



# A Comparative Study of Promoting the Core Literacy of Chinese – Using the Lanting Preface as an Example

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**Abstract.** The concept of “core literacy of Chinese” proposes that Chinese curriculum should focus on “language understanding and application, cogitation development and improvement, aesthetic discovery and appreciation, cultural inheritance and participation”. The core literacy of Chinese also emphasizes the ability to understand, absorb, inherit and develop the excellent parts of traditional Chinese culture. This paper takes the teaching of “Lanting Preface” as an example, compares traditional teaching and innovative teaching in two classes, discusses the methods of improving the core literacy of Chinese for vocational school students through teaching traditional Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Core literacy of Chinese, Lanting Preface, Course design, Teaching evaluation.

## 1 Introduction

Core literacy is the foundation of students' growth and is an essential ability for people's lifelong development. China's excellent parts of traditional culture is the nutrient for students' growth. Traditional culture education plays an important role in improving vocational school students' core literacy, especially in the core literacy of Chinese. In 2014, China's Ministry of Education issued the "Guidelines for Improving the Education of China's Excellent Parts of Traditional Culture", emphasizing the importance of strengthening the education of China's excellent parts of traditional culture. In 2020, according to the "Chinese Curriculum Standards for Secondary Vocational School"[1], scholars from the perspective of the “core literacy of Chinese” proposed that vocational schools' Chinese teaching should focus on the four aspects of “language understanding and application, cogitation development and improvement, aesthetic discovery and appreciation, cultural inheritance and participation [2]”, and emphasize “based on the excellent parts of traditional Chinese culture, students should initially have the ability to understand, absorb, inherit and develop Chinese culture. [3]”

In the past decades, the Chinese government has also made a series of important statements on inheriting and promoting China's excellent traditional culture. Those statements not only emphasize the importance of Chinese traditional values and moral

ities, but also emphasize the importance of linking traditional culture and modernization. As an important carrier of Chinese traditional culture education, it is the responsibility of teachers to accurately and richly convey the essence of traditional culture in Chinese curriculums. The ordinary way of Chinese teaching emphasizes the understanding of words and themes, but relatively weakens the role of aesthetics and cultural heritage in teaching. Therefore, in this study, researchers focused on one question: Compared with the ordinary way of teaching, can the course design that emphasizes aesthetics and cultural heritage improve students' core literacy of Chinese? In order to answer this question, this paper focuses on reporting the course design and teaching evaluation of the key text "Lanting Preface" as an example.

## **2 Comparing Two Course Designs of Teaching the Lanting Preface**

The researcher first designed a ordinary teaching plan for the "preface to the poems composed at the orchid pavilion", which is short for the "Lanting Preface". The ordinary plan is that the teaching was designed strictly in accordance with the teaching reference book of the vocational Chinese textbook, including an introduction to the writing's background, understanding of words, sentences and paragraphs, understanding of the main idea, writing techniques, reading and reciting. This traditional teaching plan was randomly applied to one class in the school. At the same time, the researcher innovatively designed a teaching plan for the "Lanting Preface", reducing the training of function words and grammatical structures in the understanding of words, sentences and paragraphs, and also reducing the introduction of writing techniques. In the innovative design, the appreciation of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy was added, and a small debate session on "whether the original copy of "Lanting Preface" should be excavated by archaeology" was also designed. This innovative teaching plan was randomly applied to another class. The students in the two classes were of similar level and in the same grade. In order to ensure that the knowledge received by the two teaching classes in the standardized assessment was consistent, after the comparative experiment and before the final exam, the researcher used the review session of the semester to systematically review the important knowledge points of "Lanting Preface" to ensure that students' final exam was not affected by the experiment.

## **3 The Innovative Teaching Plan of Lanting Preface**

The "Lanting Preface" is a key text of the Chinese course in vocational schools. It has high literary quality and is regarded as a treasure of the country's traditional culture. Because the Lanting Preface has combined its literary quality with Wang Xizhi's calligraphy works. But at the same time, the language habits in the Wei and Jin Dynasties are far away from today, and the atmosphere of nihilism was prevalent at that time. Therefore, today's students have a hard time in understanding the words of "Lanting Preface" and the main theme. Based on this background, it is difficult to extend the

aesthetics and inheritance of "Lanting Preface". Therefore, this study has proposed to only teach some of the important words and the main theme, and focus on arousing students' interest in aesthetics and inheritance.

