

Reassessing the Value of Humanities-Oriented Foreign Language Textbooks in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Conceptualization, Functions, and Future Directions

Zhongyan Wan

School of Foreign Languages, China Pharmaceutical University, Nanjing 211100, Jiangsu, China

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the value of foreign language education. Since machines are capable of producing translations, texts, and graded exercises on demand, the skills-training function that has long underpinned foreign language learning textbooks in China is also diminishing, which makes a reassessment of the value of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks important. Drawing on research on foreign language textbook development and Chinese curricular practice, this paper examines three questions: how such textbooks should be conceptualized, how their forms have evolved, and what distinctive functions they still retain. It argues, first, that humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks are moving beyond the transmission of linguistic knowledge toward the cultivation of meaning and values; and, second, that in the age of generative AI, their core functions are consolidating around four axes—cultivating deep reading and critical thinking, fostering intercultural understanding and cultural self-awareness, supporting value formation and character education, and nurturing both humanistic sensibility and the critical literacy needed to engage with AI. Looking ahead, three developmental directions are identified: human–AI collaboration, open and co-constructed textbook systems, and interdisciplinary content reconstruction under the New Liberal Arts agenda in China. The paper concludes that AI has not weakened humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks but has instead thrown their irreplaceability into sharper relief, and that how well such textbooks are developed will directly shape the educational substance of foreign language education in the age of generative AI in China.

Keywords: Humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks; Generative AI; Humanistic value; Functions; Future directions

Online publication: June 26, 2026

1. Introduction

Teaching materials are a crucial link between curriculum standards and classroom practice, and their role

and value continue to evolve in response to social demand and technological change ^[1]. Since late 2022, large language models such as ChatGPT have entered education with unusual speed, and their capacities for text generation, language conversion, and immediate feedback have significant implications for how content is produced, how instruction is delivered, and how learning is assessed ^[2]. The impact has been especially direct in foreign language education. As machines become capable of handling translation, composition, and conversation with near-native fluency, the instrumental motivation that has long sustained language learning—the motivation to acquire a language for communicative and professional advantage—weakens appreciably, and the legitimacy of foreign language programs, indeed of the discipline itself, becomes a matter of open debate.

Yet the crisis contains an opening. Precisely as the instrumental value of language education declines, its humanistic value becomes newly visible. The relationship between instrumental and humanistic aims is, of course, not a new question in the field: nearly two decades ago, Hu and Sun ^[3] identified a tendency in Chinese English-major programs to overinvest in skills training at the expense of humanistic education and argued for a return to the discipline's status as a humanities discipline. To raise that argument again in the age of generative AI, however, is no longer simply a matter of internal adjustment within the discipline. It is a question about the very rationale of foreign language education itself: if linguistic skill can be delegated to machines, what can foreign language education still teach, and what ought it to teach?

Part of the answer, this paper contends, lies in foreign language textbooks—and specifically in humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks, a principal channel through which humanistic content enters the foreign language classroom. Their value has not diminished in the age of generative AI; rather, their importance stands out more sharply in contrast to what the technology can and cannot do.

Adopting the four-dimensional framework proposed by Shu ^[1] for foreign language materials generally—conceptualization, form, function, and developmental trend—this paper applies it to humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks as a specific focus, with value reassessment as its central concern. The argument is conceptual rather than empirical: it synthesizes international research on materials development, Chinese curricular and textbook policy since 2020, and the broader body of critical literature on humanistic education in Chinese foreign language programs in order to provide an integrative analytical framework for the writing, use, and study of foreign language textbooks in the age of generative AI.

2. Conceptualizing humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks

A reassessment of value is linked with what is being assessed. Scholarly understandings of teaching materials or textbooks have evolved from a narrow definition to, more recently, an ecological perspective ^[1]. In the narrow sense, teaching materials refer to textbooks developed in accordance with curriculum requirements and officially approved for classroom use ^[4]. In the broad sense, they include any resource that supports language learning ^[5], such as commercially published textbooks, supplementary materials, teacher-developed resources, and learner-generated materials. More recent research has further emphasized the mediating role of teaching materials. From this perspective, materials are not merely containers of knowledge, but educational media that shape meaning and transmit values through specific choices in content selection, representation, and organization. Apple ^[6] made a classical analysis of textbooks: a textbook is never a value-neutral body of knowledge, but knowledge that has been selected, structured, and legitimated.

