

# Visual Enlightenment and Image Education: A Study of Image Narration and the Reconstruction of National Character in Picture Primers of the Republican Era—Based on the Digital Compilation of Books Collected by Anhui University

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## Abstract

The Republican era marked a pivotal period of societal transition in China, moving from tradition to modernity. As a crucial medium for children's education, the illustrated primers of the time reflected not only the evolution of educational philosophies but also served as a visual manifestation of the reshaping of national identity. This study examines eight illustrated primers from the Republican era, preserved at Anhui University. Employing digital methodologies and image narrative theory, it investigates how images, through symbolic systems and the integration of text and visuals, contributed to the construction of national identity. The research reveals that during this period of societal transformation, these primers utilized advancements in printing technology to translate traditional ethics and modern values into accessible visual symbols, thereby establishing a path of "visual enlightenment" in education. Through the implicit influence of image narratives, these primers instilled cultural values within children's cognitive frameworks, achieving the goal of reshaping national identity. In the contemporary context, the integration of digital technology offers new possibilities for children's enlightenment education, necessitating the use of cross-media narratives and interactive design to enhance educational outcomes.

**Keywords:** Republican-era primers, digitization, national identity reconstruction, visual enlightenment

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of the deepening development of ancient books work in the new era, the "Opinions on Promoting the Work of Ancient Books in the New Era" issued by the Central Committee in 2022 clearly put forward the core proposition of activating the contemporary value of ancient books. This policy orientation provides a new theoretical framework and practical path for the collation and research of ancient books across the country. This paper takes eight kinds of pictorial enlightenment reading materials collected by the China Publishing Exhibition Hall of Anhui University as the research object, and attempts to construct a cross-disciplinary research paradigm to explore the internal relationship between its image narrative and the shaping of national character.

As a pivotal period in China's modern societal transformation, the Republican era witnessed significant shifts in its political system and economic structure, fostering a dynamic interplay of diverse cultural ideas. Elementary reading materials, central to basic education, underwent a transformation from the traditional Three-Character Classic system to modern illustrated textbooks. This shift not only reflected a restructuring of the knowledge system but also carried the cultural mission of shaping national character. Existing research has established an academic framework across three dimensions: visual culture theory focuses on the signifying mechanisms of image narratives, demonstrating the ability of the image-text interaction to transcend textual limitations and

enhance knowledge dissemination; educational history research reveals the deep connection between textbook transformation and the construction of modern national identity, explaining the embodied characteristics of educational transformation from the perspective of bodily discipline; and digital humanities research provides a new paradigm for document processing through digital twin technology of image-text. However, current research still has limitations: in terms of research content, influenced by the research paradigm of Western missionary publications, there is a lack of systematic organization and analysis of indigenous elementary school image resources; the analysis of national character formation tends to be mechanistically attributed, failing to reveal the emotional mobilization mechanisms of image narratives. In terms of research methods, interdisciplinary research has not yet formed an effective dialogue, and digital humanities and traditional textual criticism methods need to be deeply integrated.

This study centers on how illustrated primers achieved national identity reconstruction through visual narratives. It emphasizes the context of image production in Republican-era primers, the analysis of illustrations from a digital humanities perspective, and the mechanisms by which visual narratives shaped national identity. The interplay of these issues may offer new perspectives on the visual enlightenment and national identity reconstruction facilitated by images in Republican-era primers.

## **2. Visual Enlightenment and Knowledge Production: Reconstruction of the Image Production Field in Republican-Era Enlightenment Readers**

Advances in printing technology facilitated the emergence of images as independent information carriers. The societal transformation from the late Qing dynasty to the Republican era spurred the creation of a new visual consumption field. The abolition of the imperial examination system and the promotion of modern education dismantled the traditional private school education system. This, coupled with the urban populace's thirst for knowledge and the rise of print capitalism, created a synergistic effect. The large-scale introduction of Western printing technologies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries fundamentally altered the landscape of knowledge dissemination in China. Shanghai, as the center of the printing industry, pioneered the adoption of letterpress, lithography, and offset printing technologies. Taking the Commercial Press in Shanghai, a key player in modern Chinese publishing, as an example, the introduction of the German Heidelberg high-speed rotary printing press increased printing efficiency from a traditional woodblock printing output of a hundred pages per day to several thousand copies per hour. The new printing technologies enabled low-cost, high-precision image reproduction, allowing illustrations to enter ordinary households on a large scale. This provided the material foundation for the image production of enlightenment readers, which not only transformed these readers from private school textbooks for the elite to mass-produced commodities but also fostered a "visual-first" reading habit, where images were no longer merely subservient to text but became independent information carriers.

