9 - Innovating Chinese Language and Culture Education: A Film-based Course for Singapore's Digital-Era Learners

Mo Zhang
yncmz@nus.edu.sg
Yale-NUS College / National University of Singapore

Abstract

This paper introduces a novel approach to Chinese language and culture education for advanced learners in Singapore. The course integrates traditional cultural elements with modern digital themes, employing film-literature pairings, interactive assignments, and collaborative digital tools to foster a deeper understanding of Chinese language and heritage. By addressing challenges specific to Singapore, such as bridging heritage and non-heritage learners, the course prioritizes cultural identity while advancing formal language skills. It equips students to navigate Chinese social media, understand cultural references, and engage confidently with both classical and modern texts, positioning heritage language learning within a vibrant, modernized framework.

Keywords: Chinese language education, heritage language learning, film-based pedagogy, digital tools, cultural identity

1. Introduction

In today's digital and multilingual Singapore, where English increasingly dominates in education and business, heritage languages like Chinese often find themselves relegated to secondary status. Teaching Chinese language and culture thus requires an approach that not only deeply engages heritage learners but also enriches the experience for non-heritage students, subtly bridging cultural gaps. Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has emphasized the essential role of proficiency in mother tongue languages in nurturing Singapore's national identity and deepening cross-cultural understanding. His perspective highlights the necessity for younger generations not only to know their heritage language but also to use it confidently in meaningful contexts.

This course, specifically crafted for students at the ACTFL Advanced High level, which corresponds to HSK Level 5 and above, adopts a dynamic approach that utilizes digital tools, interactive media, and real-world projects. By integrating traditional cultural content with new educational technology, the course transcends mere memorization to offer an immersive and comprehensive learning experience. Students will develop advanced linguistic skills alongside critical cultural competencies, preparing them for a lifetime of effective communication and cultural engagement. By fostering these abilities, the course supports Singapore's commitment to uphold linguistic diversity and positions heritage languages as central to national identity.

2. Relevance to Singaporean Society

This course addresses the unique challenges faced by advanced learners of Chinese in Singapore. Insights from students who have grown up attending Chinese classes reveal a common pattern: while many are fluent in speaking and understanding Chinese, they often struggle to engage effectively with Chinese social media or converse naturally with native speakers. Key challenges include interpreting implied meanings, using language appropriately across various contexts, and avoiding unintentional impoliteness.

Additionally, many students follow cultural norms without fully understanding their origins, largely due to the lack of explanation from parents or traditional educational settings. This limited cultural and literary exposure creates a gap in their ability to recognize commonly used references and expressions, further hindering their ability to communicate with nuance and depth.

Feedback also suggests that traditional Chinese education methods in Singapore, which often focus on rote memorization and a rigid pedagogical approach, do not always resonate with all students and may lead to decreased motivation. The limited exposure to the broader spectrum of Chinese literature and culture typically afforded to native speakers further exacerbates this issue. There is an increasing recognition of the need for more dynamic and inclusive teaching strategies that can deepen students' understanding and appreciation of the language.

To bridge these gaps, the course integrates a variety of cultural references that students encounter in their everyday digital and social interactions, smoothly transitioning from historical to contemporary contexts. For instance, students explore Chinese myths to see their impact on modern values and local Singaporean religious practices, delve into classical literary phrases such as Li Bai's '深藏功与名' (keep one's merit and fame hidden), and examine how themes from 'Journey to the West' and Lu Xun's 'Kong Yiji' appear in modern media forms like memes. This approach not only informs students about the origins of these cultural elements but also shows their modern applications, filling knowledge gaps and enhancing their understanding of nuanced language use. The course's clear explanations and historical context enrich students' appreciation of the significance of these expressions and behaviors.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1 Cultural Relevance and Social Identity in Language Learning

Research highlights the importance of cultural relevance in language education, especially for learners in multicultural settings like Singapore. Studies, such as those by Wen (2011) and Kagan (2012), underscore the unique motivational and identity-related challenges faced by students when cultural content is minimal. Dos Santos (2021) finds that students demonstrate greater commitment to language studies when these studies strengthen their cultural and social identities. By incorporating culturally relevant materials, the course not only enhances learners' connections to the language and culture but also helps them integrate their complex identities.