Within the broader category of foreign language teaching materials, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks present a distinct type. In this paper, they are defined as textbooks used in foreign language education that take humanistic content, such as literature, history, philosophy, culture, and ethics, as their primary vehicle, and that aim to foster both language proficiency and humanistic development. Typical examples include literary reading, literature appreciation anthologies, intercultural communication coursebooks, critical reading and writing materials, regional studies and civilizational history surveys, and texts designed to support the international communication of Chinese culture. Therefore, what distinguishes humanities-oriented textbooks from skills-based textbooks is their underlying organizing principle: skills-based textbooks are generally structured around language points or communicative functions, whereas humanities-oriented textbooks are structured around questions of meaning, including the understanding and evaluation of individuals and societies, history and the present, and the self in relation to others. Skills-based textbooks focus primarily on how to express oneself; humanities-oriented textbooks further engage with why one speaks and what meanings such expression conveys. The distinction leads to important differences in material design, and it is precisely these differences that generative AI brings into sharper relief.

This understanding is closely aligned with national curriculum policy. For example, the *Teaching Guide for Undergraduate Programs in Foreign Languages and Literatures* ^[7] places foreign language programs within the humanities and names humanistic literacy, intercultural competence, and critical thinking as outcomes to be cultivated. *The Declaration on the Construction of the New Liberal Arts* ^[8] gives the same orientation a broader frame by linking liberal arts education with value guidance and cultural confidence. Humanities-oriented textbooks are one of the platforms where these requirements become teachable: they translate policy language into choices about texts, tasks, and classroom discussion. Hence, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks should not be described simply as language-learning aids, but as educational media that carry cultural content and pedagogical intention at the same time.

3. The evolution of form

The form of teaching materials is defined by both their material medium and their mode of presentation, and it evolves in response to changes in technology and educational needs ^[1]. In the case of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks, this development can be understood in terms of three broad stages: the printed anthology, the digital and multimodal resource, and the generative system. Editorial work has remained central during the process, even though its focus has shifted from one stage to another.

For much of their history, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks were presented as printed anthologies. In most cases, they gathered canonical texts together with notes, contextual information, and questions for classroom discussion. Teaching with these books relied heavily on close reading. Their importance did not rest only on the texts themselves. It also lay in the choices made by editors about what should be included. In that sense, selection was already part of humanities education. Print, however, came with clear limits: space was restricted, updating was slow, and culture was shown mostly through written text. This made it difficult to represent cultural experience in its layered and multimodal forms. In this period, textbook editing was largely a matter of making choices under conditions of scarcity.

Digital technology altered this landscape. Humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks became increasingly multimodal and layered. Audio, video, corpora, and digital humanities resources made it possible

to teach literature and culture beyond the confines of the printed page. Online courses and digital platforms also connected canonical texts with extended readings, historical documents, and teacher commentary, turning textbooks into more interconnected resource networks. Selection remained important, but it was no longer sufficient on its own. Editorial work increasingly involved deciding how disparate resources should be linked, sequenced, and made pedagogically meaningful.

The rise of generative AI marks a further shift. Large language models can now produce summaries, background information, parallel translations, and practice tasks almost instantly, while also adjusting textual difficulty to learners' needs ^[9]. At first glance, this might seem to reduce the need for textbooks: if content can be generated endlessly and on demand, the value of a pre-compiled book may appear less self-evident. But that conclusion is misleading. However fluent generated content may appear, it does not become teaching material simply by being produced. Textbooks are distinguished not by the quantity of content they contain, but by the judgment that informs their selection, arrangement, and classroom use. In humanities-oriented textbooks, this judgment matters especially because questions of factual reliability, cultural representation, and value orientation are always involved. As existing research has shown, large language models may generate factual errors, cultural bias, and unstable normative positions ^[2]. For that reason, the role of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks is not diminished by generative AI; if anything, it becomes more important.

Under these conditions, the central editorial task is less a matter of compilation than of evaluation and curation. Faced with a large volume of outputs that may all seem plausible at first sight, editors and teachers must decide which are accurate, which are pedagogically appropriate, and which can be responsibly used in the classroom. This is not a simpler task than before. In some respects, it is more demanding, because plausible error is harder to detect than obvious absence. The formal evolution of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks has therefore not rendered them obsolete. What has changed is the basis of their value. Their importance now lies less in supplying content than in shaping, organizing, and legitimizing it within an educational framework of meaning. Any reassessment of their value needs to begin from this shift.