The nascent modern educational system facilitated the reconstruction of enlightenment primers. The promulgation of the "Guimao Educational System" in 1904 marked the preliminary establishment of China's modern educational system, with primers incorporated into the design of the national education system. Following the issuance of the "Renxu Educational System" in 1922, the compilation of textbook illustrations placed greater emphasis on practicality and interest, thereby highlighting a child-centered approach. In these primers, images held far greater appeal for children than text, and children's imitative habits enabled the edification of primer illustrations. Consequently, the insertion of illustrations into children's reading materials, presenting enlightenment education through a combination of images and text, became the mainstream approach. Cai Yuanpei's proposition of "aesthetic education replacing religion" further propelled the transformation of primers from tools of moral instruction to vehicles of aesthetic education. Illustration design began to emphasize the integration of scientific and artistic elements: for instance, the flora and fauna illustrations in the "Latest Elementary Primary School Chinese Textbook" adopted a realistic style, imparting knowledge while cultivating observational skills. This reconstruction transformed primers from "ethical edification manuals" into "tools for cultivating comprehensive qualities."

## **3. Analysis of the Illustrative Features of Republican-Era Elementary Reading Materials: The Symbolic Significance of Artifacts, Spatial Settings, and Bodily Postures**

The symbolic significance of artifacts refers to the abstract concepts, cultural values, or collective memories that are conveyed through man-made objects (such as tools, ornaments, and ritual implements), which transcend their material functions. As concrete carriers of symbols, artifacts are not only components of daily life but also reflections of cultural identity and the spiritual world. For instance, the excerpt "Diagram of the Eight Sounds of

Music" from the ancient text "Illustrated and Annotated Historical Revised Three-Character Classic" utilizes lines to depict the eight categories of ancient Chinese musical instruments—metal, stone, earth, leather, silk, wood, gourd, and bamboo—based on the classification of the eight sounds. This integration of visual art not only represents the inheritance of ritual and music culture but also conveys profound symbolic meanings through the forms, materials, and combinations of the artifacts. The eight-sound instruments strictly correspond to social hierarchies in rituals and music. For example, metal instruments are often used in sacrificial ceremonies or court rituals, symbolizing power and sanctity. They represent the symbolic significance of a composite carrier of rational power, natural views, and philosophical thought, presenting a microcosm of the ancient society's "using music to carry the Dao" through the carrier.

The symbolic significance of spatial settings represents a sophisticated method by which humans embody abstract thought. Serving as both a narrative vessel and a generator of meaning, the interpretation of spatial symbolism necessitates an examination of its underlying meanings and cultural transmissions through the interplay of reality and illusion. For instance, in the ancient text "Illustrated and Annotated Historical Revision of the Three-Character Classic," the depiction of "Kong Rong Yielding Pears" places Kong Rong at the center, highlighting the key figure. Elders and siblings are positioned on either side in a symmetrical arrangement, reflecting the hierarchical order of ancient families and subtly conveying the Confucian ethical framework of respecting elders and maintaining order among siblings. The illustration further employs a visual contrast through the depiction of large and small pears, metaphorically representing the test of choices in the face of interests. Kong Rong's act of voluntarily yielding pears symbolizes Confucian virtues, elevating individual morality to the level of cultural heritage.

The symbolic significance of bodily postures refers to the conveyance of profound information beyond superficial actions through human movements, stances, or forms, encompassing emotions, identities, power dynamics, cultural values, or spiritual beliefs. As a core form of non-verbal symbols, bodily postures are both expressions of biological instincts and products of social construction. For example, in "The Enthronement of the Shu Han," the open and elevated posture of the enthroned figure symbolizes confidence, acceptance, dominance, authority, or control. This contrasts with the lower postures of the subordinate officials, which symbolize obedience or humility, reflecting the ancient practice of kneeling in deference between subjects and rulers.

#### **4. From Symbols to Identification: The Mechanism of Constructing National Identity through Image Narratives—A Three-Dimensional Interpretation Based on Symbolic Representation, Emotional Identification, and Value Internalization**

The illustrations in Republican-era primers were not merely aesthetic expressions but also visual instruments of a value system. Through meticulously designed images, traditional ethics and modern values were encoded into perceptible symbols, permeating children's cognitive systems. Image-based education in ancient Chinese education served the function of "cultivating education and assisting human relations." Republican-era illustrated primers, through image simplification and behavioral demonstration, transformed abstract ethical concepts into intuitive visual symbols, reinforcing the practicality of ethical education through "image-history mutual verification." For instance, the Illustrated Thousand Character Classic depicted labor scenes with "farming and weaving illustrations," embodying the laws of life and traditional virtues such as "diligence" in the "autumn harvest and winter storage" scenes, enabling children to understand moral connotations through visual association. This "image-text interpretation" approach aligns with the "dual-coding theory" in cognitive psychology, where images and text complement each other to enhance memory and understanding, thereby strengthening children's emotional identification.

