

Reconstructing the Literary Curriculum System Centred on 'Literary Imagination'

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of building a modern Chinese civilisation in the new era, the Chinese Language and Literature, as a vital bastion of the new liberal arts, urgently requires a response to the 'new cultural mission'. This paper proposes a systematic restructuring of five core literary courses-Chinese Classical Literature, Chinese Modern Literature, Chinese Contemporary Literature, Foreign Literature, and Introduction to Literature-centred on the concept of 'literary imagination'. This paper takes "literary imagination" as the core concept and proposes a systematic reconstruction of five courses-ancient Chinese literature, modern Chinese literature, contemporary Chinese literature, foreign literature, and an introduction to literature-based on the characteristics of literary courses. By establishing a logical closed loop of 'Imagination-Identification-Creation', this framework elevates 'literary imagination' from textual rhetoric to an intrinsic mechanism of cultural cognition and aesthetic practice. Through functional divisions of 'Decoding-Tradition-Construction-Reference', the system aims to deepen students' cultural agency and aesthetic experience, providing an operational curriculum paradigm for cultivating cultural innovators in the new era.

1. Introduction

Recent mainstream literary creations (with the 11th Mao Dun Literature Prize-winning works as typical examples) have demonstrated profound exploration of ethnic themes. The key to their artistic breakthrough lies in transcending the display of regional customs, using "literary imagination" as a medium to directly reach the core of civilization. This phenomenon reveals that "literary imagination" is not merely an individual creative act of writers, but also a collective practice involving group participation in constructing Chinese cultural memory and shaping national community identity. His important discourses on "new cultural missions," "adhering to the 'two combinations,'" "the Fourteen Emphases," and "the Seven Focuses" provide fundamental guidance for talent cultivation in higher education institutions. As a crucial platform for cultural inheritance and innovation in universities, the teaching reform of Chinese Language and Literature programs urgently needs to translate grand cultural missions into concrete teaching approaches. This study argues that integrating the existing literary curriculum system with "literary imagination" as the theoretical pivot constitutes an effective strategy for achieving this transformation.

2. Theoretical Foundation: The Cultural Implication and Translating of the Times of "Literary Imagination"

From Aristotle's "Theory of Imitation" that embodies creative imagination, to the lofty positioning of "imagination" as a comprehensive mental capacity by German classical philosophers like Kant and Hegel, and further to Sartre's "psychology of imagination" which views imagination as a negation and transcendence of reality, literary imagination as the core mechanism of literary creation and reception has long been a focus of multidisciplinary attention spanning philosophy, psychology, narratology, and cognitive science. Within contemporary cultural studies, "literary imagination" has been endowed with distinct cultural connotations. In 1977, Williams proposed the concept of "emotional structure," viewing it as a key socio-cultural mechanism constraining literary imagination. Said pointed out that "literary imagination" represents the "Oriental" with cognitive biases in Western writers' works, serving as a crucial vehicle for constructing "other" discourse. With advancing cognitive understanding and interdisciplinary expansion, "literary imagination" is no longer a simple, neutral mental activity but rather a dynamic interplay of power struggles and resistance, driving the recalibration of social power structures and the awakening of identity consciousness. This article integrates it into the context of "mission of the new era", thus realizing the fundamental promotion of its value.

On one hand, imagination possesses the characteristic of creative synthesis, resonating with the requirements of "creative transformation and innovative development" in the new era. It emphasizes reconstructing the future while respecting the original essence. Kant believed that affinity imagination has two characteristics: sensibility and transcendental nature. This imagination also categorizes the manifold, providing a unified diversity to phenomenal manifold based on the principle of transcendental unity of self-consciousness—this is the synthetic transcendental unity of imagination [1]. "The 'end' of culture is civilization; the mission of any cultural form is to refine and forge a civilization" [2]. The ultimate value of constructing a modern cultural form in the Chinese style lies in achieving contemporary understanding and profound response to the laws of human civilization evolution through creative transformation of Chinese civilization and cultural genes. On the other hand, imagination has collective characteristics, providing a micro aesthetic entry point for understanding the "Chinese national community consciousness." Williams pointed out, "An emotional structure is the culture of a period: it is the special existing result of all components in the overall society" [3], representing shared social experience. It is also dynamic: "Most effective configurations of current art are related to already very obvious social configurations, i.e., dominant or residual configurations, while those related to emerging configurations (although such correlations often manifest as modifications or abnormal states within existing forms) are mainly sensory structures in a dissolving and flowing state" [4]. The Chinese national community consciousness is not an abstract political concept but is continuously confirmed and reproduced through shared stories, imagery, and emotional patterns in the "imagination" of countless individuals. Therefore, the concept of "literary imagination" is used in teaching process to cultivate students' cultural subjectivity and historical consciousness, which is also the task of new liberal arts in the present education.

