

The Role and Prospects of Confucianism in Teaching Chinese as a Second Language

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Abstract: Confucianism, deeply rooted in China's historical and philosophical tradition, offers profound insights and potential enlightenment for the pedagogical landscape of Teaching Chinese as a Second Language (TCSL). This paper delineates the multifaceted impact of Confucian thought on TCSL education and charts a course for its prospective integration.

Keywords: Confucianism; International Chinese Language Education; Second-language Acquisition.

1. Introduction

The Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period in ancient China stands as an era of vibrant intellectual discourse, characterized by the coexistence co-prosperity of various schools of thought. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism advanced profound ideologies, encompassing principles for governance as well as methods for personal cultivation. They also engaged in extensive debates on a good deal of societal issues. These philosophical luminaries not only articulated their viewpoints but also left indelible imprints on history, subsequently wielding substantial influence on succeeding generations. Confucianism serves as one of the representative schools of thought, and its principles found favor with rulers, enduring for over two millennia within China's feudal society. Therefore, it is imperative to summarize and analyze Confucian thought which furnishes modern Chinese pedagogical development with insights and potential enlightenment.

2. Confucianism and Chinese Education

Referred to as the study of 'Neisheng Waiwang', the ultimate ideal of self-cultivation and governance in ancient times, Confucianism underscores the cultivation of personal character, family harmony, good governance, and world peace. As a pivotal component of China's ancient philosophical system, Confucianism has exerted a profound and lasting influence on the nation's development. It places significant importance on the role of individuals in governance, advocating for benevolent, virtuous and equitable governance through adopting moral and ritual measures, ensuring rational division of labor within societal structures. As an integral facet of Confucian thought, Confucian management principles continue to exert a pivotal role in the realm of Chinese modern educational management.

Emerging from the Spring and Autumn period, and extending all the way to the Qing Dynasty, Confucianism has experienced an uninterrupted inheritance and development. Numerous Confucians have tirelessly enriched its ideological system, striving for its systematicity and unity. Moving into the modern time of China, Confucianism broadly diverged into two intellectual currents: one focused on an in-depth exploration of Confucian doctrine, while the other explored how to integrate Confucian thought systematically into

education. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the imperative pronouncement, "forging a strong sense of the Chinese nation as a community," has enjoyed popular support, which holds profound significance and represents the latest achievement in the Sinicization of Marxist national theory. A sense of the Chinese Nation as a Community serves as the foundation for national unity, ethnic solidarity, and the spiritual essence of the nation. To comprehensively and profoundly advance the establishment of this crucial Sense, it is imperative to integrate this concept into primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions.

Apart from primary, secondary, and tertiary education institutions, the educational system in modern mainland China encompasses various categories, including community-based, adult, and vocational education, among others. Within the conventional primary, secondary, and tertiary education system, the teaching of Confucianism is characterized by a more systematic approach, extended duration, broad subject matter, and various teaching methods. For instance, within the three stages of primary, junior high, and high school, subjects such as history, Chinese language, geography, and politics routinely incorporate content related to Confucian thought. These teaching contents are often presented comprehensively delving into the specific ideas and biographies of notable Confucian philosophers, which allows students to immerse themselves in Confucianism's teachings and Confucians' lives. In universities, students continue to build upon the Confucian knowledge acquired in earlier stages through courses on ethics, Marxist philosophy, and ideological studies. While community education, adult education, and vocational training tend to offer more fragmented and specialized instruction. Typically, students pursue these educational opportunities to meet specific learning needs or career requirements. However, as China's economic prowess has flourished, there has been a surge in the desire to cultivate personal intellectual pursuits, leading to a myriad of private courses and workshops, encompassing a wide range of subjects, such as traditional Chinese culture and diverse interest-oriented courses.

3. The Inspirations of Confucianism on TCSL

On a global scale, the educational framework of Confucianism has attained a remarkable level of

comprehensiveness and maturity. What profound insights can Confucianism provide to the teaching of TCSL?