The modern translation of traditional symbols in elementary school illustrations reflects the value integration during the cultural transition period. Two copies of Illustrated Thousand Character Classic from the Republican-era ancient book collection of Anhui University exhibit the same content but differ in their illustrations. For instance, the illustrations in the older edition of Illustrated Thousand Character Classic use the terms "Heaven and Earth, the Universe" to represent the origin of all things, depicting the chaotic state of the universe's beginning, symbolizing the origin of all things and the initial natural laws. However, in the revised edition of Illustrated Thousand Character Classic, the illustrations for "Heaven and Earth, the Universe" are replaced with "Weather" and "Earth," reflecting the further updating and development of the understanding of natural science during the Republican period, and demonstrating the visual harmonization of old and new values. Simultaneously, through comparison, the revised edition's illustration designs pay more attention to the three-dimensionality and spatiality of traditional images in the depiction of lines, making them more detailed and clear,

providing a better visual experience for children's enlightenment, and reflecting the emphasis on children's elementary education.

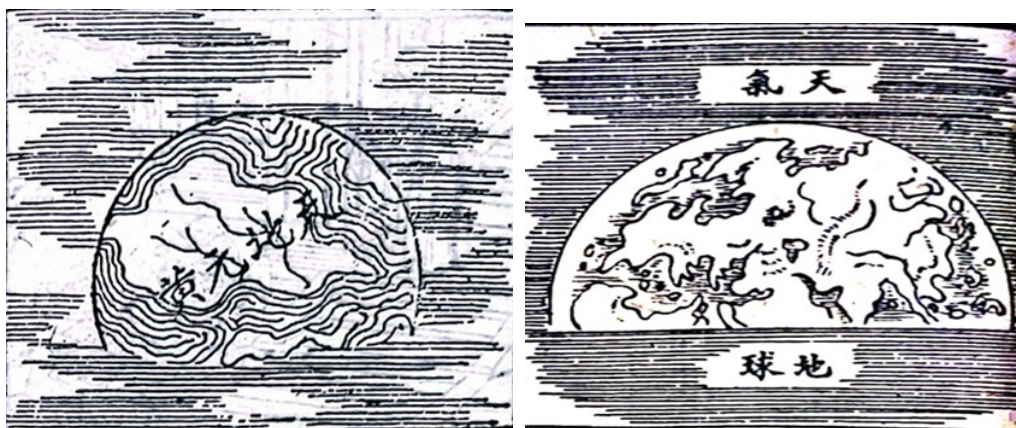


Figure 1. Heaven and Earth, the Universe (The image on the left is from the old edition of the Illustrated Thousand Character Classic, and the image on the right is from the revised edition).

### 5. Contemporary Implications and Digital Dissemination Strategies

The pictorial primers of the Republican era, through their image-based encoding, served to initiate children into the tenets of a new national identity. This process of early education aimed to cultivate a "new citizenry," leveraging the child as the focal point for the construction of national character, the refinement of societal mores, and ultimately, the revitalization of the nation. The image narrative mechanisms employed in these illustrated primers offer profound insights for contemporary educational practices and the dissemination of cultural heritage.

From the perspective of enlightenment education, early childhood education constitutes the bedrock of basic education and serves as a crucial component in the cultivation of national character. It is imperative that we prioritize early childhood education, as it exerts a beneficial influence not only on individual development but also on the overall societal ethos. In terms of image narrative, the core value of images as tools for "visual enlightenment" is increasingly prominent in the digital age. Contemporary education confronts the challenges of information overload and diminished attention spans. Images, however, through their inherent intuitiveness, engaging nature, and symbolic representation, can effectively enhance the efficiency of knowledge dissemination, thereby aligning with the cognitive developmental patterns of children. For instance, the elementary school textbooks of the Republican era, through the method of "image-history corroboration," concretized abstract ethical principles. This strategy can be applied to contemporary moral education, transforming contemporary value systems into visual symbols through digital animation or interactive picture books, thereby strengthening the emotional identification of young people. Furthermore, the path of integrating traditional culture with modern values warrants consideration. The illustrations in the Republican-era elementary school textbooks both preserved the symbolic representations of Confucian ethics (such as ritual instruments and family scenes) and incorporated scientific knowledge (such as realistic depictions of natural phenomena). This "harmonization of the old and the new" model provides a methodological reference for contemporary cultural inheritance. Within the context of globalization, traditional culture necessitates creative transformation through modern media to construct cultural expressions that are both localized and internationalized.

### 6. Conclusion

Supported by digital technologies, the digitization of ancient texts, coupled with the encoding of symbolic systems and the guidance of visual cognition, wove Confucian ethics, scientific concepts, and civic consciousness into the "cultural genes" of children's enlightenment. This process, occurring at the intersection of tradition and modernity, subtly reshaped national identity. This mechanism of reconstruction relied on both the democratization of images brought about by innovations in printing technology and the new educational system's respect for children's subjectivity. This exploration not only deepens the research dimensions of the history of

education and visual culture in the Republican era but also provides historical insights and practical pathways for the construction of cultural identity and the cultivation of national spirit in the era of globalization.

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