3. System Construction: Four-dimensional "Literary Imagination" Course Synergy Mechanism

Practice is the transformer of thought, and the charm of thought can only be fully demonstrated when applied to practice. To integrate the aforementioned concepts into curriculum development, it is necessary to break down the barriers between courses, focus on building an overall disciplinary perspective, and strive to construct a new system with unified objectives, logical progression, and complementary functions.

3.1 Introduction to Literature: Decoding the Theory of "Imagination" -Expanding and Consciousness of Cultural Horizon

As a theoretical course in literature, "Introduction to Literature" aims to equip students with a systematic, open, and culturally conscious methodology for literary analysis. It should not merely teach basic literary concepts and their components, but instead cultivate students' cognitive abilities and value judgments centered on "literary imagination." This approach elevates "literary imagination" from a traditional focus on psychological or rhetorical aspects to a tool for understanding the deep structure of literary texts.

3.1.1 Constructing an Interpretive Framework for Cultural Archetypes

Through systematic instruction on Carl Jung's "collective unconscious" theory and Frye's "myth-archetype criticism," students are guided to identify and analyze distinctive cultural archetypes of Chinese civilization, such as "harmony between heaven and humanity," "loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness," and "landscape as a metaphor for virtue." The theoretical curriculum transcends abstract concepts; it delves into specific imaginative schemas embedded in the national psyche, which have persistently shaped narrative logic and imagery systems across five millennia of history. By examining how symbols like the "dragon" and "wild goose" are repeatedly reactivated and reconstructed in different historical contexts, students gain insight into how literature serves as a vessel for preserving and transmitting national cultural memory.

3.1.2 The Implicit Dimension of Implanting Cultural Awareness

The assertion in "The German Ideology" that "the ruling class's ideology dominates every era" reveals how the political superstructure shapes cultural production through ideological leadership. Culture not only embodies the objective logic of economic relations but also reflects the value propositions of political power structures. While adhering to Marxist literary theory, the curriculum should implicitly incorporate discussions on the ideological functions of "literary imagination." Through analyzing classic works like "The Gadfly"-which uses "growth narratives" to portray people as active subjects in revolutionary history-and "Xiao Baozhuang"-which employs "spatial imagination" to reflect urban class differentiation-the interpretation of political elements transcends mere repetition. It helps students understand literature's crucial role in national identity, value guidance, and cultural heritage preservation through academic perspectives, thereby enabling them to grasp the cultural mission of the new era.

3.2 Ancient Chinese Literature: The Activation of the "Imagination" Tradition - From Archetypal Motifs to Cultural Roots

"China Ancient Literature" is the backbone and core course of the literature category, not only guiding students to understand the aesthetic mechanisms of Chinese literature, but also serving as the core vehicle for the self-awareness, historical writing, and value construction of Chinese civilization. Under the tradition of "literature bearing the way," Chinese literature undertakes the mission of "a great undertaking for the state and an immortal grand event." Emphasizing concepts such as "cultural confidence" and "people first," the teaching highlights the cultural roots of "why China."

3.2.1 The Mechanism of Highlighting the Cultural Context of Chinese History

Literature transcends being a passive reflection of historical events; it is an active practice of reinterpreting historical experiences through imaginative processing and value reassessment. Since

the Shangshu's assertion that "poetry expresses aspirations," literature has served as the enduring dynamic memory of Chinese civilization. Take the highly symbolic pursuit of "water" in "Jianjia" from the Book of Songs' Qin Odes as an example. The linguistic tension between lofty ideals and practical constraints ("the path is long and arduous" and "tracing upstream to follow it") became a spiritual archetype for scholars confronting the gap between ideals and reality. Qu Yuan's resolve in "the road ahead is long and arduous," Du Fu's concern in "worrying about the common people all year round, sighing with inner heat," and Gong Zizhen's call in "I urge the heavens to shake off their lethargy and send talents without restriction" all exemplify this. Literature not only records individuals but also eras, and through the intergenerational transmission of imagery, constructs the spiritual lineage of Chinese scholars that permeates the civilization.

