatedly recontextualized within broader social and institutional settings.

5.1 Moral Personhood from Habitual Embodiment to Reflexive Self-Regulation

Lower-grade textbooks build moral character through embodied norms of everyday life. For example, the first-grade textbook "On the Way to School" contains traffic safety rhymes ("Red light stop, green light go, keep to the right") and applies parallelism and repetition in language to help students internalize behavioral norms and achieve self-discipline. This functions as a form of micro-regulation of children's bodies while also providing a foundation for developing a sense of safety, rules, and care for others in public spaces.

Empirical coding shows that the increase of legal system content did not cause the "complete fading away" of moral education with higher grades. Moral character runs through the process from specific daily behavioral habits to empathy, perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and reflective moral judgment. In the sixth-grade textbook "Learning to Respect," sanitation workers, delivery workers, children, and the disabled are all depicted at the same eye level, and warm colors are used to reduce social hierarchy differences. This means that the rule of law does not eliminate morality but reorganizes the ethics of daily life in a broader context of human dignity, equality, and inclusiveness (Tao, 2019).

5.2 Family and Community Responsibility: Responsibility, Care, and Negotiated Relationships

Citizenship emerges first in everyday micro-interpersonal relations such as filial piety in the family, mutual assistance among neighbors, and community service before it enters formal political and national life. Representations of responsibility therefore develop outward from family and community relations toward broader civic obligations, linking traditional Chinese ethics with modern civic duties in education.

The fifth-grade text about intergenerational conflicts upsets the usual moral assumption of unquestioning obedience with the first-person voice of children who grumble, "Parents do not understand their changing interests." This text is a very typical example of a negotiated reading position in Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding perspective. The textbook does not encourage rebellion against authority, but it encourages children to reconcile differences by proactively writing letters and thinking with empathy, emphasizing social harmony while recognizing individual independence (Zhang, 2019).

5.3 Norms and the Public Sphere: Norms of Conduct and Collective Norm-Making

In Grade 2, the discussion of rules moved from individual limitations to the concepts of "everyone", common areas and public property. In "Classroom Life Has Rules," students meet to talk and write rule cards by hand, indicating a movement from "passive recipients" of rules to "rule negotiators" in the pre-existing educational structure.

This evidence does not support describing lower-grade pupils simply as the "consumers" of rules. The textbooks maintain clear normative boundaries but also employ discussion, comparison, games, questions, and collective rule-making. Here, Gao's account of the textbook as a learning-activity-centered resource is relevant: he explicitly argues that the design attempts to move beyond a purely didactic or sermon-like organization and to position pupils as participants in learning activities.

The case of the second-grade "duty student" constitutes the main "oppositional position" of the entire book. The textbook, through dramatic depictions of physical confrontation, exposes the rights and transgressions of the duty monitor's exercise of power, encouraging students to scrutinize, challenge, and refuse inappropriate authority. This key design indicates that the rules constructed in the textbook are not about blind obedience without principles but rather about a sharp discernment between legitimate duties and abuse of power.

5.4 Law and Rights/Responsibilities: Growing Abstraction Without Replacing Everyday Morality

Legal education does not suddenly emerge in Grade 6; rather, it follows a clear path of early groundwork and gradual deepening. In Grade 2, constitutional environmental provisions are introduced through images of smog. In Grade 3, historical photographs of children who have dropped out of school are used to introduce the right to education and the right to privacy in communication. In the middle and upper grades, the curriculum gradually shifts toward criminal law.

This pattern is very similar to the design proposed by Tao (2019), in which the lower-primary rules and civilized behavior are a form of pre-legal education, the legal concepts of middle-primary are distributed in life-related topics, and Grade 6 is a more systematic and direct legal education. The database therefore provides empirical evidence for seeing the development of legal language as at least partially an intended curricular progression in abstraction and conceptual complexity, rather than merely as evidence that political authority becomes increasingly dominant. A closely related finding appears in (Naftali, 2022) analysis of Xi-era citizenship textbooks, which identifies

an expanded emphasis on legal consciousness and law-abiding civic subjectivity while also noting the coexistence of consensual and directive forms of legal socialization.

