

Examining the Influence of Chinese Literary Works on Japanese Students' Comprehension of Chinese Culture: A Case Study of Lu Xun's Contributions

Introduction

Over the historical development of Japanese cultural and educational systems, the integration of Chinese literature into the Japanese education system presents a unique and compelling story(Komatsu, 18). Starting from primary school, Japanese students will take the "Kokugo" course, which is a comprehensive study of the Japanese language and literature. This course usually includes three parts, Kanbun, which is an introduction to classical Chinese literature, modern Japanese literature, and international literature. Then, in the middle school, students started to learn a combination of classic and modern Chinese literature, which reflecting Japan's historical and cultural ties with China and enriching students' understanding of the Chinese culture. Such curriculum provides students a rich knowledge and context of Chinese society and history. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the influence of Chinese writers on Japanese education and their impact on the perception and understanding of Chinese culture among Japanese students, since the education system is one of the basic sources which students rely on to understand foreign culture(OpenStax, n.d.).

In our research project, we want to exam the Chinese literature in Japanese textbook facilitated Japanese student understanding of Chinese culture and society, and how these texts provide Japanese students with not just Japanese language skills but also cultural and historical context understanding. While various kinds of Chinese literary works from different era have been integrated into Japanese textbook, we will select Lu Xun and his work *Hometown* as a sample to further investigate.

Background

Throughout history, the relationship between Japan and China has been complex, which involved a long period of cultural exchange, adaptation, and mutual influence. The introduction of Chinese literature into Japan can be dated back to the 5th century when Chinese scholars and monks brought various kinds of Chinese texts to Japan. As diplomatic relations with ancient China solidified later, many Chinese literary works from various dynasties were continuously brought to Japan by Chinese and Japanese scholars for the educational purpose. Those works predominantly studied by those in higher social status (Clements, 109). This is followed by a prolonged period, over a millennium, where Chinese culture was highly influential in Japan. However, during the Meiji period, as Japan initiated a path towards the modernization and Westernization, the prominence of Chinese literature and philosophy started to fade. Following World War II, when Japanese government reestablished relations with China, modern Chinese culture and literature began to be reintroduced.

In the education part, this relationship followed the similar path. As the Meiji government's 1872 "Gakusei" (Education System Order) established a national education system, in which Kokugo course was introduced and started to incorporate classical Chinese literature into Japanese textbooks. This education system aimed to "cultivate the spirit of respecting classic and traditional culture, showing respect to other nations" (Beauchamp, 92). Over the years, the educational content has undergone several changes. In modern times, Japanese Kokugo textbooks include works by Chinese authors, both classical and contemporary, as more than just tools for teaching Japanese language and grammar. Those works reflect Japan's continued engagement with China's extensive literary history. While ancient Chinese literature still plays an important role in the "Kanbun" part, modern Chinese literature was also introduced. Among the prominent Chinese literary figures, Lu Xun was one of the most influential writers. His works

usually depict the upheaval and change in early 20th-century China. Such depictions provide Japanese students with insights into China's journey towards modernity (Maher, 27). Therefore, learning such Chinese literature will provide Japanese students with an understanding of Chinese culture and a context of Chinese historical and cultural changes. Moreover, according to Yoshimi Takeuchi, the translator for *Hometown*, LuXun's work helped Japanese think about the issues of nationalism and cultural identity crisis brought about by Japan's modernization (Jon, 46). Consequently, Japanese students will be able to gain a brief understanding of modern Chinese culture, way of living, and historical context with LuXun's work.

In "Hometown," Lu Xun recalled his return to his childhood village after many years, and reflected his emotion and nostalgic experiences as he revisits familiar places and reunion with his friends. An important moment in the story is his reunion with Runtu, a childhood friend who has remained in the village. This encounter showcased the changes brought by time, as Runtu, who was once Lu Xun's playmate and had equal social status, now adheres to the social hierarchies, demonstrating respectfulness to Lu Xun and acknowledging their altered social status.

Method

This study will examine the way of Chinese literature, in particular the *Hometown* by Lu Xun, is presented and interpreted in the Japanese educational context. The research will investigate the translation and interpretation in Japanese textbook system. Moreover, the research aims to understand how these works provide for Japanese students with basic comprehension and appreciation of Chinese culture. We believe that the way Japanese students were taught, and their own understanding of the texts may tell us about the Japanese students' perception of Chinese culture and history.

