

Changes in the Junior Secondary Political Curriculum and Textbook Policy in China from 1978 to 2012

Yanli Ji and Bee Piang Tan *

Faculty of Human Sciences, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjong Malim 359000, Malaysia

Abstract: This article examines changes in mainland China's junior secondary political curriculum and textbook policy between 1978 and 2012 through a qualitative analysis of selected policy documents, institutional histories, and academic literature. It compares educational purposes, curriculum organization, textbook governance, and prescribed approaches to learning. Four policy periods organize the discussion: reconstruction from 1978 to 1984, curricular adjustment from 1985 to 1991, compulsory education curriculum consolidation from 1992 to 1998, and quality-oriented reform from 1999 to 2012. The analysis identifies continuing political and moral purposes alongside changes in how curriculum authorities connected these purposes to adolescent development and social life. It also qualifies two assumptions about this history: attention to learners was already explicit in 1985, and a national curriculum framework in the 1990s coexisted with the development of multiple approved textbook series. Later reforms therefore represented a reconfiguration of established concerns rather than an entirely new departure. The findings concern policy intentions and textbook governance; they do not establish uniform changes in classroom practice or student outcomes. The article contributes a historically differentiated account of continuity and reform in political education.

Keywords: junior secondary education; political curriculum; textbook policy; documentary analysis; moral and citizenship education; China

1. Introduction

Curriculum change in political education involves decisions about what students should know, how they should relate to others, and which public values schools should promote. Textbooks help translate these decisions into materials that teachers and students can use. Apple's account of official knowledge provides a useful conceptual starting point: the selection and organization of school knowledge are connected to questions of authority and social power [1]. In the Chinese context, this perspective directs attention to both the continuity of political purposes and changes in their curricular expression.

Existing scholarship makes a simple opposition between political instruction and citizenship education difficult to sustain. Fairbrother's historical comparison of mainland Chinese and Taiwanese junior secondary textbooks links curricular priorities to changing political and social contexts [2]. The edited volume by Kennedy, Fairbrother, and Zhao brings together different perspectives on citizenship education in China [3]. These works inform the interpretation offered here, but their different geographical and institutional scopes must be respected.

The social context also matters. Qi and Tang discuss how market reform, globalization, changing family structures, and expanding media environments complicated the setting of moral education in China [4]. Zhong

and Lee explain the overlapping use of political, ideological, and moral education terminology in their account of the Chinese citizenship curriculum [5]. These analyses support examining both the changing problems addressed by the curriculum and the historically specific meanings of its labels.

This article asks how the official purposes and organization of junior secondary political education changed between 1978 and 2012, how textbook governance related to those changes, and which continuities complicate a linear account of reform. Mainland China is the geographical focus. References to comparative scholarship do not extend the findings to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The term political education is used as a broad historical category; specific official course names are identified only where the documents support them.

The central argument is that the curriculum's political and moral purposes were repeatedly connected to changing educational priorities. Attention to adolescent development and active learning did not begin abruptly in the new century. Equally, national regulation did not always mean a single textbook series. These distinctions allow a more precise account of reform without treating official prescriptions as direct evidence of what happened in every classroom.

2. Research Design and Analytical Framework

2.1. Qualitative Documentary and Literature Analysis

The study is a qualitative documentary analysis informed by a focused review of relevant literature. Following Bowen's discussion of document analysis, documents are treated as situated sources whose purposes and limitations affect their evidential value [6]. The analysis is interpretive rather than a systematic review or a statistical assessment of curriculum effects. It uses a purposively bounded set of sources relevant to the historical milestones and analytical questions addressed in this article.

The documentary corpus comprises nine sources: two retrospective People's Education Press textbook histories, the 1985 course reform notice, the 1999 quality education decision, the 2001 curriculum reform outline, the 2003 and 2011 standard-issuance notices, the 2006 revision of the Compulsory Education Law, and selected sections of the 2011 Ideology and Morality standard. Table 1 identifies their roles; source-specific citations accompany their substantive analysis below. The publisher histories are not substitutes for the original teaching plans. Issuance notices establish chronology, while the standard and legislation provide evidence of prescribed curriculum principles and textbook requirements.

Table 1. Documentary Sources and Their Evidential Roles.

