

Reform of Chinese Literature Curriculum in Institutes of Technology

CAO Bingyan^{[a],*}

^[a] College of Humanities and Law, Shandong University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China.

* Corresponding Author.

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Abstract

Chinese literature teaching in institutes of technology is confronting new situations: instrumental rationality concept, application-oriented training objective, generally weak literary basis of the students. In such situations, Chinese literature curriculum reform should work on the following three respects: firstly, make it clear that the “value” of literature is to strengthen the cultivation of humanistic accomplishment; secondly, deemphasize history teaching while emphasize the teaching of open texts; thirdly, cultivate students’ sense of participation and improve language ability.

Key words: Institutes of technology; Modern and contemporary Chinese literature; Reform; Humanistic quality

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Chinese literature is the backbone curriculum of Chinese profession. However, it has been in an embarrassing situation since 1990s and was forced to reform. After two decades, the results of the reform are not optimistic though creative and constructive suggestions were proposed by experts and scholars. I believe, curriculum reform is a systematic performance, instead of setting a common standard, the degree, mode, and method

should vary according to the nature and category of the institute where the teaching objective and requirement of this course differs. “Institutes of technology” provide us with a new background for further discussion of teaching reform in this course.

1. NEW SITUATIONS MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE COURSE CONFRONTING IN INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY

1.1 Instrumental Rationality Learning Concept

Instrumental rationality learning concept is now very common among higher education students. Ever since higher education popularized in China, the professional setting, discipline construction and training of students in universities have been under the influence of market economy. In 2007, the Education Ministry pointed out in *Several Suggestions On Further Deepen the Teaching Reform in Universities to Improve Teaching Quality in All Respects* that, “research to establish the system for monitoring and predicting of the demand of the talent, regularly release the conditions of both the higher education personnel training and demand of economy and society, guide higher education institutes timely to set up and adjust professions and their directions, deepen the reform of skilled personnel training mode, course system, teaching content and methods etc.” University professional setting has been developing to employment-orientated, newly emerging and featured professions. For students, attending university is the necessary preparation before employment, is an indispensable link for the transition of knowledge accumulation to economic value. When making profession selections, the students pay more attention to the potential market rather than self-improvement in cultural breeding or the pursuit of cultural significance. Professions that link professional study

and future career, or those have a high society demand and employment rate, or that can obtain a high income become the so-called popular professions. Professional setting in institutes of technology is precisely in line with the above characteristics, with common features like highly technique and skill natured, strong application ability and clear occupation counterpart etc. Students study with specific and clear-cut purposes. Under this circumstance, some fundamental profession and courses with weak application are isolated, the course “Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature” in Chinese profession, for instance. I have been teaching this course in engineering-oriented universities for years, and I realize the biggest problem is that the students are generally confused with the point of learning this course. Driven by instrumental rationality learning concept, students from Department of Chinese Language and Literature become very pragmatic, actively taking professions with strong application, such as foreign language, law, economy and even computer etc. as a second major, working diligently for various vocational qualification examinations, while spending much less energy on professional courses than needed.

1.2 Application-Oriented Training Objective

The wide establishment of Chinese profession in institutes of technology dated back to 1990s. In the 90s, an array of newly arising vocations related to Chinese profession came into being like mushrooms after rain, such as culture enterprise, the mess media, advertisement planning and training institution and so on. New demands were required of the Chinese profession majors. They needed to possess not only a solid foundation of Chinese Language, good oral and writing skills but also relative professional knowledge, like management, journalism, advertising, law and secretary etc. As a result, most universities, especially the regional institutes of technology that were not included in “211 Project”, had set their goal clearly for training applied Chinese profession majors. In order to elevate students’ vocational skills, curriculum system is also adjusted accordingly: lecture hours of basic professional courses were greatly compressed while application-oriented and technique practice courses saw an increase of lecture hours. For example, in Shandong University of Science and Technology where I am working in, the lecture hours of modern and contemporary Chinese literature are merely 72 in undergraduate. Comparatively, more than 120 lecture hours is given in comprehensive universities generally, 124 lecture hours in Beijing University and 144 lecture hours in Shandong University respectively for instance. Such curriculum is conducive to the cultivation of vocational skills, but it is also likely to lower students’ Chinese language and literature attainment which will further deprive the discipline advantage of the Chinese Language and Literature profession.