At the same time, the analysis suggests a particular normative relation between rights and duties. Rights are not absent from the textbooks: pupils encounter rights to education, privacy, and legal protection and are directed to the channels through which opinions or suggestions may be expressed. But rights are rarely expressed as atomized individual claims. They are generally associated with duties, legal processes, public order, respect between persons, or collective responsibility.

The importance of multimodality lies in making this abstract legal discourse accessible. Historical photographs are paired with the right to education, legal provisions are juxtaposed with familiar life situations, metaphors make law into objects such as a protective instrument, and the Grade 6 Constitution diagram depicts constitutional hierarchy through a visually intelligible natural structure. They do more than dress up legal facts. They translate institutional abstraction into forms that are emotionally and visually intelligible.

5.5 Participation and Voice: A Pattern of Limited or Organized Participation

This study corrects the binary assumption that student participation is simply "decentralization" and formally proposes the concept framework of "bounded or structured participation." From formulating class rules in the second grade, investigating school functional departments in the third grade, to standardizing class committee elections in the fifth grade and finally submitting genuine suggestions to national legislative bodies in Grade 6 and receiving written responses, the scope of student participation and the level of institutionalization have significantly increased.

This concept of bounded participation also helps reconcile apparently contradictory findings. Norm-following and voice are not necessarily represented as mutually exclusive. The same curriculum may ask pupils to obey legitimate rules while inviting them to discuss classroom arrangements, question an inappropriate exercise of minor authority, assess conflicting views, vote in class elections, or submit suggestions through institutionally recognized channels.

The fifth-grade class election scene, which includes the presentation of speeches, secret balloting, sealed ballot boxes, and public counting, effectively simulates the fairness of democratic procedures; additionally, the example of sixth-grade students writing to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and receiving a formal reply conveys to children a sense of political engagement. However, this participation has always been placed within a clearly compliant and orderly institutional framework, balancing the voices of the participants with institutional stability. Recent analysis of democracy discourse in Chinese citizenship education likewise shows that democratic terminology and participatory forms need to be interpreted in relation to the institutional and ideological meanings assigned to them in official educational discourse (Chen, 2025).

Chinese curriculum scholarship again provides useful contextualization. Tao emphasizes textbook "blank spaces," questions, discussion, debate, and activities that leave room for pupils to express experience, while Zhang identifies social inquiry and autonomous moral learning as important elements of the textbook design. Thus, participation is not an accidental contradiction within an otherwise purely directive curriculum; it is also part of its stated pedagogical architecture. At the classroom level, however, research indicates that the realization of citizenship education can be shaped by testing, official discourse, and teacher agency, so textbook affordances should not be treated as direct evidence of classroom enactment or student reception (Jiang, 2021). Survey-based work likewise cautions against assuming a simple, uniform relationship between exposure to citizenship education and citizens' orientations (Hsu *et al.*, 2022).

5.6 National and political identification: early presence, historical and institutional expansion later

Unlike general cognitive development theories, national identity is not located in the higher grades but is deeply embedded in children's physical memory and emotional belonging in the first grade, which is achieved through multimodal coordination such as flag-raising ceremonies, looking at the flag, singing the national anthem, and the Young Pioneers salute.

The upper grades further expand national identity into a grand narrative of large-scale territorial boundaries, historical hardships, and the founding of the new China. In the fourth-grade textbook "The Development of My Hometown," the past scenes with low saturation and dull colors are juxtaposed with today's modern bridges, high-speed trains, and bright, highly saturated new images, visually constructing a strong national achievement identity of "modernization equals progress." This national political identity runs parallel to other dimensions of citizenship, forming an inseparable foundation for the citizen subject. This finding is consistent with recent textbook studies showing that national identity is constructed through narratives of historical memory, patriotic belonging, and state-centered representations across Chinese primary-school materials (Lee & Wang, 2023; Zheng & Cherng, 2020). Research on students' affective responses further shows that patriotic education is not merely cognitive but also involves emotion and identification, reinforcing the importance of analyzing visual and affective resources rather than verbal propositions alone (Li, 2024).