Date or Period	Document	Role in the Analysis
2010 account of 1978 reconstruction	People's Education Press fifth-series history	Textbook preparation, use, and revision chronology
1985	CPC course reform notice	Stage-specific content and prescribed pedagogy
2010 account of the 1992 framework	People's Education Press ninth-series history	Compulsory education framework and textbook plurality
1999	CPC and State Council quality education decision	Purposes, curriculum organization, and textbook policy
2001	Ministry of Education reform outline	National, local, and school curriculum management
2003	Ministry of Education subject-standard notice	Issuance and initial experimental implementation
2006 revision	Compulsory Education Law, Articles 38–39	Textbook standards, examination, and approval
2011	Ministry of Education revised-standards notice	Official issuance of revised standards
2011 edition	Ideology and Morality standard, pp. 1–4, 21–23	Course principles and textbook compilation guidance

The sources were compared in relation to four questions: what educational purposes were stated, how the curriculum was organized, how textbooks were developed and regulated, and what approaches to teaching and learning were prescribed. The comparison gives particular attention to evidence that complicates the periodization, including learner-related provisions in the 1985 notice and textbook plurality within the national framework of the 1990s. Interpretations are distinguished from dated documentary statements throughout the discussion.

The academic literature supplies conceptual, historical, and comparative context. Sixteen scholarly works complement the nine documentary sources. Selection was guided by relevance to curriculum authority, Chinese moral and citizenship education, textbook analysis, or the interpretation of reform. This is a focused literature analysis, not an exhaustive database review. Later publications may interpret the historical period without extending its endpoint. No interviews, classroom observations, student assessments, or independently sampled textbook volumes form part of this study. Findings from published textbook and teacher studies are attributed to those studies and kept within their reported scope.

2.2. Curriculum Authority and the Limits of Policy Evidence

The analysis distinguishes official purposes, arrangements for curriculum and textbook production, and educational enactment. The first two can be investigated through the documentary corpus; the third requires evidence of how materials were interpreted and used. Within this framework, textbook regulation is examined as an institutional arrangement. Authorization of a text does not by itself demonstrate that teachers or students accepted its prescribed meanings.

This distinction is also relevant to citizenship education. Fairbrother's study of student resistance to political education makes learners' responses a separate object of investigation [7]. Its findings should not be generalized to all mainland junior secondary classrooms. For the present article, the implication is methodological: an account of official curriculum change must leave open the possibility that classroom interpretation and student responses differed from policy intentions.

2.3. Historical Scope and Periodization

Four non-overlapping periods structure the analysis: 1978–1984, 1985–1991, 1992–1998, and 1999–2012. These are analytical groupings organized around the curriculum milestones examined in Section 3. They do not imply simultaneous changes in every school or equally complete evidence for each interval. The year 2012 closes the historical window examined here; it is not presented as the completion of reform.

3. Evolution of Curriculum Policy

3.1. Reconstruction from 1978 to 1984

The People's Education Press account of its fifth textbook series records that preparation began in 1977 and that the books entered use in autumn 1978. It identifies the January 1978 trial teaching plan for full-time ten-year primary and secondary schools among the series' curricular bases and describes subsequent revisions [8]. This chronology locates textbook reconstruction before, as well as within, the wider reform era. It does not support presenting the January plan as a response to the Third Plenum held later in 1978.

In institutional terms, reconstruction involved reconnecting teaching plans, textbook preparation, and subsequent revision. The publisher's record establishes this organizational process more securely than the content or pedagogy of individual political textbooks. The period is therefore characterized by the renewal of curricular provision, while the interpretation of particular lessons remains an issue for edition-specific research.

3.2. Curricular Adjustment from 1985 to 1991

The CPC Central Committee's 1985 notice on reforming ideological and moral education and political theory courses distinguished educational stages and called for attention to adolescents' development and changes in social life. For junior secondary education, its specified content included morality, socialist

democracy and legal awareness, discipline, social development, and socialist construction. The notice also criticized mechanical transmission and advocated heuristic teaching and students' own thinking. Its discussion and social-practice provisions included stage-specific references that should not all be attributed to junior secondary schooling. Political direction, centrally guided reform, textbook review, experimentation, and gradual implementation remained part of the same policy [9].

The developmental and heuristic provisions complicate a chronology in which concern for learners appeared only after 2000. They also show why curriculum content should not be confused with course titles: a prescribed theme does not establish that it constituted a separately named subject. The analytical significance of this notice lies in its articulation of developmental considerations together with political purposes. It establishes an intended direction without demonstrating the prevalence or success of the proposed methods during the following years.

3.3. Compulsory Education Curriculum Consolidation from 1992 to 1998

The People's Education Press history of its ninth textbook series identifies the 1992 trial curriculum plan for nine-year compulsory full-time primary and junior secondary education and the associated subject syllabi as bases for revision. It records the availability of revised textbooks from autumn 1993 and describes multiple textbook development teams and approved series [10]. This account supports treating 1992 as a milestone in compulsory education curriculum organization. It also qualifies the description of the period as complete textbook unification: a national framework coexisted with differentiated provision. The source describes the broader textbook system rather than a complete inventory of political education editions or their regional adoption.