1.3 Generally Weak Literary Basis of the Students

For most of the students majoring in Chinese Language and Literature, the profession is not their first choice; they are reassigned from finance, trade or other popular professions. Coupled with the long-term constraints of examination-oriented education, they haven’t read many works during middle school, which results in a generally weak literary basis of the students. I found in a survey of freshmen of Department of Chinese Language and Literature that they were generally very familiar with popular writers like Han Han and Guo Jingming, but for serious first class writers like Zhang Wei, Zhang Chengzhi, they knew nothing at all; they knew that Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but never had they read his works.

Targeting on the above problems, although the reform of the curriculum of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature is an issue faced by Chinese Language and Literature profession, institutes of technology should reform their own system in the respect of teaching concept, content and method of the undergraduate’s curriculum, according to their own special condition.

2. REFORM AND CONSTRUCTION OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE LITERATURE CURRICULUM IN INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY

2.1 Reform of Teaching Concept: Make Clear the “Value” of Literature

At the mercy of instrumental rationality learning concept, those days when “interest” served as the main driving force of study has long gone. In order to make the students actually absorb nutrition and marrow from the vast repository of the modern and contemporary Chinese literature, we must make them truly feel the “value” of literature, that is, what is the irreplaceable significance and value of literature, compared with the practical and utilitarian use. As early as 2,000 years ago, Confucius said, “The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one’s father, and the remoter one of serving one’s prince. From them we become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.”(The Analects ·Yang Huo), speaking highly of aesthetic value and social significance of literature. At the beginning of last century, Wang Guowei, a scholar in Qing Dynasty, also said, “To nurture one great litterateur is much better than nurture a hundred of politicians. Why? Politicians benefit the people materially while writers benefit the people spiritually. So which weighs more of the two? Moreover,

the material benefits are temporary while that of spiritual are long-lasting.”¹ Brilliant literary works in any era all pervade thinking of self, others, society, and life, among which moral, wisdom, experience, aesthetic sense and life ideals all have inspiring significance beyond age which is of immeasurable meaning for both the individuals and the whole nation. At the higher level, good literary spirit is beneficial to reshape the national personality and construct new type of culture system. As for the students personally, the quality of an outstanding Chinese Language and Literature major is embodied not only through the comprehensive and proficient degree to which one masters the professional knowledge, and the basic ability of listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also through the interpersonal communication and coordination, and harmoniously continuous self-development. The Chinese Language and Literature majors’ professional advantages should be demonstrated that they can do better than non-Chinese Language and Literature majors in respects of sensibility, comprehending, imaging, aesthetic ability, communication and writing capabilities which are an integrated humanistic achievement that can not be cultivated through courses of technique and skill kind.

Courses of literary kind are basic professional courses of Chinese Language and Literature profession; they form not only the system of the basis knowledge, but also the system of value. They are the essence of humanistic achievement cultivation, because the great potential of profound literature and culture accumulation in human-shaping is beyond measure. Contemporary literature is one of the important carriers of the traditional Chinese fine culture and modern Chinese culture, and for the sake of its distinct stage of time and reality enlightenment, it is more likely to arouse spiritual resonance in present readers compared with literature of other eras or of foreign nations. In today, the 21st century, we can still visualize the num and ignorant Ah Q, the old domineering Master Zhao, and experience the stories in *Fortress Besieged* (A very popular novel written by Qian Zhongshu in 1947) in various stages in our life. To students, the meaning of the humanistic spirit sediment in literature courses is throughout life other than merely vocational.