In order to achieve these goals, the research will adopt a multi-disciplinary approach, which includes interview, literary analysis, and cultural studies. In particular, the research integrates primary data from interviews with Japanese students at Grinnell College, who can provide firsthand insights into the experiences of those at the intersection of the cultural and educational exchanges. Through this comprehensive investigation, the research wants to understand the role of literature as a bridge between cultures and as a tool for deeper intercultural understanding.

Interview

In order to investigate the general opinions regarding Chinese literature in Japanese textbook, we conducted a series of interviews collects the perspectives of five Grinnell College students — Iseki Yuina, Uchino Hiroyuki, Shibue Shuta, Katayama Tareku, and Mutsunaga Ryota — on the integration and impact of Chinese writers in the Japanese education system. The interview question is shown in the Appendix I. In the interview, we asked students about their general opinions towards Kokugo course and then our questions focused on their impressions and opinions about LuXun and his work *Hometown*. These students, with diverse educational backgrounds, offer different and important opinions for the research project. While Uchino and Shibue completed their middle school education in Japan and pursued high school in Hawaii and Germany, Yuina, Tareku, and Ryota completed both middle and high school in Japan under the standard Japanese education system. Their responses during the interviews indicated varied perspectives regarding the presence and influence of Chinese literature in the Japanese education system.

Firstly, we noticed that there was the generally high engagement level with Kokugo courses among the students, since four out of five students being interviewed expressing a strong interest in the subject and was able to recall some of Chinese literature they had studied. Additionally, they all indicated a high active level in their Kokugo courses. While asked to rank their active level from 1 to 5, where 1 the most active and 5 is the least, the average score for them was 1.8. Another key observation was the students show a significant preference for modern Chinese literature over classical works, primarily since modern Chinese works were relatability and easy to understand. Moreover, in the interview, Iseki, Uchino, Mutsunaga all stated that their preference for the modern Chinese works partially came from the fact that in the story by modern Chinese author described, the environment was similar to that of modern Japanese society so that they could understand the story without much aid from teachers. Thus, this preference indicates that students have more interests towards literature that mirrors contemporary societal contexts and resonates more closely with their own experiences. Besides, Mutsunaga's comments about classic Chinese literature's distinct syntax and grammar, which differ significantly from daily usage and was very hard to read and understand, reflected this trend. In contrast, modern Chinese literature, presented in modern Japanese version, provides a more accessible and relevant understanding of Chinese culture and society.

However, Katayama expressed a completely different opinion, as he reported lower engagement with Chinese literature. His middle and high school experience involved a curriculum that prioritized grammatical aspects over the rich cultural and historical contexts of the texts, leading to a superficial understanding of Chinese culture. Therefore, he stated that he was unable to experience the cultural and historical context in the Chinese literature he had

learned since most for text, either in Japanese or in Chinese, were taught in a relatively fixed so that students can lose interest to them easily.

Aside from general positive opinion towards the Chinese literature in Japanese textbooks, Iseki and Mutsunaga expressed their unique comments regarding the *Hometown*. Firstly, Iseki's education experience through middle and high school in Japan offered her a comprehensive exposure to the depths of Japanese and Chinese literature. In the interview, she expressed particular interest and curiosity to the Kokugo course and Chinese literature she had learned. Iseki also said that she was particular interested in cultural and literary parts of Japanese culture and Chinese culture. One particular work that she used as example in her interview was Lu Xun's *Hometown*. This modern Chinese work made a significant impression on Yuina, as she found it relatable and, in many ways, similar to Japanese works. The narrative and themes of *Hometown*, combined with the description of Chinese culture and societal changes, provided her with a new perspective regarding the way modern Chinese authors write rural stories. Her observation of its similarity to Japanese works suggests a cultural and literary bridge between the two nations, highlighting shared human experiences and emotions. She said that similar to one of the Japanese works she read, named *Soil* by Nagatsuka Takashi, which both expressed the strong emotional bond to author's hometown and the unbearable pain experienced by farmers. However, Lu Xun's work was the first one by a foreign author and the depict in the *Hometown* by Lu Xun shared the same essence with Japanese author. The memory of hometown provided the resonance between Chinese and Japanese in the turbulent times.