3.2.2 The Field of Cohesion for National Community Consciousness

Numerous classical texts originated from and served the people, continuously enriching their meanings through interactions among multiple ethnic groups. The "Guofeng" in the Book of Songs, for instance, comprises folk songs from various regions, while the Han Yuefu, characterized by its simplicity and vigor, "arises from sorrow and joy, and is inspired by events." Bai Juyi's verse "Only through song can the people's suffering be expressed" reflects a profound commitment to reality and compassion for the common people, forming the deepest moral foundation in Chinese literature. From the shamanistic culture in the Songs of Chu and the Northern Dynasties' customs in Chilu Chuan, to the Western Regions' landscapes in Tang Dynasty frontier poetry and the "Hu culture" phenomenon in Yuan opera, and further to the intermingling of Manchu and Han cultures in the Qing Dynasty, along with multi-ethnic epic traditions like the heroic epics Gesar, Jianggeer, and Manas, these texts collectively serve as literary testimonies to the "unity in diversity" of Chinese civilization. They provide a solid historical basis and emotional support for "strengthening the sense of community among the Chinese nation."

3.3 China Modern Literature: The Construction of a "Community of Imagination" -The Modern Transformation of National Narratives

The courses "China Modern Literature" and "China Contemporary Literature" not only inherit the cultural genes accumulated in "China Ancient Literature" but also provide global perspectives from "Foreign Literature," directly addressing the practical circumstances and spiritual demands of China's society in the new era. They serve as a "link" within the literary curriculum system. This course should guide students to understand how Chinese literature contributes to the construction of a modern nation-state, the awakening of individual subjectivity, and the consolidation of the consciousness of the Chinese nation community. Based on the deployment of "new cultural missions," "adhering to the 'two combinations,'" and "strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese nation community," it highlights the key pathways for writing the spiritual core of Chinese literature since the 20th century.

3.3.1 Interpretation of Literary Imagination and the Dual Awakening of "Nation-Individual"

The emergence and development of China's modern and contemporary literature itself is a thought revolution driven by "imagination". Facing the collapse of traditional order and the impact of Western civilization, literary imagination provides practical power for the transformation of modernity. The first generation of enlightenment writers, represented by Lu Xun, with deep concern for the dual modernity tasks of "establishing individuals" and "establishing the nation", used literary imagination as a weapon to deconstruct traditional authority and open space for modern rationality and individual will. Lu Xun's "New Retellings of Old Tales" demystified and deconstructed images such as gods, heroes, and ancient sages with a "smooth" writing style.

3.3.2 Characterizing the cultural confidence of contemporary China

With the development of the times, contemporary Chinese literature has further shifted towards a positive portrayal of contemporary China. Writers no longer passively accept Western theories or narrative models, but instead engage in the dialogue of world literature based on Chinese experience. Mo Yan became the first Chinese writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. In "Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out," the author borrows the framework of Buddhism's "six realms of samsara" and, through indigenous imaginative resources, creates a uniquely Chinese "surreal historical writing." Liu Liangcheng's "Benba," based on the Mongolian epic "Jangar," achieves a bidirectional convergence between nomadic and Central Plains civilizations through temporal and spatial reorganization, earning the 11th Mao Dun Literature Prize.

3.4 Foreign Literature Course: The Multiple Reference of "Imagination" -The Establishment of Subjectivity in the Dialogue of Civilizations

Foreign Literature serves as a unique "reference framework" in literary curricula. Rather than merely presenting foreign literary histories, the course guides students to explore the diverse forms of "literary imagination" within the broader context of global civilizations. It encourages reflection on the uniqueness and universality of Chinese culture, thereby fostering a clear and confident cultural identity. Guided by the principles of "promoting civilizational exchange and mutual learning" and "embracing outstanding cultural achievements with an open mind," the program enhances students' profound understanding of world civilizations and their capacity for equal dialogue.