The political context provides a further dimension of this period. Zhao interprets the patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China as a state-led effort to strengthen political legitimacy through nationalism [11]. This account locates curriculum questions within a wider political project. It does not establish the content of every junior secondary textbook or demonstrate how individual students responded to that project.

This distinction changes the interpretation of state involvement. National requirements could define common expectations while approval arrangements permitted more than one textbook series. Regulation and plurality were not mutually exclusive. Whether different editions offered meaningfully different explanations, activities, or representations of citizenship remains an edition-level question. The present documentary sources establish an institutional setting for such comparisons without resolving their results.

3.4. Quality-Oriented Reform from 1999 to 2012

The 1999 decision on deepening education reform and comprehensively promoting quality education connected improvement with students' overall development, innovation, and practical ability. It reaffirmed moral education and commitments to patriotism, collectivism, and socialism. It also called for moral education to connect with students' lives and social practice, changes in teaching and assessment, national, local, and school curricula, and textbook diversity within a review system [12].

Within this decision, quality education did not replace political purposes with an exclusively individual-centered conception of schooling. Its significance for the present comparison lies in the breadth of the reform agenda. The policy connected established moral and political concerns to a wider reorganization of educational purposes, curriculum, assessment, and provision.

The Ministry of Education's 2001 curriculum reform outline provided a further institutional framework, including curriculum management at national, local, and school levels [13]. This general reform document is relevant to the context of political education, but it should not be used to infer that identical changes occurred in every subject or locality. Curriculum management, subject standards, textbook approval, and classroom teaching operate at related but distinct levels.

Dello-Iacovo's review places curriculum reform within the wider quality education agenda and identifies barriers including resource constraints, conceptual ambiguity, resistance to change, and tensions with examination expectations [14]. This broader literature helps explain why the existence of a reform policy cannot be treated as evidence of consistent implementation in junior secondary political education.

The Ministry's May 2003 notice issued the experimental curriculum standard for Ideology and Morality, or

Sixiang Pinde, and specified experimentation beginning that autumn in national basic education curriculum reform experimental areas [15]. This establishes a dated subject-specific development without implying immediate nationwide replacement of earlier materials.

Zhan and Ning's account of the junior high school reform links the 2003 curriculum to students' developing lives. They describe its ideological, humanistic, practical, and integrative dimensions and its attention to values, competencies, and knowledge, using selected textbook and classroom examples [16]. This subject-specific account supports a more precise interpretation of the reform than a general claim that political education simply became depoliticized. Its illustrative examples do not establish national implementation rates.

In December 2011, the Ministry issued revised compulsory education subject standards, including Ideology and Morality [17]. This provides a later official milestone within the period. The substantive principles and textbook guidance of the 2011 standard are examined together in Section 4.2.

The chronology establishes changes in official expectations. Read alongside the implementation literature, it also identifies a limit of policy-based periodization: the date of a notice cannot establish when, where, or how fully its expectations entered classroom practice.

4. Textbook Governance and Pedagogical Expectations

4.1. From Reconstruction to Regulated Plurality

The institutional comparison in Section 3 distinguishes renewed textbook preparation from later provision within a common curriculum framework. A further legal basis for regulated provision appears in the 2006 revision of the Compulsory Education Law. Article 38 requires textbooks to comply with state educational policy and curriculum standards; Article 39 establishes examination and approval and prohibits publication or use without approval [18]. These provisions concern the general compulsory education textbook system and are not evidence of the content of individual political education editions.

A distinction is therefore necessary between uniform curricular expectations and uniform materials. Different textbooks may work within a shared syllabus or standard, and a common textbook may be taught in different ways. Textbook plurality alone also says little about the range of permissible political interpretations. To assess that issue, researchers would need to compare the language, examples, omissions, and activities of identified editions. The present evidence supports the existence of regulated plurality in the broader textbook system rather than a claim about its ideological or classroom effects.

4.2. Developmental Appropriateness and the Relationship to Social Life

The comparison in Sections 3.2 and 3.4 identifies developmental concerns at more than one policy moment. This continuity qualifies an abrupt transition narrative. What changes across the documents is the setting in which those concerns are articulated: the earlier course-specific reform and the later broader quality education agenda provide different institutional contexts.