5.7 Ecological and Global Orientation: Expanding Responsibility beyond Immediate Communities

Environmental sensitivity begins in the lower grades through nature appreciation, water conservation, clean air, resource saving, and emotionally accessible personification. In such cases, environmental responsibility is primarily constructed through affective identification and everyday action. Middle-grade textbooks extend the curriculum to include pollution, environmental law, low-carbon behavior and social responsibility. By Grade 6, the spatial scale has expanded to include ecological adaptation in different cultures, international organizations, war and peace, and cooperation across national boundaries. A recent critical analysis of environmental representation in Chinese-language primary textbooks similarly demonstrates that environmental responsibility is ideologically framed through both verbal and visual resources, supporting the value of treating ecological citizenship as a multimodal rather than purely thematic category (Lee, 2023).

This progression, therefore, parallels the overall curriculum movement from familiar life worlds to the shared world. However, global orientation does not displace national identification. International organizations are introduced alongside China's participation in international affairs, while peace and cooperation coexist with strong representations of national history and identity.

It is here that Zhao, Kennedy, and Yang's (2024) analysis is helpful in countering the assumption that international orientation and national identification have to be opposites in contemporary Chinese citizenship education. Their analysis of Chinese compulsory civics materials identifies an effort to combine commitment to the nation with a broader international worldview. The present textbook data support a similar interpretation at the primary level: the global dimension is integrated within national citizenship rather than detached from it. (Ho, 2025) analysis of Chinese school music textbooks similarly identifies citizenship themes that move across family, school, national, and global scales, providing a useful cross-curricular comparison for the layered pattern observed here.

The term "global citizen" should consequently be used cautiously. The Grade 6 corpus certainly broadens pupils' imagined civic field beyond China's borders, but it does not construct a post-national identity in which national membership becomes secondary. A more empirically defensible formulation is nationally situated international or global responsibility, expressed through environmental concern, international institutions, cultural coexistence, and peace.

6. Conclusion

This study identifies systematic cross-grade variation in how Chinese citizenship is represented across the twelve analyzed volumes of the nationally unified primary-school Morality and the Rule of Law textbooks. Using multimodal critical discourse analysis, the study shows that citizenship is constructed through the interaction of linguistic choices, visual representations, pedagogical activities, intertextual references, and institutional contexts. Lower-grade materials more frequently embed civic expectations in everyday routines, interpersonal relationships, bodily practices, safety, school belonging, and shared rules. Middle-grade materials broaden these representations to include community responsibility, inquiry, reason-giving, critical judgement, public norms, and increasingly explicit legal concepts. Upper-grade materials provide greater visibility to procedural participation, national history and territory, constitutional knowledge, state institutions, rights and responsibilities, and international cooperation. These

differences are best understood not as a linear ideological progression from obedience to political citizenship, but as a spiralling and layered configuration of civic subject positions embedded within a developmentally organised curriculum. Moral personhood, family and community responsibility, rules and public space, legal consciousness, participation and voice, national and political identification, and ecological and global responsibility accumulate and are repeatedly recontextualized across grade levels rather than simply replacing one another.

