

Study on Integrating the Character “Fu” in Chinese Cultural Lessons for International Education

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Abstract: In the field of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL), cultural instruction plays a pivotal role in helping learners understand and engage with the cultural environment behind the language. This paper uses the Chinese character “fu” (fú, meaning “good fortune”) as the entry point to explore both the historical evolution of Chinese characters and the cultural connotations behind “fu.” Drawing on a teaching practice in a secondary school in Phetchabun, Thailand, the paper introduces a culture-focused lesson titled “Bringing ‘Fu’ Home.” The lesson design, implementation, and outcomes are examined to illustrate how integrating the “fu” character into cultural instruction can inspire students’ interest in the Chinese language, deepen their cultural awareness, and foster greater appreciation of Chinese traditions.

Keywords: Fu Character; Chinese Character Culture; International Chinese Education; Thailand; Cultural Teaching.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the demand for Chinese language learning has surged worldwide, including in countries such as Thailand, largely due to increased economic, cultural, and educational exchanges with China. Alongside the development of language skills, cultural teaching has emerged as an essential component of international Chinese education. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and a purely language-focused curriculum risks neglecting the cultural context in which language thrives. As many scholars advocate, “to teach language is to teach culture,” necessitating deeper integration of cultural elements into the Chinese language classroom (Wang, 2012).

Among the myriad Chinese characters and cultural symbols, the character “Fu” (*fú*) stands out for its prevalence and significance in daily life as well as festive celebrations in Chinese society. “Fu” signifies blessings, prosperity, and happiness—words that resonate across cultural boundaries. In China, people often display “Fu” during the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), either upright or upside down, playing with the pun of (“Fu is upside down”) and (“Fortune has arrived”). “Fu” appears frequently on occasions such as weddings, housewarmings, and birthdays, representing auspicious wishes for good fortune. For foreign learners of Chinese, understanding the symbolic richness behind “Fu” opens a window into Chinese sociocultural values and fosters a deeper connection with the language.

Thailand shares certain cultural and spiritual beliefs with China, especially regarding concepts of auspiciousness, luck, and “merit.” Consequently, Thai learners may find “Fu” appealing and relatable, laying a foundation for meaningful cultural exchange (Qin, 2019). Motivated by this insight, I designed a cultural lesson titled “Bringing ‘Fu’ Home” while teaching in a secondary school in Phetchabun, Thailand. The lesson aims to introduce the historical evolution of the “Fu” character, highlight its cultural connotations, and engage students in hands-on activities that reinforce both language acquisition and cultural understanding.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it explores the historical origins and cultural meanings of “Fu,” tracing its development from early Chinese scripts to its modern form.

Second, it discusses the pedagogical rationale behind introducing “Fu” to Thai learners of Chinese. Third, it presents the lesson design and classroom activities implemented in Phetchabun. Finally, it evaluates the outcomes, reflects on pedagogical challenges, and provides recommendations for future improvements in international Chinese cultural instruction.

2. The Evolution and Cultural Connotations of “Fu”

2.1. Evolution of the Character “Fu”

Chinese is among the world’s oldest continuous writing systems, with characters that have evolved for millennia. The written form of “Fu” can be traced back to oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, offering a glimpse into ancient beliefs and practices (Zhou, 1988).

1. Oracle Bone and Bronze Inscriptions

In oracle bone script, “Fu” may comprise two main components: the “left part” element (associated with rituals and deities) and the “right part” (possibly referring to a wine vessel). Ancient Chinese believed blessings and prosperity were closely tied to sacrificial offerings and divine favor.

In bronze inscriptions, the structure of “Fu” becomes more discernible, retaining the idea of spiritual invocation and material abundance.

2. Small Seal and Clerical Script

During the Qin Dynasty, a small seal script standardized the overall shape of characters. “Fu” in small seal script still mirrored its religious and sacrificial roots, emphasizing the integration of the “left part” and the container-like form that symbolized abundance.

In the Han Dynasty, clerical script simplified certain strokes, making “Fu” more accessible and paving the way for subsequent transformations into regular script.

3. Regular Script and Modern Forms

In regular script, commonly used since the Wei and Jin dynasties, “Fu” takes a more standardized, balanced form. The left component underscores its religious or ritualistic origin, while the right component often resembles symbolizes material well-being.

In contemporary usage, “Fu” remains one of the most

recognizable Chinese characters. It frequently appears in household decorations during festivals, reflecting a cultural continuity that stretches back thousands of years.

By examining the evolutionary path of “Fu,” international learners gain a tangible sense of how Chinese characters have formed and changed over time. Through this lens, they also discover the enduring cultural significance embedded in seemingly simple strokes.