The 2011 Ideology and Morality standard connects morality, mental health, law, and national conditions with students' expanding lives. Its course principles combine value guidance with independent thought and practical activity (pp. 1–4). Its textbook guidance calls for materials grounded in experience, organized around meaningful themes and problems, and open to exploration; it permits regional adaptation within the standard's requirements (pp. 21–23) [19]. These prescriptions support the interpretation that learner participation and political direction were intended to operate together. They describe design expectations without demonstrating the characteristics of every published edition.

Published textbook research provides a distinct kind of evidence. Comparing Grade 7–9 textbooks from 1997 and 2005, Tse identifies changes in the presentation of ideological content alongside continuing commitments to socialism and Party leadership. His analysis also finds greater accommodation of human rights and global citizenship in the later texts [20]. This edition-based finding is compatible with the present interpretation of continuity and change, while remaining bounded by the textbooks compared. It cannot substitute for a representative analysis of all approved series.

4.3. *What Can Be Concluded About Textbook Use*

Actual textbook use involves questions about selection, lesson organization, assessment, and student interpretation. Lee and Yin's qualitative study of curriculum reform in senior secondary schools links teachers' emotions and professional identities to their perceptions of new textbooks, teaching expectations, and uncertainty surrounding college entrance examinations [21]. Its school level differs from the focus of this article. It is used here to illustrate why teacher responses require separate investigation, not to establish findings about junior secondary classrooms.

For future textbook analysis, Pingel's UNESCO guidebook sets out qualitative and quantitative approaches to textbook research and revision [22]. A suitable extension of the present study would identify editions before comparing the framing of citizenship, the organization of themes, and the opportunities for student judgment in exercises. Analysis of textual features could then be linked to evidence about classroom use. These are proposed research steps rather than activities undertaken in this article.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Reform as a Changing Relationship Between Purposes and Means*

The comparison suggests that continuity in political and moral purposes was compatible with changes in educational organization and prescribed pedagogy. This interpretation accords with Law's argument that globalization does not necessarily diminish the state's role in citizenship education; his analysis examines the reconfiguration of Chinese citizenship amid global and domestic changes [23]. The present document comparison adds a historically bounded illustration of that relationship without estimating the causal weight of particular political or economic forces.

This reading qualifies an account of steady progress from ideological instruction to nonpolitical, learner-centered education. It also avoids the opposite assumption that stable political purposes made all reforms insignificant. Changes in the organization of compulsory education, the provision of approved textbook alternatives, and the issuance of subject standards were institutionally consequential. Whether those changes altered students' educational experience requires a different evidential basis.

5.2. *National Authority and Variation*

The documents analyzed in Sections 3 and 4 show how shared curricular expectations and textbook approval could coexist with differentiated provision. Law's study of curriculum reform for the twenty-first century describes a shift from state-dominated curriculum making toward a state-led process involving expert assistance and evidence, while emphasizing the state's continuing importance [24]. This interpretation helps distinguish changes in the organization of authority from its disappearance.

Tan and Chua examine policy borrowing through the relationship between Chinese educational traditions and ideas associated with Western reform [25]. Their analysis provides a reason to interpret new pedagogical language within its institutional and cultural setting. In this article, the coexistence of participation-oriented prescriptions and continuing political direction is treated as an issue for contextual analysis. Neither imported terminology nor official approval alone establishes how teachers and students understood the curriculum.

5.3. *Limitations and Implications for Further Research*

The corpus is selective and uneven across the historical periods. Early textbook developments are accessed through retrospective publisher histories, which reflect institutional perspectives. General education documents have a broader scope than junior secondary political education, issuance notices primarily establish chronology, and the analysis of the 2011 standard does not amount to a full comparison with earlier standards. These differences limit the level of detail that can be compared consistently. The four periods are an organizing device supported by selected milestones, not an exhaustive classification of every reform.

Further research could extend the analysis through original curriculum plans and a documented sample of political textbooks. A defensible comparison would identify publisher, year, edition, grade, and relevant pages

before examining themes or pedagogical features. Studies of textbook use would additionally require evidence from schools, teachers, students, or assessment materials. These extensions would connect the historical policy record to questions of curricular interpretation and educational practice.

6. Conclusions

This documentary and literature analysis identifies both change and continuity in mainland China's junior secondary political curriculum and textbook policy between 1978 and 2012. Four policy periods distinguish reconstruction, curricular adjustment, compulsory education curriculum consolidation, and quality-oriented reform. Across them, political and moral purposes were connected to changing expectations about learners, social life, curriculum organization, and textbook provision.