On the other hand, Mutsunaga's engagement with Lu Xun's *Hometown* was from a completely different approach. As a history enthusiast, particularly the modernization of East Asia, Mutsunaga found that *Hometown* can be interpreted through his understanding of historical

changes and their impacts. He recalled his high school history courses, where he learned about the modernization transformations through East Asia during the early 20th century. Mutsunaga said that Lu Xun's portrayal of the differences in lifestyle and social status within China was a very clear sample of the country's modernization process. This depiction in *Hometown* captures the dichotomous scene between the rapidly Westernizing city centers and the more traditional rural areas, which seemed to stay in the old ways of life. He learned that while the large cities in China were embracing a Westernized lifestyle, constructing a new social structure, and walking towards for equality, the rural areas appeared to remain entrenched in their traditional customs and social hierarchies. This contrast was highlighted in *Hometown* and provided Mutsunaga with a vivid picture of a nation in flux, caught between the old and the new, tradition and modernity. Therefore, Mutsunaga emphasized that *Hometown* enriched his historical perspective by offering a more vivid and personal view of China's modernization. The story extended beyond the boundary of a literary work. Instead, it served as a window into the lives of people experiencing the changes in the early 20th century.

Therefore, in the responses from Iseki and Mutsunaga, we noticed that both of them admitted that *Hometown* provided them with extra information regarding Chinese culture and historical context. Their opinions reflect a deepening comprehension and appreciation of the Chinese societal dynamics. However, there is still some divergence between Iseki and Mutsunaga. Iseki, with her keen interest in the cultural and literary part of the text, recognized the emotional similarity between "Hometown" and similar works in Japanese literature. Mutsunaga, on the other hand, analyzed *Hometown* from a historical perspective. Mutsunaga's insights into the contrasting depictions of urban modernization and rural traditionalism in

Hometown exemplify how literature can serve as a powerful tool in understanding historical and social transformations.

To sum up, based on the interview, we notice that the integration of Chinese literature into the Japanese textbooks plays a significant role in shaping students' understanding of Chinese culture. Additionally, there is a clear preference for modern works due to their relevance and accessibility. Students believe that the modern works, particularly LuXun's *Hometown*, provide them with a deeper appreciation of the cultural and historical ties between Japan and China.

Text Analysis

According to the interview results, it was clear according to most of students that Chinese texts in Japanese textbooks play a crucial role in helping students understand Chinese culture and providing them with a historical context of Chinese society. According to interviewees, modern Chinese works were easier to comprehend and more relatable to the students' lives. However, these modern texts often contain culturally loaded terms and unique grammatical structures specific to the Chinese language, leading to potential comprehension challenges for Japanese students. (Hori, 78) To find how modern Chinese works' translation version influence Japanese students' understanding of Chinese culture, it is necessary to conduct a textual analysis of Lu Xun's *Hometown*.

The analysis will concentrate on two aspects. Firstly, we will examine how the translator determine culturally loaded terms and finds corresponding expressions in Japanese. Secondly, how the translator used Keigo (a respectful form of Japanese language) to express the change in social hierarchy between Lu Xun and Runtu.

In *Hometown*, where the story was set in a small town in southern China, the narrative includes a few objects that are unique to the Chinese social environment of the early 20th century. In the text, the translator adopted a domestication approach to make the story and its underlying cultural context more accessible to Japanese students. An important example of that is the middle of the text when Lu Xun met the tofu shop hostess. In the original Chinese text, the hostess was referred as “豆腐西施” (Tofu Xi Shi), which compared her to one of ancient China's renowned beauties. In Takeuchi's Japanese translation, this reference is adapted to “「豆腐屋小町」と呼ばれていたつけ”(Mutsuo, 92), which translated the name of the character to Ono no Komachi, a famous Japanese poet known for her beauty during the Heian period. This translation choice not only preserves the essence of the hostess's beauty but also contextualizes it in a way that is more familiar and meaningful to Japanese students. This translation bridged the cultural gap by substituting a Chinese historical figure with a Japanese character who holds similar cultural significance. Such translation choices are crucial in conveying the original text's cultural and historical context while ensuring comprehension for Japanese students. The analysis of these translations will effectively offer insights into modern Chinese literature in Japanese textbooks and foster a deeper understanding of Chinese social hierarchy changes among Japanese students.