3.2 The Role of Movies in Language Education

The use of movies in language classes effectively bridges cultural and linguistic understanding. Films provide dynamic engagement by presenting cultural nuances in authentic contexts, as noted by Cai (2020) and Liu (2013). These movie-based activities allow students to construct and share cultural knowledge, thereby creating contexts for new conversations in their language, making the learning process both engaging and deeply informative.

3.3 Collaborative and Digital Tools in Language Education

Digital tools, including AI-based platforms and collaborative technologies like OneNote, play a critical role in modern language education. Niu et al. (2022) and Blake (2013) highlight how these technologies support tailored instruction and foster authentic language use through real-time feedback and collaborative learning environments. These tools provide dynamic, interactive opportunities for students to engage deeply with both the Chinese language and culture, facilitating a more effective and immersive learning experience.

4. Course Design and Structure

This course combines traditional Chinese culture and contemporary perspectives through film and text pairings, with weekly assignments that involve vocabulary development, cultural analysis, film

study, and peer-led discussions to foster active engagement. The course culminates in a creative final project that encourages students to apply their learning in a comprehensive, hands-on adaptation.

4.1 Film and literary pairings

The curriculum is thoughtfully structured to explore six major topics over the semester, each topic featuring a combination of one film and two literary texts that complement and deepen the understanding of each theme. For each topic, (i) the First Text introduces the historical and cultural background relevant to the topic. This preparatory phase is crucial for setting the context. For instance, before watching the movie *Chang'an*, students study Tang poetry—its forms, evolution, famous poets, and the stylistic rules and rhythms that characterize it. This foundational knowledge equips them to appreciate the cultural nuances depicted in the film. On the other hand, (ii) the Second Text involves a close reading of the literature related to the film. This deep dive helps students analyse and connect the thematic elements of the text with the film. For example, when exploring Liu Cixin's *The Wandering Earth*, students not only watch the film adaptation but also critically engage with the novel, comparing and contrasting the literary narrative with its cinematic interpretation. This dual-text approach ensures that students gain a robust understanding of each topic by engaging both broadly with cultural contexts and specifically with textual analysis. The film serves as a bridge, linking theoretical knowledge with visual and narrative representation, thereby enhancing students' appreciation and critical engagement with Chinese language and culture.

4.2 Classroom activities and assignments

The course is designed to maximize student engagement and autonomy, employing a flipped classroom model that emphasizes student-driven learning and preparation. This approach not only enhances linguistic and cultural comprehension but also fosters critical thinking and collaborative skills.

4.2.1 Pre-class preparation

In this course, preparation plays a crucial role and is highly collaborative, designed to foster both independence and teamwork. Instead of being provided with predefined vocabulary and grammatical structures, students are actively engaged in creating their own vocabulary lists, identifying key grammatical points, and noting significant phrases from the assigned texts.

To facilitate this collaborative process, the entire class shares a OneNote notebook, which enables real-time collaboration and asynchronous contributions while allowing the instructor to monitor progress and provide continuous feedback. Serving as a central repository, the OneNote notebook allows all students to compile their findings, prepare for discussions, and stay organized. This approach ensures that students remain focused and productive throughout the course.

Students are also required to develop thought-provoking questions based on their readings to bring to class discussions. These questions are designed to delve deeper into the material, encourage critical thinking, and challenge their peers' understanding. This preparatory work is a cornerstone of the course, forming the basis for in-class discussions and contributing significantly to students' final grades.

Using OneNote in this manner enhances students' ability to manage and organize their work while fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility for learning. It transforms the classroom into a dynamic, collaborative environment where preparation is integral to success. This approach not only makes the learning process more engaging but also instills a greater sense of accountability among students, ensuring a richer educational experience for everyone involved.

4.2.2 In-Class Discussions and Analysis

In-class discussions are a cornerstone of this course, primarily driven by students to foster a deeper engagement with the cinematic content. Each movie featured in the curriculum is paired with a student-led discussion session, where two students work as a group to facilitate the conversation.

This collaborative approach not only helps students delve deeper into the film's content but also enhances their leadership and presentation skills.

Before each movie discussion, all students are required to watch the designated movie independently and complete a detailed worksheet as homework. This worksheet covers various aspects of the film including its summary, themes, characters, and cinematic techniques. It serves as a preparatory tool that prompts students to critically analyze the film and organize their thoughts and observations, which they then bring to the classroom discussion.