Two qualifications are central to the argument. First, the 1985 course reform notice already expressed concern for adolescent development and more active understanding. Second, the national framework associated with the 1992 curriculum reforms coexisted with multiple approved textbook series. Later reforms should therefore be understood in relation to earlier developments, rather than as the first introduction of learner-related concerns or textbook diversity. These conclusions describe the official and institutional record. They do not establish uniform classroom implementation or student outcomes.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Author Contributions

Writing—original draft, Y.J. and B.P.T.; writing—review and editing, Y.J. and B.P.T. All authors have read and agreed to the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. The study analyzes published documents and literature and does not involve human participants.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

The documentary and published sources used in the analysis are identified in Table 1 and the reference list. No participant data were collected.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- 1 Apple MW. *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*, 3rd ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203814383>.
- 2 Fairbrother GP. Citizenship Education in a Divided China, 1949–1995. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 2004; **24**(1): 29–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0218879040240104>.
- 3 Kennedy KJ, Fairbrother GP, Zhao Z, (Eds.) *Citizenship Education in China: Preparing Citizens for the “Chinese Century”*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203797129>.
- 4 Qi W, Tang H. The Social and Cultural Background of Contemporary Moral Education in China. *Journal of Moral Education* 2004; **33**(4): 465–480. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724042000315590>.
- 5 Zhong M, Lee WO. Citizenship Curriculum in China: A Shifting Discourse Towards Chinese Democracy, Law Education and Psychological Health. In *Citizenship Curriculum in Asia and the Pacific*; Grossman DL, Lee WO, Kennedy KJ, Eds.; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2008; pp. 61–73. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8745-5_4.

- 6 Bowen GA. Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. *Qualitative Research Journal* 2009; **9** (2): 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.
- 7 Fairbrother G. *Toward Critical Patriotism: Student Resistance to Political Education in Hong Kong and China*; Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, China, 2003.
- 8 People's Education Press. *An Overview of Twelve Series of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks*, 5th Series; People's Education Press: Beijing, China, 2010. (In Chinese)
- 9 CPC Central Committee. *Notice on Reforming the Teaching of Ideological and Moral Education and Political Theory Courses in Schools*; Zhongfa [1985] No. 18, 1985. (In Chinese)
- 10 People's Education Press. *An Overview of Twelve Series of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks*, 9th Series; People's Education Press: Beijing, China, 2010. (In Chinese)
- 11 Zhao S. A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 1998; **31**(3): 287–302. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X\(98\)00009-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0967-067X(98)00009-9).
- 12 CPC Central Committee and State Council. *Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education*; Zhongfa [1999] No. 9, 1999. (In Chinese)
- 13 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. *Notice Issuing the Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial)*; Jiaoji [2001] No. 17, 2001. (In Chinese)
- 14 Dello-Iacovo B. Curriculum Reform and 'Quality Education' in China: An Overview. *International Journal of Educational Development* 2009; **29**(3): 241–249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2008.02.008>.
- 15 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. *Notice Issuing the Ideology and Morality Curriculum Standard for Full-Time Compulsory Education (Experimental Draft)*; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China: Beijing, China, 2003. (In Chinese)
- 16 Zhan W, Ning W. The Moral Education Curriculum for Junior High Schools in 21st Century China. *Journal of Moral Education* 2004; **33**(4): 511–532. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305724042000327993>.
- 17 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Notice Issuing the Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards for Chinese and Other Subjects (2011 edition). Jiaojier [2011] No. 9, 28 December 2011. (In Chinese)
- 18 Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China; amended June 29, 2006; effective September 1, 2006; Arts. 38–39.
- 19 Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. *Ideology and Morality Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (2011 Edition)*; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China: Beijing, China, 2011. (In Chinese)
- 20 Tse TKC. Creating Good Citizens in China: Comparing Grade 7–9 School Textbooks, 1997–2005. *Journal of Moral Education* 2011; **40**(2): 161–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.568098>.
- 21 Lee JCK, Yin HB. Teachers' Emotions and Professional Identity in Curriculum Reform: A Chinese Perspective. *Journal of Educational Change* 2011; **12**(1): 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-010-9149-3>.
- 22 Pingel F. *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision*, 2nd Revised and Updated ed; UNESCO and Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research: Paris, France, 2010.
- 23 Law WW. Citizenship, Citizenship Education, and the State in China in a Global Age. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 2006; **36**(4): 597–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640601049322>.
- 24 Law WW. Understanding China's Curriculum Reform for the 21st Century. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 2014; **46**(3): 332–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.883431>.
- 25 Tan C, Chua CSK. *Education Policy Borrowing in China: Has the West Wind Overpowered the East Wind?* Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education 2015; **45**(5): 686–704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2013.871397>.