On the other hand, in the *Hometown*, two important interactions between Lu Xun and his childhood friend Runtu effectively illustrate the changes brought about by time and social norms. The first interaction shows their youthful innocence, while the second reflects their relationship after grown up. In the later interaction, Runtu acknowledged a lower social status compared to Lu Xun. In the original Chinese version, Lu Xun employs specific appellatives and verbs to highlight the shift in their social status over time. However, such linguistic expressions present a challenge in translation, as Japanese does not have equivalents for these terms. The translator,

Takeuchi, navigates this challenge by utilizing Keigo in the Japanese translation to convey the similar change in Runtu's attitude and social standing in relation to Lu Xun. Therefore, Keigo, which is a form of the Japanese language that expresses respect or humility to the people in higher social status, becomes a powerful tool in expressing the social dynamics of their relationship. In their childhood interaction, Runtu called Lu Xun as “シユンちゃん”, (Mutsuo, 95) which is a friendly and informal way of calling someone in Japanese, which indicated their equal standing and closeness. Additionally, Runtu's response to Lu Xun's request to go bird hunting, “だめだよ、大雪が降ってからでなきゃ”, (Mutsuo, 89) is phrased in a friendly manner without using any Keigo, reinforcing their friendship and equality. However, the nature of their interaction changes significantly in their adult reunion. During their reunion, Runtu referred to Lu Xun as “だんな様”, a term used to express higher social status and respect. This obvious change from the casual “シユンちゃん” to the formal “だんな様” is a clear indicator to the reader of the altered social dynamics between the two characters. The formality in Runtu's address signal a disappearance of their past familiarity and equality. Furthermore, the subsequent conversation, in which Runtu used the phrase “なんとも、どんでもないことごとございます” (translated as "It is indeed an unbelievable or outrageous matter.") (Mutsuo, 96), as a response to Lu Xun's mother asking Runtu to address Lu Xun as “シユンちゃん” also reinforced the same idea of change in their relationship. To be more specific, this part of the dialogue is translated in a highly respectful and formal tone, indicating the change in their relationship. This phrase reinforced the sense of distance and hierarchy that has developed between them. The use of Keigo in the later interaction between Runtu and Lu Xun serves as a nuanced method to illustrate the societal influence on Runtu's behavior and his perception of his position in relation to Lu

Xun. This approach not only maintains the central idea of the original text but also adapts it to the linguistic and cultural context of the Japanese reader, providing a clear understanding of the transformation in Runtu and Lu Xun's relationship from equality in childhood to hierarchy in adulthood. The context later provided students with more information about the change. As LuXun described, "Numerous children, famine, harsh taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials, gentry, all these hardships made him like a puppet." It will be a clear indicator for students to know about the Chinese rural society in the story. As a pre-modern society, Chinese people in the rural area were under pressure. To be more specific, local governance often imposed taxes and labor demands on rural populations. Additionally, as the modernization progressed, rural populations often faced the pressure of adapting to new industrial methods since they usually were unable to afford such practice, leading to less competitive in markets. Therefore, the usage of Keigo, along with descriptions of the hardships Runtu experienced, offers Japanese students a rich historical narrative, effectively contextualizing the societal changes in China and enhancing their understanding of its cultural and social evolution.

Conclusion

The exploration of Chinese literary works within the Japanese educational system, particularly through the work by Lu Xun, reveals an important impact on Japanese students' comprehension of Chinese culture and historical context. Our research study highlights the profound role that literature plays in fostering an understanding of the cultural and historical knowledge of China for Japanese students.