TCSL refers to the teaching of Chinese to non-native Chinese speakers as a second language. The teaching system for Chinese as a foreign language primarily encompasses language knowledge and language skills whose complexity and content increasing with the proficiency level of Chinese learners. Four fundamental skill-based courses, namely listening comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension, and written composition, are offered with the aim of enhancing the linguistic proficiency of language learners across multiple dimensions. As language is closely intertwined with culture, many educators of TCSL often incorporate Chinese cultural courses alongside these language courses. Therefore, as the “core” of traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism is frequently encountered in the classes of TCSL whether in everyday conversations or the study of specific cultural content. The inspirations of Confucianism in TCSL are primarily manifested in three aspects: the perpetuation of values, the development of teaching materials and pedagogical systems.

From the perspective of value transmission, Confucianism places a strong emphasis on morality, ethics, and interpersonal relationships. Confucianism is beneficial for Chinese language learners as it aids in their comprehension of the Chinese way of thinking, values, and behavioral norms during the language learning process, consequently making it easy for Chinese learners’ language acquisition, fostering cross-cultural communication and promoting an understanding and respect for Chinese culture. In Chinese language teaching, educators can guide students to learn ethical principles from Confucianism, such as filial piety (respect for parents), benevolence (compassion and care), and etiquette (respect for social norms) through stories, discussions, and practical exercises, so that students can gain a deeper understanding of these values and apply them effectively in their everyday interactions and conversations with Chinese people.

Meanwhile, Confucianism places significant emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, the moral conduct of educators, and the self-cultivation of students, which provides valuable guidance for the field of TCSL. When teaching abroad, educators can adopt an amiable attitude to establish positive interactions with students, encouraging self-directed learning, and nurture critical thinking and creativity. In situations where differences in educational philosophies across countries lead to cultural conflicts and shocks, educators can draw on these Confucian principles to address cross-cultural communication issues more comprehensively and effectively manner, providing a solid foundation for resolving such challenges.

From the perspective of textbook development, the current Chinese language textbooks of TCSL published in mainland China predominantly cater to the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Additionally, there are also specialized series of textbooks designed to prepare students for the HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) Chinese proficiency exams. International students studying in China primarily utilize the appendices and supplementary sections of these textbooks to learn and gain insights into Chinese culture. As they progress to an advanced level of Chinese proficiency, they are introduced to textbooks such as *An Overview of Chinese Culture*, which offer a more comprehensive and detailed exploration of Chinese culture through a vertical and

chapter-based approach.

However, in the realm of international Chinese language and culture education in three China Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan (especially Hong Kong and Taiwan region), and foreign countries (especially Malaysia), Chinese culture is often usually set aside as a separate course, and when developing the corresponding textbooks, there is a strong emphasis on aligning the content with the target learners’ proficiency levels. Special attention is given to incorporating the contents of myriad concepts from the philosophical thoughts in Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in ancient China, complementing by illustrations and interactive activities, all with the aim of providing Chinese language learners with insights into Chinese culture. As learners progress to higher levels, akin to language and literature courses in mainland China, as well as national language courses in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan regions, a more systematic and categorical approach is employed. Topics such as ideology, material culture, classical literature, and more are intricately studied, allowing for an in-depth exploration and understanding of Chinese culture.

Confucianism is the core of Chinese culture, and integrating Confucian thoughts into textbooks’ development of TCSL can foster a deep understanding and appreciation of traditional Chinese culture among Chinese language learners. For instance, while producing textbooks, selected passages from various levels of difficulty of Confucian classics, such as *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Great Learning*, can be integrated to cater to the distinctive requirements and proficiency levels of the target learners, which enables them to peruse, examine and deliberate on these texts. Through this approach, students not only learn the language from the original texts and translated texts but also deepen their interest in Chinese language learning. This, in turn, can lead to a shift in learning objectives, benefiting the cultivation of more advanced Chinese language learners.

From the perspective of teaching system, in future education of TCSL, it is also possible to integrate Confucianism into fields such as technology, commerce, and social media, enabling students to apply these value systems more effectively. For instance, in courses teaching Business Chinese, one could incorporate dialogue scenarios involving business meetings with Chinese entrepreneurs, allowing students to comprehend the cultural factors underlying these interactions. This approach would aid students in achieving their learning objectives with a more systematic approach.

4. The Difficulties and Challenges of the Application of Confucianism on TCSL

However, it’s important to note that the application of Confucianism on TCSL may also encounter some challenges which are broadly encompass cultural differences between two languages, difficult selection of teaching materials, high capacity of TCSL educators, unpredicted acceptance of learners, and blurry standard of language assessment criteria.