4. Reassessing core functions in the age of AI

Drawing on international research and Chinese practice, this paper proposes that the core functions of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks in the age of AI be reassessed along four axes. The four are not a list of parallel virtues but a widening series: from the formation of individual judgment, through the learner's relation to cultural others, to the normative commitments a society transmits, and finally to the conception of personhood that underwrites all three—together with the new literacy that an intelligent age requires.

4.1. Cultivating deep reading and critical thinking

AI tools can now provide fluent, immediate, and seemingly complete answers in language classrooms, and this poses a major educational risk in the age of AI. Students may obtain answers with ease while losing the process by which understanding is formed. Yet it is precisely this process that lies at the heart of humanistic education. It is through sustained engagement with difficult texts that learners learn to suspend judgment, test evidence, compare possible interpretations, live with ambiguity, and eventually form arguments of their own. This process of questioning, verifying, and reconstructing is the foundation of critical thinking and of

research capacity alike.

This concern is not new in Chinese foreign language education. Huang ^[10] criticized an “absence of critical thinking” among English majors and returned a decade later to argue that curricular reform had become urgent ^[11]; Sun ^[12] also proposed placing the cultivation of critical thinking at the center of that reform. In an intelligent age, when fluent text is available at negligible cost, the key competence is no longer the production of text as such, but the capacity to judge its validity, examine its assumptions, and assess the soundness of its reasoning. Because humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks are structured around the close reading, comparison, and interpretation of demanding texts, they continue to offer one of the most effective curricular settings for cultivating that capacity.

4.2. Fostering intercultural understanding and cultural self-awareness

One of the broader aims of foreign language education is the cultivation of intercultural competence. Byram ^[13] argued that language teaching must move beyond the transmission of skills to foster critical cultural awareness and the capacity for evaluative judgment, while Kramsch ^[14] highlighted the inseparable relationship between language and culture. Teaching materials are a principal channel through which culture is presented: whose culture is included, and how it is represented, shapes the cultural understanding that learners develop. Empirical studies in China suggest that cultural content in foreign language materials has remained structurally imbalanced in both proportion and mode of presentation, with Chinese culture at one stage appearing largely through implicit forms such as translation exercises and gap-filling tasks ^[15]. Analytical frameworks have since been developed to support improvement in this area ^[16].

Generative AI complicates this problem. Its training corpora are widely reported to be heavily weighted toward English-language internet texts, and the cultural formulations generated by these models therefore carry a corresponding risk of Anglocentric bias and stereotyping. Without carefully selected humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks as a point of comparison, learners may mistake algorithmic bias for cultural truth. Under these conditions, the functions of cultural selection and plural representation take on renewed practical importance: they help counter the biases of generated content. What distinguishes such textbooks here is less the position they explicitly advance than the comparative structure they provide—parallel accounts of the same event, source- and target-language representations of the same institution, and tasks that require learners to explain which account is better supported by evidence, and why.

4.3. Bearing responsibility for value formation and character education

Teaching materials serve national purposes and embody educational orientations, and they play a decisive role in moral cultivation and character formation ^[4]. As Apple ^[6] showed, the selection of knowledge in a textbook is already a selection of values. Because foreign language textbooks, by their very nature, bring learners into contact with other cultures, their influence on identity formation and the transmission of shared values is especially significant. *The Declaration on the Construction of the New Liberal Arts* ^[8] identifies value guidance as one of the fundamental principles of liberal arts education, while the compilation and use of the Understanding Contemporary China series marks a deliberate turn toward materials intended to cultivate national discourse capacity. Research has also confirmed the series’ contribution to the education of highly qualified foreign language professionals ^[17].

Artificial intelligence holds no value position and bears no educational responsibility. It can speak fluently about any value while being accountable for none: its normative orientation is a by-product of

training data and alignment objectives rather than the result of an educational decision, and it does not bear the consequences of what it asserts. Responsibility in the educationally meaningful sense is not a capability that can simply be added to a model. In an information environment marked by proliferating and competing values, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks—vetted by the state and tested within the scholarly community—serve as a stable point of reference that no generative system can provide.