The findings further indicate that participation is primarily represented as bounded or structured participation. Pupils are provided with opportunities to discuss rules, investigate social environments, evaluate competing viewpoints, participate in classroom decision-making, and encounter formal channels for civic expression, but these forms of participation remain situated within specified pedagogical and institutional frameworks. At the same time, the predominance of preferred readings, together with negotiated and limited oppositional positions, demonstrates that the textbooks provide strong normative orientations while still making some space available for comparison, judgement, negotiation, and the rejection of inappropriate behavior. The principal contribution of this study is therefore a documented account of the citizenship representations and subject positions made available by the textbooks, rather than evidence of their causal effects on pupils. The analysis cannot establish that students internalize these preferred meanings, develop corresponding political attitudes, or reproduce the behaviors represented in the curriculum. Future research should therefore combine edition-to-edition textbook comparison with classroom observation, teacher interviews, student interviews or focus groups, and other reception-oriented approaches to investigate how these curricular representations are interpreted, mediated, negotiated, accepted, modified, or resisted in actual educational practice.

7. Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Study Limitations

The study is limited to the twelve unified primary-school textbook volumes included in the corpus. Its findings therefore should not be generalized to all editions published during the Xi Jinping period or to revised editions introduced under the 2024 curriculum standards. The study examines the type of citizen subject position (representation) constructed by the textbook texts and multimodal discourse, without looking at whether students actually accept, negotiate, or reject these (reception) in classroom practice. Thus, textbook representations cannot be taken as straightforward indicators of educational effects.

7.2 Limitations of analysis scope

The units of analysis are text-image units relevant to civic education and do not constitute a complete census of all illustrations in the 12 volumes. Thus, typographic microfeatures, cross-page borders, font-size comparisons, and the overall visual rhythm of the books receive limited attention. Pedagogical approaches and the interaction between teachers and students can have a strong impact on the understanding and acceptance of these ideas in practice. These limitations point to the need for field work or ethnographic studies in future research. This kind of work can help us understand how teachers and students make sense of, utilize, or resist these ideas in real classrooms.

7.3 Theoretical framework and methodological constraints

The complicated question revolves around the entanglement of cognitive patterns with ideological guidance. The development of constitutional understanding, national institutions, and abstract vocabulary in middle and upper grades is an example of the dual qualities of children's psychological cognitive patterns of "from near to far, spiraling upwards" and the development of national ideology. Existing methods make it difficult to separate these factors. The Hall encoding model only reflects the interpretive space potentially provided by the text rather than the actual psychological activities of children; the interpretation of multimodal semiotics (such as gaze, composition, and hidden curriculum) highly depends on the researcher's mediation and is limited by the modal adjustments during the English translation of the Chinese source text.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Track the continuity and changes in the seven dimensions of civic representation in a longitudinal manner by comparing the 2017–2019 edition to the 2024 revised edition based on the new curriculum standards. Investigate schools across regions and urban-rural differentials. Investigate how "bounded participation" is practiced in fact through classroom observations, interviews with teachers, drawings by children, and situational interviews. Track longitudinally on the same topic (e.g., "rules/rights") and combine with empirical methods such as eye tracking to explore the real attention distribution and multimodal perception of children. Perform comparative studies on some educational issues with neighboring countries (Japan, Singapore, the United States, Canada, etc.).

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Author contributions Statement

Fan Ji: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Original Draft. Chetthapoom Wannapaisan: Data Curation, Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing. Boonrawd Chotivachira: Formal Analysis, Visualization. Chukiat Chaiboonsri: Conceptualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethics and Responsible Research

Ethical approval this study is concerned with documentary educational texts, not with human participants. Hence, formal ethical approval was waived by the Chiang Mai University Research Ethics Committee (CMUREC No. 67/293). Excerpts and images in the textbook are reprinted solely for scholarly analysis with full attribution and image reproduction permissions obtained as required by each journal. All analytical data and corpus files are securely stored on a password-protected local drive and are only accessible by the research team. Expert consultations involve methodologic feedback and do not involve human-subject data; if primary research data were generated, separate consent protocols would apply.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this research, the authors used Google Gemini solely to improve English language readability and for grammar correction during the revision process. After using this tool, the authors rigorously reviewed and edited all content. All bibliographic data, coding matrices, and analytical interpretations were independently generated and verified by the human researchers. AI was not used to generate research data or substitute scholarly judgment. The authors have full responsibility for the final content and the integrity of this publication.

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Yes

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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