### **3.1 The key Point of Word Comprehension: Learning Idioms That Have Been Handed Down to Later Generations**

This study suggests that in terms of word comprehension, students should first understand classic idioms, such as: "all of the prominent people were there, from old to young", "sharing wine from a floating goblet while chanting poems", "a sunny day with a gentle valley breeze", "spreading before the eye is the beauty of nature, and hanging high is the immeasurable universe", "repose their aspiration in Bohemianism".

### **3.2 The Key Point of Cogitation Development and Improvement: Understanding the Theme of "Lanting Preface"**

The main idea that students should capture is that the theme sentence of "Lanting" is "Well I know it is a lie to say that life and death are the same thing, and that longevity and early death make no difference!", not "Great indeed are life and death - said the ancients. Ah! What sadness!"

The theme of "Lanting Preface" is to leave one's own thoughts and emotions under the premise of knowing that fate is impermanent - "I put down a sketch of these contemporaries and their sayings at this feast", and believe that the resonance of human thoughts across time would finally happen - "although time and circumstances may change, the way they will evoke our moods of happiness and regret will remain the same." To sum up, this is a kind of broad-mindedness with pessimistic feelings, rather than lamenting the impermanence of life without hope.

### **3.3 The Focus of Aesthetic Appreciation: Calligraphy Appreciation and Enhancing the Interest of Chinese Traditional Culture**

Strictly speaking, the calligraphy works and the text of "Lanting Preface" are not interchangeable. However, it should be recognized in teaching that it is difficult for teenagers to understand and appreciate the philosophical beauty of the content expressed in "Lanting Preface". First of all, the feelings expressed in "Lanting Preface" need to be supported by rich life experience. If young students do not have enough experience, they would easily fall into a situation of "as a young man [I] knew nothing about the taste of sorrow, so I forced sorrow [out of myself] to compose new verses." Therefore, it is more than enough if students can understand in philosophy that "Lanting Preface" is not an article that encourages decadence.

Secondly, the era of "Lanting Preface" is very different from the era of today. The overall trend of today's era is enterprising and pragmatic, while the social atmosphere of the Wei and Jin Dynasties is nihilistic, detached, and confusing. In today's era, we can let students understand and respect the phenomena that existed in Chinese history.

Still, it is difficult and unnecessary for students to regard the philosophy and lifestyle of the Wei and Jin Dynasties as the only high-level aesthetic.

Therefore, introducing the calligraphy achievements of "Lanting Preface" into aesthetic appreciation can broaden students' knowledge, arouse a wider interest in traditional culture, and also meet the requirements of the core literacy of Chinese for aesthetic appreciation. For example, teachers can teach the calligraphy theory of "Eight Methods of Yong" based on personal experience and guide students to practice calligraphy, or they can start from archaeology and talk about the love of Emperor Taizong of Tang (Li Shimin) for "Lanting Preface" and the how Yu Shinan, Chu Suiliang, and Feng Chengsu made copies of the original calligraphy works.

### 3.4 Cultural Inheritance Teaching Focus: Student Discussion

The teaching of cultural inheritance of "Lanting Preface" should still be based on enhancing interest and increasing student participation. As mentioned above, it is difficult and unnecessary to let students discuss the philosophical beauty of Wei and Jin Dynasties and discuss how to "inherit" this philosophy based on the text alone. However, teachers can explore another idea of cultural inheritance in teaching the "Lanting Preface". The new idea is the question of "how future generations can protect cultural heritage". Combining Ouyang Xiu's "New Version of the History of the Five Dynasties" and the analysis of modern archaeology, the original version of Wang Xizhi's "Lanting Preface" is likely to be buried in the tomb (Zhaoling) of Emperor Taizong of Tang, or the tomb (Qianling) of Emperor Gaozong of Tang. It is possible that it has not been looted [4]. So, with the country's modern technology and national strength, should the tombs be excavated to find the original version of "Lanting Preface" and preserve it in the form of a national museum? This question can be open to students for discussion, and there is no standard answer. But the discussion itself is the process of deepening students understanding and invoking the love of traditional culture.