3.4.1 Mapping the Imagery of Multicultural Civilizations

Every literary tradition is rooted in its unique historical experiences, worldview, and emotional framework, giving rise to distinctive narrative logic and aesthetic paradigms. In teaching, educators should steer students clear of the pitfalls of "Western-centric" or "ethnocentric" perspectives. In the ancient Greek tragedy "Oedipus Rex", the "oracle" -an external, unknowable, and unyielding decree of fate-establishes the fundamental constraints on characters' actions. In contrast, the lament in "Records of the Grand Historian: The Biography of Xiang Yu", "Heaven has abandoned me, not because of my war," reflects a hero's affirmation of personal integrity at the brink of despair, where "divine mandate" becomes a symbol of moral introspection and historical responsibility. This contrast reveals the fundamental differences in how two civilizations envision humanity's relationship with the world: one emphasizes the heteronomy of fate, while the other underscores the autonomy of personality.

3.4.2 Response to the Relationship between Chinese and Western Literature

Since modern times, Western literature has exerted a profound influence on the development of Chinese literature, which is a "creative transformation" of cultural consciousness. Teaching should guide students to analyze the pathways, mechanisms, and localized outcomes of this influence, and to understand how Chinese literature establishes its own discourse in global dialogues. For instance, during the May Fourth period, Ibsen's social issue plays sparked discussions among Hu Shi, Lu Xun, and others on "Nora's departure" and "personal awakening," contributing to the rise of modern enlightenment literature in China. In the 1980s, Gabriel Garc ía Márquez inspired Chinese writers to blend folk beliefs, historical trauma, and Latin American experiences, creating "surreal historical narratives" with a distinctly Chinese flair. Notably, this influence was not one-way. Lu Xun's adoption of Nietzsche's "Übermensch" philosophy was always anchored in the Chinese consciousness of "establishing individuals" and "saving the nation." Similarly, Yu Hua's early references to Kafka and

Faulkner ultimately served his unique portrayal of the violence and warmth in Jiangnan towns. True innovation emerges at the intersection of civilizations.

4. Practice Path: From Classroom to Aesthetic Transformation of Creation

The effectiveness of the curriculum system is demonstrated through cultivating students' cultural subjectivity and stimulating their aesthetic creativity. To achieve this educational goal, it is essential to move beyond the traditional knowledge transmission model and establish a practical support system aligned with the core concept of "literary imagination." This system should focus on four key areas: teaching methodologies, educational philosophies, technological environments, and institutional coordination, thereby transforming students from passive recipients into active cultural participants and creators.

First, elevate the teaching philosophy from knowledge transmission to value guidance in public services. The fundamental task of higher education is to cultivate virtue and nurture talent, and literary education should transcend the narrow perspective of "art for art's sake" to embrace public care for society. The "people-centered" approach should be integrated into curriculum design, guiding students to translate classroom learning into practical actions for grassroots cultural development. Systematic cultural volunteer services can be organized, connecting students with local cultural centers, intangible cultural heritage protection centers, or community academies. For example, students can be guided to compile oral histories of endangered folk tales and write literary scripts, assist rural schools in developing school-based reading courses based on local legends, or plan thematic exhibitions titled "China in Literature" for urban public cultural spaces. Through this process, students not only deepen their understanding of the "people-oriented" literary tradition but also experience the responsibility and value of being cultural inheritors through service. This transformation from "imagination to action" vividly embodies the "assumption of new cultural missions" among the younger generation.