4.4. Nurturing humanistic sensibility and critical AI literacy

Humanities education has long been valued for its role in the cultivation of the whole person. Nussbaum^[18] warns that an education driven solely by measurable economic return, and therefore at the expense of the humanities, will erode learners' critical capacity, imagination, and empathy, on which democratic life depends. Small^[19], in surveying the arguments for humanistic scholarship, locates its significance in a sustained inquiry into what it means to be human. Through literary and cultural works, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks bring students into contact with the experiences of others, extending the inner life through aesthetic encounter and ethical reflection—an education for which no amount of skills training can substitute.

The age of AI also calls for the cultivation of critical AI literacy, understood as the ability to question the truthfulness of AI-generated text, identify its biases, and assess its ethical consequences^[2,20]. This is related to, but not identical with, the critical reading described in 4.1. In that context, skepticism is directed toward a text and its author—the intentions at work, the gaps in the argument, and the evidence left unspoken. Here, by contrast, skepticism is directed toward a mechanism of production—the provenance of training data, the objectives of alignment, and the characteristic way in which generated prose simulates confidence without adequate grounds. The former is a necessary condition for the latter rather than a substitute for it: one cannot evaluate a machine's output without first knowing how to test a claim against evidence. It is striking that a form of literacy so clearly oriented toward the future should rest on some of the oldest practices of humanistic study—close reading, doubt, and judgment. In this sense, humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks connect inherited traditions with what lies ahead.

5. Future directions

Shu^[1] identified intelligentization, ecologization, and interdisciplinarity as trends for foreign language learning materials as a whole. Taking that assessment as a point of departure, and attending to what is specific to the humanistic character of the textbooks at issue, this paper proposes three directions.

5.1. Human–AI collaboration: Intelligent assistance on humanistic terms

AI is likely to be deeply involved in both the production and the use of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks. It can generate background notes and lexical support for difficult classical texts, adjust the density of assistance to students' reading levels, and draft teaching guides or discussion questions. Such tools can reduce the burden of routine preparation and allow teachers to focus more fully on the higher-order work of interpretation and guidance.

This division of labor, however, must remain one in which AI assists, and human judgment leads. AI can provide scaffolding, but it cannot replace the direct engagement of teacher and student with a text. It can help shape the process of reading, but it cannot determine interpretive conclusions in advance. This distinction

matters because the consequences of error are not the same. A weak annotation can be corrected quickly, but a poorly chosen text or an interpretation closed off too early can shape students' understanding in more lasting ways. The proper orientation for the intelligent development of humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks, therefore, is one in which technology remains a tool and the humanities remain the foundation.

5.2. Open co-construction: From expert authorship to textbook ecologies

The Ministry of Education's *Implementation Plan for the Construction of National Planned Undergraduate Textbooks* during the 14th Five-Year Plan Period ^[21] explicitly calls for textbooks of new types. Future humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks will increasingly be developed within open, collaboratively constructed textbook ecologies. The model led by publishers and specialist authors will incorporate feedback from frontline teachers and learners. Digital platforms will support dynamic updating, keeping textbooks in step with a changing cultural reality. Reading practices inside and outside the classroom, together with social resources and scholarly advances, will be drawn into a single resource ecology.

Such openness is especially appropriate to the humanities, because it reflects the interpretive and evolving character of humanistic inquiry. It does, however, depend on one condition: an open ecology is worth building only if its procedures for review remain at least as rigorous as those of the model it replaces. As argued in Section 3, the responsibility for evaluation becomes heavier, not lighter, when the range of available content expands.

5.3. Interdisciplinary reconstruction under the new liberal arts

The integrative agenda set out in the *Declaration on the Construction of the New Liberal Arts* ^[8], which calls for breaking down disciplinary boundaries and for the “deep integration of the liberal arts with science, engineering, agriculture, and medicine,” requires foreign language textbooks in China to become more humanities-oriented and to move beyond the conventional separation of language, literature, and culture toward a more substantive integration of foreign language education, humanistic inquiry, and disciplinary knowledge. As fields such as regional studies, global governance, ethics of science and technology, and medical humanities become more prominent in foreign language textbooks, they respond both to the national demand for broadly trained professionals and to the need for humanistic education to remain relevant through engagement with real-world problems. The Teaching Guide ^[7], with its emphasis on interdisciplinary knowledge and integrated competence, provides a curricular basis for this shift. Properly understood, interdisciplinarity does not weaken the humanistic; rather, it marks one way in which the humanistic can be renewed in an intelligent age in China.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored how humanities-oriented foreign language textbooks can be understood in the age of artificial intelligence, including their conceptual basis, changing forms, educational functions, and possible future directions. Its central claim is that, although AI reduces the textbook's traditional importance in language training, it also makes the distinctive value of humanities-oriented materials more visible. If routine aspects of language use are increasingly handled by machines, foreign language education needs to place greater emphasis on its humanistic aims: the making of meaning, the interpretation of culture, the