For each movie, a pair of students is tasked with leading the in-class discussion. These discussion leaders use the completed worksheets as a foundation, combining them with their own findings and prepared questions to guide the session. This approach ensures that the discussions are thorough and informed, allowing for a deeper exploration of the film's content. The leaders are encouraged to foster a dynamic dialogue, challenging their classmates to engage more deeply with the material and to think critically about the cinematic presentation and its underlying messages.

This method not only enriches the learning experience but also cultivates leadership and presentation skills among the students, making the classroom environment more interactive and student-centered.

4.2.3   Creative Assignments and Final Project

Tang Poetry Analysis. Students engage in an analytical assignment where they compare translations of Tang Poetry by both humans and AI. This task involves a detailed examination of which translation captures the essence of the original poems most effectively. Students are required to document their analysis process, including sharing prompts and chat logs, which deepens their understanding of translation nuances and enriches their appreciation of poetic language and its cultural implications.

After completing this task, students reported a greater appreciation for the unique beauty of Tang poetry. They noted several challenges and unique aspects of translating such works, including:

Beauty of Chinese Characters: Students recognized the aesthetic and semantic richness of Chinese characters, which often cannot be fully replicated in translation due to their visual and conceptual complexity.

Lack of Tenses: The absence of tense in Chinese poetry can lead to ambiguities when translated into languages with strict tense requirements, posing significant challenges in maintaining the original's temporal fluidity.

Allowed Ambiguity: Chinese poetry often leverages ambiguity to enhance the lyrical quality and depth of meaning, a feature that can be lost in translation where clarity might be prioritized.

These insights highlight the intricacies of translating poetic language and underscore the inherent limitations of conveying certain poetic qualities across languages.

Final Project: "With Her Eyes" Film Adaptation. The final project challenges students to adapt the novel "With Her Eyes" by Liu Cixin into a visual narrative, integrating their accumulated knowledge creatively. The project involves several key phases:

Novel Analysis and Adaptation Planning: Students analyze the main themes of "With Her Eyes" and identify essential scenes for the film adaptation, choosing between a faithful adaptation or an innovative one focusing on core emotions and themes.

In-Class Essay – Key Scene Adaptation: During an in-class essay, students adapt a key scene, requiring detailed scene descriptions, character dialogues, and camera directions.

Storyboard Design: Using digital tools like Canva, students create storyboards that visualize the narrative transitions and designs, also submitting prompts and chat logs used in directing AI tools for scene visualization.

Final Presentation and Evaluation: Students present their adaptations, discussing their creative decisions and the visual language used, followed by a Q&A session where they receive feedback and are evaluated based on the depth and creativity of their work.

This approach strengthens language and cultural comprehension while empowering students to collaborate with AI tools, sparking innovation and creativity in their projects related to Chinese literary and cinematic traditions.

5.   Impact on Learners

Students have reported remarkable improvements in their confidence and language abilities as a result of taking this course. They have developed a deeper understanding of cultural references, including the language used on Chinese social media, memes, and emojis. This newfound knowledge has made their interactions on these platforms more accessible and relatable. Additionally, students feel more confident in their spoken Chinese, effectively employing both sophisticated vocabulary and everyday expressions. This balance has significantly enhanced their conversational fluency.

Furthermore, students have noted substantial increases in their reading speed and comprehension. Through exposure to a wide range of texts—from classical poetry to modern prose and digital content like social media posts—they have become adept at recognizing different writing styles. This varied exposure has sharpened their analytical skills, enabling them to appreciate and distinguish nuances between formal and colloquial language across diverse texts.

Overall, student feedback highlights the course's effectiveness in fostering a well-rounded development of cultural understanding and language proficiency. This growth not only aligns with the course's objectives of preparing students for various communicative contexts but also deepens their engagement with the Chinese language and culture across multiple formats.

5.   Conclusion

This course offers an innovative approach to advanced Chinese language education in Singapore, combining cultural relevance with collaborative and digital methodologies to enhance learning. Pairing classical texts with contemporary media helps students forge deep cultural connections and strengthen their linguistic foundations. It boosts confidence, equips students to navigate Chinese social media, and develops critical language skills essential for advanced learners in a diverse society.

This educational model also supports language preservation and cultural understanding in Singapore. By making learning meaningful and engaging, it meets advanced learners' practical needs while sustaining the vibrancy of Chinese cultural heritage in a multicultural context. It benefits Singapore's societal and cultural landscape, showcasing how innovative educational practices can deepen connections to heritage while embracing modernity.

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