Firstly, cultural differences present a challenging gap to bridge. The core values of Confucianism, such as benevolence, filial piety, and etiquette, are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Chinese language learners, on the other hand, come from diverse cultural backgrounds, and these values may differ from their cultural norms. Consequently, students may encounter challenges in comprehending and

internalizing these quintessential Confucian values.

Secondly, the selection of teaching materials also poses a challenge. Students of different ages and proficiency levels require content tailored to their specific needs and depth of understanding. The selection of appropriate texts for instructional materials, the identification of suitable textbook formats to incorporate these materials, and the subsequent integration into TCSL resources demand significant dedication of resources and meticulous planning. To address this challenge effectively, curriculum developers and educators should collaborate closely to identify the most relevant and age-appropriate Confucian texts for inclusion in TCSL materials, which should align with the learning objectives of the course and the proficiency level of the target learners. Developing a comprehensive framework for integrating Confucian values and texts into existing TCSL curricula can help ensure that the content is both meaningful and effective for students of various backgrounds and abilities.

Thirdly, the application of Confucianism to TCSL requires higher ability of teachers. As key participants in the teaching process, teachers must creatively integrate Confucianism with language instruction to ensure that the curriculum effectively imparts both language skills and Confucian values, placing high demands not only on teachers' expertise in their field but also requires schools and institutions to provide systematic training to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge. To effectively incorporate Confucian principles into language education, educators must possess a profound comprehension of Confucianism, cultural awareness, and the skill to craft educational materials that resonate with students from various cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, it also requires pedagogical strategies that enable students to not only learn the language but also appreciate and apply Confucian values in their language-learning process. Continuous professional development and training for educators in these areas are imperative to ensure the successful integration of Confucianism into TCSL education.

Fourthly, students' knowledge acceptance may not always meet expectations. The learners enroll in Chinese language courses with various learning objectives, driven by different motivations. Those with an interest-driven approach may exhibit higher receptivity, while those pursuing Chinese language studies for examination or work-related reasons might perceive the content related to Confucianism as less relevant to their learning objectives. Educators need to address this variability in student motivation and tailor instruction to engage students with diverse goals, demonstrating the practical applicability of Confucian values in various contexts, including exams, careers, and daily life.

Fifthly, defining standards for language testing and assessment is indeed a complex task. TCSL primarily focuses on language instruction, which boasts blurry standards of assessment criteria. Therefore, evaluating students' understanding and application of cultural values and ideas, such as Confucianism, within a language context presents a challenging issue.

What's more, the application of Confucianism in TCSL must take into account cultural adaptability. Some Confucian concepts may not align with modern societal norms, and therefore, careful consideration is needed when selecting content for second-language teaching.

5. Conclusion

In summary, from Confucianism to broader Chinese culture,

their roles in TCSL are undeniably significant. The TCSL education in mainland China differs from the emphasis placed on cultural education in international Chinese language and culture education, particularly in China Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, mainly because of its late start, language-focused instructional framework, while cultural content has often been viewed as supplementary. Although the application of Confucianism in TCSL may present challenges, these obstacles can be overcome through systematic curriculum design, practical teaching methods, and a student-centered approach that respects individual differences. Integrating Confucian thought into Chinese language teaching can offer students more profound cultural experiences and a deeper understanding, enriching their cross-cultural communication skills. Ultimately, achieving a harmonious blend of language proficiency and cultural understanding is crucial for cultivating well-rounded Chinese language learners who can adeptly engage with both the language itself and the cultural nuances it embodies.

The author argues that cultural education should not be viewed as a supplementary option or an auxiliary addition meant only to pique students' interest. Instead, the significance of cultural education, particularly the teachings of diverse philosophical schools and the vital role of Confucianism as the "bedrock" of Chinese culture, should be fully realized. Nevertheless, all Chinese educators working on an international scale must deliberate on how to distill the essence of these teachings and ensure their presentation is sufficiently flexible throughout the teaching materials and process, while simultaneously preserving their distinctive features that differentiate them from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan regions, and other places. Indeed, this is a crucial issue that requires thoughtful consideration from all international Chinese language educators. Balancing language proficiency with cultural understanding is not only essential for fostering well-rounded language learners but also for promoting a deeper appreciation of the richness and diversity of Chinese culture. Achieving this balance will enhance the effectiveness of Chinese language education on a global scale.

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