## 4 The Results of the Comparative Teaching Plans

During the course, the researcher found that the ordinary teaching design lacked appeal to students. Much time was spent on reading aloud, reciting, and asking questions about words, phrases, and paragraphs. Students could answer the questions normally, but the classroom atmosphere was rather dull. Students who were not infected by the "pessimistic broad-mindedness" expressed in "Lanting Preface" thought that the text of "Lanting Preface" was "lukewarm" and lacked the rhythm and beauty of classical poetry. Meanwhile, students who understood the main idea expressed in "Lanting Preface" found it difficult to feel excited because of the negative emotions conveyed in the text.

In comparison, the link of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy aesthetics in the innovative teaching was loved by students. Everyone believed that Wang Xizhi's calligraphy achievements were very intuitive and "beauty visible to the naked eye." At the same time, the small debate on whether archaeological excavations should be carried out also aroused the students' desire to express themselves. Although some opinions were more

extreme, this link aroused the students' awareness of cultural protection and made them feel the deep connection between traditional culture and contemporary life. After class, students who were interested in the topic continued to search the Internet for information about Ouyang Xiu, New Edition of the History of the Five Dynasties, the copy version of Lanting Preface, and the mausoleum system of Tang Dynasty. This experience itself is an essential part of improving the core literacy of Chinese.

## **5 Reflection on the Comparative Teaching Plans of "Lanting Preface"**

Innovative teaching design helps improve students' core literacy of Chinese, especially in terms of aesthetics and cultural heritage. However, this comparative teaching also triggered the researcher to think further. In the instant test of after-class exercises, students in the innovative teaching class are weaker in mastering and interpreting words, phrases and sentences than those in the ordinary teaching class. It may be because the atmosphere in the innovative class was too active, diluting the "hard core" knowledge of the ordinary class, and students forgot the explanation of some words, phrases and sentences. Especially in the test of translating classical Chinese into vernacular Chinese, the grammar of the innovative teaching class is obviously not as standardized as that of the ordinary teaching class.

However, this gap is not irreparable. In the review session before the final exam, the author found that there was basically no difference in the basic knowledge level of the two teaching classes - not all improved, but tended to return to the average. In other words, the knowledge acquired by the ordinary teaching class would still be forgotten after 2-3 months if it was not reviewed and trained. In addition, the majority of vocational students is weak in understanding classical Chinese masterpieces. The solution to firmly grasp the basic knowledge is not to directly use ordinary teaching methods but to conduct two or three rounds of review before students forget knowledge according to the distribution of the memory forgetting curve. After the review session, the students' levels are similar, and the innovative teaching class has a greater love for Chinese traditional culture than others. It should be said that what is gained is greater than what is lost. At the same time, we should also realize that it is responsible to students to review the knowledge they have learned in a timely manner. Sufficient basic knowledge is the foundation of innovative thinking. Innovative teaching cannot be at the expense of students' basic knowledge level, otherwise "love for traditional culture" will become a castle built in the air [5]. In recent years, the conditions for vocational students to apply for colleges and universities have been relaxed, and the opportunities are increasing. Solid basic knowledge can help more vocational students get into universities.

## 6 Conclusion

To sum up, the teaching of traditional Chinese culture is an important way to improve students' core literacy of Chinese, and indirectly enrich their spiritual world and improve their professional literacy. The teaching of traditional Chinese culture should focus on the four aspects of "language understanding and application, cogitation development and improvement, aesthetic discovery and appreciation, cultural inheritance and participation", and develop courses with teaching evaluations according to local conditions. This study takes the key curriculum "Lanting Preface" as an example to conduct the comparative study, and hope to play a role in inspiring other teachers and course designers.

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