The case study of Lu Xun's "Hometown" and its translations into Japanese investigate how language and literature can serve as powerful conductor for cultural exchange. The students'

engagement with the text, as evidenced by the interviews, illustrates a deepened appreciation for the appearance of Chinese literature, particularly the journey through modernization and the resulting social changes. Additionally, this study also revealed the importance of literary works in education not just for linguistic proficiency but also for their ability to open windows into other cultures and historical periods. Additionally, the research highlights how translations play a crucial role in this process, serving as bridges that allow students to overcome the difficulties for understanding setting that is unique to another culture and gain a more comprehensive understanding of foreign societies. The careful translation of culturally loaded terms and the portrayal of social changes in *Hometown* have enabled Japanese students to connect with the story for a deeper cultural insight. Therefore, our research suggested that Chinese literary works in Japanese textbooks helped students understanding Chinese culture and provided them with a historical context for understanding Chinese social changes over the history.

Appendix I: Interview Question

Background and General Questions:

1. Have you completed middle school and high school education in Japan? Did your school used traditional Japanese education system?
2. Can you briefly tell me about your experience for your Kokugo courses?
3. Have you ever exposed to Chinese culture and literature in your education? How do you describe the experience?
4. Are there specific authors or works from China that you've studied in school? Can you name a few?
5. Are you familiar with Chinese writer named Lu Xun and his work *Hometown*?

Understanding of Lu Xun and His Works:

6. How was Lu Xun portrayed or described in your textbooks or by your teachers?
7. In your opinion, what kind of impact has Lu Xun's works had on Japanese students' perception of Chinese culture?

Pedagogical Approach and Curriculum:

8. Have you noticed any linguistic or translation challenges when studying Chinese literature?
9. Do you have any idea about the amount of Chinese literature in Japanese textbook? Do you think it is too much, right amount, or too few?

Personal Experiences and Reflections:

10. Do you believe studying Chinese literature has given you a deeper understanding of Chinese culture? Why or why not?
11. Do you think that you can understand the idea expressed from Chinese literature in your textbook, in particular, Lu Xun's work?
12. Compared with ancient Chinese literature, do you think works by modern Chinese authors are easier to understand. Do you have personal preference between those works?

Interpretation Chinese Elements in the Curriculum:

13. How do you interpret and understand the Chinese elements in your textbooks, especially those from modern Chinese authors like Lu Xun?
14. How did your instructor interpret modern Chinese author's work when taught them? Did they interpret them within the historical context? If not, in which way?
15. Are there any other thoughts or experiences related to Chinese literature and culture in your education that you'd like to share?

Reference

Beauchamp, E. R., & Rubinger, R. (1989). *Education in Japan: A Source Book*. Routledge.

Christopher Robins. *Japanese Visions of Lu Xun in the Light of the Magic Lantern Incident*. The Asia-Pacific Journal, Feb 2, 2007

Cummings, William K. *The egalitarian transformation of postwar Japanese education*. Comparative Education Review, vol. 26, no. 1, 1982, pp. 16-35.

Clements, R. (2015). 'Chinese' texts. In *A Cultural History of Translation in Early Modern Japan* (pp. 94-140). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139942201.005

Hori, Makoto. *China in Japanese Textbook 'Kokugo'*. 1st ed., Tokyo Gakubunsha Press, 2021.

Jon Eugene von Kowallis (2023) *Thoughts after translating Takeuchi Yoshimi's Ro Jin 鲁迅 (Lu Xun)*, Asia Pacific Translation and Intercultural Studies, DOI: 10.1080/23306343.2023.2243432

Komatsu, Shigehisa. *Transition in the Japanese curriculum: How is the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools in Japan determined*. International Education Journal, vol. 3, no. 5, 2002, pp. 50-55.

Maher, John C. *The kakyō: Chinese in Japan* Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, vol. 16, nos. 1-2, 1995, pp. 125-138, DOI: 10.1080/01434632.1995.9994596..

Mutsuo Kai. *Chūgakkō Kokugo (中学校 国語)*, 2016, Mitsumura Tosho. ISBN4-89528-240-6

OpenStax College. (n.d.). Chapter 16. Education. In *Introduction to Sociology – 1st Canadian Edition*. Retrieved from <https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontosociology/chapter/chapter16-education/> Accessed 12/02/2024

In addition to resource mentioned above, I give thanks to Grinnell College Chinese and Japanese Department, Professor Seong, Eun Young, Professor Mariko Shigeta Schimmel, and Professor Heesu Oh.