Next, improve teaching methods by activating the generation mechanism of literary imagination through the BOPPPS teaching model and project-based learning. This paper introduces the BOPPPS teaching model to ensure that classroom teaching centers on the core goal of cultivating "literary imagination." For example, when explaining the "blank theory" in the course "Introduction to Literature," a short story without an ending can be used to spark students' imagination about "undetermined points." Then, this study clarifies that the lesson objective is to understand how the "call structure" drives reader participation. Through classroom interactions, teachers assess students' existing knowledge, organize group discussions on different versions of continuations and their cultural metaphors, and finally evaluate students' understanding of the "co-construction of imagination" mechanism through reflection journals. By designing comprehensive tasks with authentic cultural contexts, this teaching design actively promotes project-based learning. For instance, in the course "Ancient Chinese Literature," a project titled "Retelling Local Legends" can be set, requiring students to conduct field research, explore archetypal motifs in folk narratives, and creatively reinterpret them using modern media (short videos, podcasts, picture books, etc.). In "Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature," a project titled "Writing Contemporary Forewords for National Epics" can be conducted, guiding students to create a foreword that blends classical imagery with contemporary themes, using "Gesar" and "Jangar" as models and incorporating their own understanding of "community." Such projects allow students to experience the complete cycle of "decoding tradition-emotional identification-innovative expression," transforming the abstract concept of "literary imagination" into actionable and demonstrable aesthetic practices.

Meanwhile, we should further enhance the creation of teaching environments by leveraging digital technologies to elevate immersive aesthetic experiences. In response to the learning habits of digital

natives, educators must proactively embrace technological advancements and utilize digital humanities tools to expand the perceptual boundaries of "literary imagination." By constructing blended virtual and physical teaching environments, we can strengthen students' immersion and interactivity. On one hand, collaboration with STEM disciplines could develop immersive literary scenarios—such as reconstructing the spatial layout and lighting ambiance of the Grand View Garden in "Dream of the Red Chamber" to allow students to "step into" the Illusory Realm, intuitively experiencing how Cao Xueqin constructed a fable-like world through garden imagery, or simulating Buddhist scenes from Dunhuang murals to appreciate how ancient artists conveyed religious emotions through visual imagination. On the other hand, digital corpora and text mining technologies can guide students in cross-civilization comparative studies. For instance, analyzing hero title networks in "The Iliad", "The Epic of King Gesar", and "The Odyssey" to quantify different civilizations' emphasis on qualities like "courage" and "loyalty," or using sentiment analysis tools to track the emotional intensity evolution of "loneliness" imagery from "Li Sao" to "Wild Grass". These technological approaches can enhance teaching novelty, enabling students to deepen their understanding of the "literary imagination" mechanism through both data and experiential dimensions.

Next, construct a literary teaching system to promote knowledge integration through cross-course seminars. The reform of a single course has its limitations, necessitating the breaking down of disciplinary barriers and the establishment of an integrated cross-course collaborative mechanism. This can be achieved through the research group's topic setting, where teachers from various courses jointly design and take turns leading a series of seminar courses, thereby enhancing both knowledge and skills. For example, a special topic titled "The Genealogy of Utopian Imagination" could be introduced. Theory teachers would focus on analyzing "Utopia" as a theoretical model of social imagination, while literature history teachers would integrate knowledge systems by combining literary characteristics from different periods. In the section on ancient Chinese literature, the farming ideal and Taoist natural philosophy in Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring" could be interpreted. In the section on modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Shen Congwen's critique of modernity in "The Western Hunan World" and Liu Cixin's cosmological and sociological concepts in "The Three-Body Problem" could be analyzed. In the foreign literature section, texts such as More's "Utopia" and Huxley's "Brave New World" could be introduced to explore the evolution of Western utopian thought. Through such comprehensive and in-depth knowledge integration, students can fully grasp the historical evolution and civilizational differences of a particular imaginative motif within the curriculum function chain of "decoding-gene-connection-reference," achieving structural integration of knowledge and a leap in thinking.

5. Conclusion

The "Decoding-Genes-Construction-Reference" approach to reconstructing the literary curriculum system through "literary imagination" represents an innovative exploration of translating cultural missions into educational practice. By synergizing four core courses, this framework effectively bridges the gap between grand narratives and individual experiences. However, challenges persist in balancing "aesthetic autonomy" with "ideological guidance," as well as nurturing students' capacity for deep, coherent imagination. Looking ahead, the rapid development of AI-generated content is reshaping humanity's unique "literary imagination" mechanism. This demands that our curriculum remain open and forward-looking—not only teaching students "how to imagine," but also guiding them to reflect on "why we imagine" and "what imagination truly means." Only through such an approach can we cultivate new generations with profound cultural roots, global perspectives, and innovative capabilities, contributing an inexhaustible wellspring of wisdom to the modernization of Chinese civilization.

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