exercise of judgment, and the cultivation of the inner life. In this sense, humanities-oriented textbooks are no longer peripheral, but become a central medium through which foreign language education can sustain its humanistic commitments. At the same time, this shift should not be understood as a simple return to older textbook models. What is needed instead is a form of development that combines technological innovation with humanistic depth ^[1]. AI can help make textbooks more responsive and efficient, but its use also requires caution, especially in relation to algorithmic bias and generative hallucinations. Future textbook development is also likely to become more open and collaborative, though this should not come at the expense of the quality safeguards traditionally provided by expert authorship and formal review.

Funding

This work was supported by the Foreign Language Program of the 2024 Jiangsu Province Applied Social-Science Excellence Project (Grant No.: 24SWC-04).

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Shu D, 2026, The conceptualization, forms, functional evolution, and future trends of foreign language teaching materials. *Modern Foreign Languages*. Advance online publication. DOI:10.20071/j.cnki.xdwy.20260701.013.
- [2] Kasneci E, Seßler K, Küchemann S, et al., 2023, ChatGPT for good? On opportunities and challenges of large language models for education. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 103: 102274. DOI:10.1016/j.lindif.2023.102274.
- [3] Hu W, Sun Y, 2006, Highlighting disciplinary characteristics and strengthening humanistic education: On the current reform of English major programmes. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 38(5): 243–247.
- [4] Shi O, 2019, Introduction to textbooks. Guangdong Education Publishing House.
- [5] Tomlinson B, (Ed.), 2011, *Materials development in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- [6] Apple MW, 1979, *Ideology and curriculum*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- [7] National Advisory Committee on Teaching Foreign Languages and Literatures in Higher Education, 2020, *Teaching guide for undergraduate programmes in foreign languages and literatures* (Vol. 1, English programmes). Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [8] Ministry of Education Working Group on the New Liberal Arts, 2020, Declaration on the construction of the New Liberal Arts. China Social Sciences Net, 2020-11-03. visited on June 4, 2026, https://www.cssn.cn/ztzl/yingxiangshixue/zhengcewenjian/202302/t20230216_5588800.shtml
- [9] Kohnke L, Moorhouse BL, Zou D, 2023, ChatGPT for language teaching and learning. *RELC Journal*, 54(2): 537–550. DOI:10.1177/00336882231162868.
- [10] Huang Y, 1998, The absence of critical thinking. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (7): 1 + 19.
- [11] Huang Y, 2010, The curriculum of English majors must be thoroughly reformed: Revisiting “the absence of critical thinking.” *Foreign Language World*, (1): 11–16.
- [12] Sun Y, 2011, Foregrounding the cultivation of critical thinking: Deepening the reform of English major

- programmes. *Foreign Languages in China*, 8(3): 49–58.
- [13] Byram M, 1997, Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence. *Multilingual Matters*.
- [14] Kramsch C, 1998, *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.
- [15] Zhang H, Yu R, 2020, Representation of Chinese culture in college English textbooks. *Foreign Language Education in China*, 3(3): 42–48 + 91.
- [16] Zhang H, Li X, 2022, Developing an analytical framework for cultural representation in English language textbooks. *Foreign Languages in China*, 19(2): 78–84.
- [17] Sun J, Shi Y, 2023, The use of the Understanding Contemporary China series and the cultivation of highly qualified foreign language professionals. *Foreign Language Education in China*, 6(3): 23–28.
- [18] Nussbaum MC, 2010, *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
- [19] Small H, 2013, *The value of the humanities*. Oxford University Press.
- [20] Kern R, 2024, Twenty-first century technologies and language education: Charting a path forward. *The Modern Language Journal*, 108(2): 515–533. DOI:10.1111/modl.12924.
- [21] Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2023, Implementation plan for the construction of national planned undergraduate textbooks during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. visited on June 4, 2026, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A08/s7056/202312/t20231207_1093515.html

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.