2.2. Cultural Significance of “Fu”

1. Auspiciousness and Blessings

The primary connotation of “Fu” is auspiciousness or blessings. During Chinese New Year, people display paper cuttings or calligraphic prints of “Fu” on doors, windows, and other visible places to invite good fortune into their homes.

2. Association with Traditional Festivals

The practice of placing “Fu” upside down during the Lunar New Year exemplifies a linguistic pun—(dào) means “to invert,” while (dào) sounds the same but means “to arrive.” Thus, the upside-down “Fu” is a playful indication that “fortune has arrived.”

3. Links to Religion and Rituals

Initially tied to divinity, “Fu” retains vestiges of spiritual connotations. Although the modern usage of “Fu” has become largely secular, it remains a culturally potent symbol of well-being and divine favor.

4. Integration with Family and Community

For both domestic and overseas Chinese communities, “Fu” often takes center stage at family gatherings and community events. In teaching international students about “Fu,” educators can introduce broader contexts of family values, kinship, and communal celebrations that shape Chinese social life.

3. The Value of “Fu” in International Chinese Education

Focusing on the character “Fu” presents several advantages for teaching Chinese to non-native speakers:

1. Enhancing Understanding of Character Form-Meaning Associations

By investigating the shape, sound, and meaning of “Fu,” students learn how Chinese characters have historically combined pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic elements (Liu, 2005). This approach encourages a holistic recognition of Chinese writing, alleviating the misconception that characters are mere memorization items.

2. Appreciating Chinese Word Formation and Orthographic Patterns

Although “Fu” stems from ancient ritualistic contexts, it nonetheless illustrates aspects of phonetic and semantic structure that appear in numerous Chinese characters. Learners thereby gain insights into recurring patterns in character construction.

3. Developing Cross-Cultural Communication

Thai students—who often share an affinity for concepts of merit, blessings, and well-being—can relate to the notion of “Fu.” Their own cultural beliefs can be mapped onto the Chinese concept of “fortune,” triggering deeper conversations about communal values, spiritual life, and daily habits (Qin, 2019).

4. Stimulating Interest and Positive Emotions

Cultural elements such as “Fu” foster emotional resonance and curiosity, giving learners a reason beyond rote

memorization to explore the language. The joyous symbolism of “Fu” is an effective tool for motivating students and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere.

4. Teaching Case: “Bringing ‘Fu’ Home” in a Thai Secondary School

4.1. Teaching Context

Location: A secondary school in Phetchabun, Thailand.

Student Proficiency: Most students possess beginner or intermediate Chinese proficiency. A few have little to no prior exposure to Chinese, while some have a basic command of common words and phrases.

Lesson Duration: One class period (approximately 50 minutes), specifically dedicated to a cultural theme.

4.2. Instructional Objectives

1. Knowledge Objectives

Understand the historical evolution and cultural connotations of “Fu.”

Recognize the pronunciation and stroke order of the character “Fu.”

2. Skill Objectives

Use basic Chinese expressions related to “Fu,” such as “Xing Fu” (happiness), “Fu qi” (good fortune), and “zhu Fu” (blessing).

Engage in simple speaking and writing exercises that reinforce the meaning of “Fu.”

3. Affective and Attitudinal Objectives

Foster a sense of curiosity and appreciation for Chinese cultural symbols.

Respect and compare cultural practices in both Chinese and Thai contexts, thereby enhancing students’ intercultural awareness.

4.3. Teaching Process

1. Warm-Up and Introduction (5 minutes)

Situational Introduction: Show photos or slides featuring “Fu” in various Chinese festivities—especially during the Spring Festival—to spark students’ curiosity.

Guiding Questions: Ask whether any student has seen the “Fu” character before, or if they understand its meaning. Introduce the lesson’s title, “Bringing ‘Fu’ Home.”

2. Cultural Explanation (10 minutes)

Evolution of “Fu”: Present a brief timeline of its development—from oracle bone script to modern forms—via PowerPoint or the blackboard. Emphasize the interplay between spiritual worship and abundance.

Cultural Connotations: Explain auspicious customs involving “Fu,” such as upside-down postings during New Year, linking them to the pun “Fu dao” (fortune arrives).

3. Language Focus (10 minutes)

Pronunciation and Stroke Order: Lead choral practice of “Fu” to ensure accurate pronunciation (in 2nd tone, “fú”). Demonstrate the stroke order and have the class follow.

Vocabulary Expansion: Introduce words containing “Fu,” such as “Xing Fu” (happiness), “Fuqi” (good luck), and “zhu Fu” (blessing). Offer simple sentences.