In this age when being materialistic and pragmatic outweigh seeking for spiritual achievements, therefore, the teaching of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in institutes of technology should highlight its grand significance of humanistic accomplishment, and not only make the students merely master the basic knowledge of literature, but also make them sense and appreciate the rich and complex spiritual world the literary masters had created, and make them “not just live for the immediate material benefits, but possess a metaphysical and spiritual pursuit transcend the phenomenal world, so as to nurture the students’ ultimate concern for and faith in humanity.”²

2.2 Reform of Teaching Content: Open Texts Teaching

In institutes of technology, during the modern and contemporary Chinese literature teaching process, “limited lecture hours” is the inescapable bottleneck, imposing a direct restriction to the diversity, depth and breadth of teaching content. Therefore, aiming at achieving humanistic achievement cultivation with limited lecture hours, reform of teaching content is a must to choose the suitable teaching content for training of applied masters of Chinese Language and Literature. In traditional teaching process, contents of this course mainly are: literature trends, literature movements and writers and their works, with literature trends and movements as the line of literature development and also as the frame within which the writers and their works will be lectured. Commonly used textbooks include *Three Decades of Modern Chinese Literature*, written by Qian Liqun, Wen Rumin and Wu Fuhui etc., *Textbook of History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, edited by Chen Sihe etc., *History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, written by Hong Zicheng etc., generally co-used with a works selection textbook *Selection of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature 1917-2000*, edited by Zhu Donglin. All the above textbooks are content-enriched, informative and theory-oriented; the features mentioned above make them more suitable for long-lecture-hour guaranteed and academic research-centered professional teaching. While in institutes of technology where lecture hours are greatly compressed, it is a teaching task impossible to fulfill. Consequently, the lecture will become simplified and formulated which will further fail to make the students correctly understand the development of literature history, let alone appreciate the charm of literature. As a matter of fact, now there is no modern and contemporary Chinese literature textbook specifically aiming at applied Chinese Language and literature profession.

“Deemphasize history teaching while emphasize the teaching of open texts” is the generally agreed way of reforming this discipline. Under this guideline, the literature history part will mainly focus on key elements and essential stages, outlining the skeleton of the development of modern and contemporary literature, and concentrating on lecturing of writers and their works. However, “deemphasize history teaching while emphasize the teaching of open texts” has drawbacks like causing closed appreciation of isolated text, neglecting construction of literature horizon. So our approach is to highlight important parts and open the texts at the same time. Dig deep to masterpieces of important writers for an all-round grasp of the writers’ unique feature and style by getting the panorama through analyzing fragmented parts. We will list all the works required of reading at the beginning of this course, and basing on students’ close reading of the works, break the rigidified teaching pattern,

i.e. lecturing on writers' lives, ideological meaning and artistic features, deemphasize general knowledge, and adjust the train of thought and method of teaching according to the writers' unique feature and style. Here are two examples. When explaining *The True Story Ah Q*, the essence is Lu Xun's criticism and introspection of character of Chinese nation; we must fully explain the formation and meaning of the writer's enlightening thought and his tragedy sensation as the enlightener etc. before students can profoundly understand this idea. When explaining *The Thunderstorm*, as long as the theme of "tragedy of fate" is centered, not only other works of Cao Yu can be linked together, the students can also indeed comprehend the spiritual high Cao Yu's drama had achieved. Not confining to the text while basing on the text, we should analyze various factors interrelated with the ideology and style of the writers and their works within a broader vision, find out the flesh-and-blood relationship between literature and history, society and culture. It can not only allow the students comprehend the works' artistic charm and ideological significance, but also help the student establish an open vision of literature to give a clear explanation to the writers and their works' contribution and value under the circumstance of history and culture.