4. Comparative Discussion (10 minutes)

Chinese-Thai Cultural Comparison: Prompt students to think of Thai words or symbols that express “luck” or “merit” (e.g., “บุญ” /bun/, referring to merit in a Buddhist context). Compare it with “Fu,” inviting students to draw parallels between Thai and Chinese cultural attitudes toward blessings.

Group Conversation: In small groups, students discuss their own perceptions of “luck” or “blessings” in simple Chinese or Thai. Provide language scaffolding if needed.

5. Hands-On Activity (10 minutes)

Writing “Fu”: Provide each student with paper or calligraphy sheets. Those with stronger Chinese proficiency can attempt to write multiple forms (regular script, semi-cursive), while beginners can follow a guided stroke order chart.

Upside-Down “Fu” Game: Have pre-printed or student-written “Fu” characters. Distribute them randomly or in small teams, and ask students to hang them on the classroom walls—some upright, some inverted—while explaining the pun behind “Dao tie Fu.” Encourage them to practice simple Chinese phrases as they do so.

6. Conclusion and Extension (5 minutes)

Review: Summarize key points: (1) the origin and form of “Fu,” (2) its cultural significance, and (3) new vocabulary.

Homework or Extended Task: Suggest that students take home their written “Fu” or share it with family, possibly documenting reactions or personal reflections for the next class.

4.4. Evaluation and Outcomes

1. Student Response

Most students showed genuine enthusiasm for the “Fu” character, actively writing and participating in the “Dao Fu” (upside-down Fu) activity.

Students who previously had no exposure to Chinese writing found the strokes challenging yet intriguing, reflecting heightened motivation to continue learning.

2. Teacher Observations

Centering the lesson on “Fu” effectively anchored the cultural component, sustaining high engagement throughout the class.

The comparison with Thai concepts of “merit” piqued students’ interest and prompted lively discussions.

3. Reflection on Teaching

Time Allocation: Fifty minutes was somewhat limited for a complete exploration of character evolution, cultural explanation, hands-on practice, and discussion. A two-session approach might enable deeper investigations and more thorough assessment.

Differentiated Instruction: Given the varying proficiency levels, future lessons might offer tiered tasks, from basic stroke copying for absolute beginners to more advanced reading and usage for higher-level learners.

Multimedia Integration: Enhancing the lesson with short videos or animated segments on “Fu” could further enrich the sensory experience and contextual understanding.

5. Significance and Reflection

1. Feasibility of Character-Centered Cultural Instruction in Thailand

The Thai educational context often values cultural and spiritual elements, mirroring the symbolic depth of “Fu” in Chinese culture. Students are inclined to engage when they perceive parallels between their own and another culture’s traditions (Qin, 2019).

2. Mutual Enrichment of Language and Culture

Highlighting the evolving form of “Fu” underscores how a single Chinese character can encapsulate intricate cultural values. This integration helps to sidestep the pitfall of teaching language in isolation from culture, facilitating

deeper student insight.

3. Role of the Teacher as Cultural Mediator

In cultural lessons, the teacher goes beyond imparting linguistic knowledge. They encourage intercultural dialogue, use creative tasks, and guide learners to discover how language reflects identity, belief systems, and social structures.

4. Potential Directions for Future Practice

Expand beyond “Fu”: Explore other culturally significant characters such as “Xi” (joy), “Shou” (longevity), or “Jia” (home), weaving them into thematic units or cultural capsules that highlight specific facets of Chinese society.

Incorporate technology: Use digital tools—online quizzes, interactive character tracing apps, or virtual reality (VR) experiences—to visualize historical scripts, compare fonts, and practice calligraphy in novel ways.

6. Conclusion

The Chinese character “Fu” stands among the most emblematic and culturally rich elements in the Chinese linguistic repertoire. Its evolution from archaic script to modern usage reflects the enduring human desire for blessing, abundance, and peace. By implementing a theme-based lesson such as “Bringing ‘Fu’ Home,” educators in Thailand and elsewhere can offer learners an immersive look into the cultural and linguistic dimensions of Chinese. This case study underscores how integrating cultural symbols that resonate with learners’ own cultural backgrounds not only sparks their curiosity but also reinforces language retention and cross-cultural empathy.

The results of this initiative in Phetchabun show that, even within a single 50-minute session, students can gain valuable insights into the symbolic nature of Chinese characters, develop basic character-recognition skills, and draw meaningful parallels between “Fu” and their cultural notions of merit and fortune. While time constraints and varying proficiency levels present challenges, thoughtful layered activities and interactive discussion design can yield an engaging learning experience. As international Chinese education continues to evolve, a focus on culturally significant characters like “Fu” promises to deepen students’ appreciation of Chinese language and traditions, thereby serving the broader goals of cultural exchange and mutual understanding.

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