2.3 Reform of Teaching Methods: Cultivate Students' Awareness of Participation to Improve Chinese Ability

Professor Wen Rumin from Beijing University once said, "What are the characteristics of cultivation of students from Department of Chinese Language and Literature? Where do the "strong points" lie compared with other art professions? My view will be the "language and literature" capacity."³ Sensing, understanding, judging and analyzing abilities of literature are all included in language and literature capacity which is an integrated capacity cultivated on the basis of texts reading. I find in teaching, however, that students' text reading still remains at the external levels like the plot etc., and the reading sensibility is also rather rough and unsubtle. And if they are asked to speak out their reading sensibilities, the answers are either similar fragmented feelings, or the clichéd conclusions found from baidu.com. I think there are two main reasons leading to this phenomenon: firstly, the long-term examination-oriented education has drive the students into a habit of catering to ready-made conclusions and the standard answers, so they neither take initiative in reading nor value much of their own personal feelings; secondly, their awareness of participation in reading is weak, and they cannot make comparisons between the content of the text and self-cognition and experience so as to raise questions. Under this condition, there is no way to cultivate students' abilities of how to sense, understand, analyze and express literature, and teaching will also stagnate with the old cram method. In order to change

this condition, I managed in the following two respects: First of all, respect students' reading sensibilities and give them proper guidance. In classes, students should be encouraged to speak out their true feelings they get from reading, which should not be judged as right or wrong. For example, when teaching poems written by Guo Moruo (a poet during 1940s), many students say they do not like his poems because his language is rough and the emotions are exaggerated and overused. If, in this case, we force the students to accept the significance and contribution of Guo's poetry, students will not be affected at all, on the contrary, they will feel that it is unreal. Therefore, I will guide them alongside by confirming the inadequacies of Guo's poems pointed out by the students and by letting them voice what they think should be the ideal norms and aesthetic requirements of poetry; and then combined with poetry concept and poems of Huang Zunxian and Hu Shi, I will present the transition path of poetry from classic to modern, naturally conclude the achievements and status of Guo Moruo's poetry. Moreover, explain the ethos of Guo's poetry with the era of May Fourth Movement as the background, inspire students to think about the special meaning at present, an age when instrumental rationality prevails. In the second place, narrow the gap between teaching contents and students' real life situation, make students master how to guide life, comprehend society and improve self with knowledge. Zhu Guangqian, a famous scholar in 1897-1986, once said in earnest, "The first important thing to do in learning literature is to appreciate and think about as many works of the prestigious writers as possible; and secondly, one should diligently practice writing so the sweetness and bitterness of writing are able to be tasted, and then a pure interest can be cultivated gradually, and the insight and compassion of a litterateur to experience the social and material world are obtained. When one reaches this step, the literature accomplishment is a success at large." The contact between literature and reality is truly established when one can sense litterateur's insight and compassion when confronting things in the social and material world. Such as Lu Xun's profound understanding of the character of our nation, Shen Congwen's pursuit of nature and humanism, Cao Yu's thinking of fate, and the mocking of the blind life and unenlightened human nature of the messes in *Fortress Besieged*....

Litterateurs' senses and inspirations of the society and life are of important and practical significance even in today. When teaching writers and their works of these kinds, properly make a combination with social phenomenon and issues, make the students sense and analyze texts with "the insight and compassion of a litterateur to experience the social and material world". In this way, not only the students' interest is enhanced and understanding deepened of this course, but also their genuine perceptions of the society and life is augmented.

Therefore, they can manage their relationships with others and the society appropriately, and they will learn to be modest, love the nature, hold in awe and reverence for life, and develop a healthy and harmonious personality.

3. PERORATION

The biggest peril to literature curriculum reform is using engineering courses' practicality and skill cultivation as its benchmark, and loses its own advantages and distinctive feature. Einstein once said precisely, "...I want to oppose the idea that the school has to teach directly that special knowledge and those accomplishments which one has to use later directly in life. The demands of life are much too manifold to let such a specialized training in school appear possible. Apart from that, it seems to me, moreover, objectionable to treat the individual like a dead tool. The school should always have as its aim that the young man leave[s] it as a harmonious personality, not as a specialist. This in my opinion is true in a certain sense even for technical schools, whose students will devote themselves to a quite definite profession." Einstein's words are

particularly vigilant to the curriculum reform of modern and contemporary Chinese literature in engineering-oriented universities; excessive emphasis on practicality is depreciating literature taste. With the prevailing of instrumental rationality, promoting literature for its own sake is meaningful than the reform itself.

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