<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Teaching of thinking skills and transmission of culture: A case in the teaching of classical Chinese short stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author</strong></td>
<td>Chan Chiu Ming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source</strong></td>
<td>ERA Conference, Singapore, 23-25 November 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organised by</strong></td>
<td>Educational Research Association of Singapore (ERAS)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.
Teaching of Thinking Skills and Transmission of Culture
- a Case in the Teaching of Classical Chinese Short Stories

Chan Chiu Ming
DIVISION of Chinese Language and Culture
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

I) Thinking Skills for the 21st Century and the Teaching of Classical Chinese Literature

With the advent of the 21st century, educationists as well as political leaders of many parts of the world have started rethinking the role of schools. The importance of teaching of thinking skills is foregrounded. In Singapore, political leaders and educationists aspire to the ideal of Thinking Schools and Learning Nation (TSLN). At the same time, it is believed that the transmission of traditional Chinese values is important for Chinese Singaporeans. This is because: (1) the knowledge of their Mother Tongue (in our case, Chinese), and the traditions, values and perspectives embodied in their cultural heritage will contribute to the development of a sense of cultural awareness and confidence for Chinese Singaporeans (Teo, 1998), and (2) an understanding of the Chinese perspective in addition to the western perspective will enable Chinese Singaporeans to understand the world, as well as Singapore society, better (Lee, 1997).

Questions remain, however, as to whether thinking skills can be infused into the teaching of short stories while at the same time transmitting cultural values? and in what ways can this be achieved? Given the numerous examples in Swartze & Parks (Swartze & Parks, 1994), one may safely say that thinking skills can be infused into the teaching of literature. However, one may need a theory to support this claim. Therefore, in a section below, we will attempt to back this claim up from a literary perspective. A concrete example, however, will be needed if one is to show that one can infuse thinking and at the same time transmit cultural values. Such an example will be given later.

To answer the second question, one must first examine what the thinking skills are that experts of the field advocate. One must then proceed to explore whether and which of these thinking skills can be meaningfully applied to a specific discipline, in our case, classical Chinese short stories. Such an exploration would involve an investigation into the nature of the short story in general and classical Chinese short stories in particular.

II) Thinking Skills: What do we mean?

Swartze and Parks have mapped out five domains of thinking, namely, (1) critical thinking, (2) creative thinking, (3) classification and understanding, (4) decision making and (5) problem solving. The first three domains are the thinking skills while the domains of decision making and problem solving are the thinking processes. Swartze and Park observe that the teaching of the thinking skills will not be complete if students are not trained to use them in decision making and problem solving. (Swartze & Park, 1994, pp.7-8). As a matter of fact, one may argue that “classification and understanding” skills can be subsumed under critical thinking. Therefore, it is understandable why many writers would only make the distinction of critical thinking and creative thinking, although there are many different definitions of the terms (Treffinger, 1995).

In the Thinking Programme that the Singapore Ministry of Education is launching, the following eight core thinking skills are emphasised: (1) Information Gathering, (2) Remembering, (3) Focusing, (4) Organising, (5) Analysing, (6) Evaluating, (7) Generating and (8) Integrating. To a large extent, they cover more or less the two categories of skills which Swartze and Parks call “critical thinking” and “classification and understanding.”
If my understanding of the Thinking Programme is correct, the emphasis for Singapore schools is at present on critical thinking. Accordingly, if one was to infuse thinking skills into the teaching of Chinese literature, one should also put the emphasis on critical thinking skills. One may, for example, ask students to gather information about an author or the historical background of a story. One may also analyse together with students the structure of a piece of writing by using visual organisers which Chinese scholars called banshu (whiteboard graphic design). A comparison and contrast of the characters of different persons in a story can also be done. This, in fact, is what many Chinese scholars have been doing. When it comes to writing an academic report on a short story, practically all the eight core thinking skills are applicable.

An advocate of lateral thinking, Edward de Bono points out that though “judgement (i.e. critical) thinking has its place and its value, it lacks generative, productive, creative and design aspects of thinking which are so vital” (de Bono, p.15). Citing David Perkins, he assures that “almost all the errors of thinking are errors of perception. In real life logical errors are quite rare.” (de Bono, 15). Therefore, instead of focusing on the “processing” phase of thinking (which he seems to apply to critical thinking skills), he is concerned more with the “perceptual” phase of thinking. He argues that “Perception is the way we look at things. Processing is what we do with that perception... In the future, we shall be able to delegate more and more processing to computers. That leaves the perceptual sort of thinking to humans.” (de Bono, pp.37-38). In his thinking programmes, he has promoted the use of a number of CoRT thinking skills, such as the PML, APC, CAF and C&S.

De Bono, one has to note, does not advocate the infusing of his CoRT thinking skills into specific content areas. However, if one reflects on the nature of literature and the purpose of teaching literature, one would have to say that literature has a lot of dealing with perceptions and one major purpose of literary studies is to broaden the ways people look at things, i.e. people’s perceptions. If one agrees with de Bono that the “perceptual sort of thinking” is more important in the age of IT, then the implications will be that in teaching literary work, one should aim more to the training of the perceptual phase of thinking. In analysing a character’s behaviour in a story, one should focus on what the character’s perception is and what does that perception leads to, instead of making judgement on his behaviours. In this light, the infusing of CoRT thinking skills into the teaching of literary writings can be most meaningful. In fact, Dr Chia Shih Yar, a colleague of mine, has made a good attempt in this direction (Chia & Lim, 1990, pp. 627-637).

An ideal kind of training in thinking skills should, if one combines the ideas of de Bono and Swartz, take care of both the “perceptual” phase as well as the “processing” phase of thinking. Since quite some example of how to infuse thinking for the “processing phase” can be found in Swartz and Park, my paper will only give an example of how to infuse thinking skills for the “perceptual phase.” But before I do that, let me first deal with the fundamental question of whether and why literature is a good means to infuse thinking.

III) The Teaching of Literature and Infusing of Thinking Skills

As mentioned above, Swartz and Parks argue that the teaching of thinking skills is not complete if students are not trained to use those skills in decision making and problem solving. In a recent seminar on assessment for thinking and change, Anthony J Nitko stipulates that one of the most basic assessment strategies for setting problem solving tasks is to “require students to apply their learning to real-world situations” (Nitko, 1998). What, one may want to ask, are the real-world situations to which a teacher of short stories can ask students to apply their thinking skills?

In the academic world, the writing of literary criticism may be a “real-life” problem. So that they may continue to a higher level, students have to master the thinking skills required for literary criticism. To students who will eventually become Chinese language teachers, the analysing of the structure of a piece writing can be a problem they will have to tackle in “real-world situations:” because theirs will be a world of academics.
Here some people may tempt to jump to the conclusion that if one looks beyond school life, then to the majority of students who do not pursue a teaching job in the future, writing a literary critique has nothing to do with a real life problem. If this observation is correct, then it will be most unfortunate.

Literature, however, deals with life itself. Literary works in general and fiction in particular cover all kinds of themes in diverse arenas which can be most central to adults’ lives: the political, cultural and ethical dimensions in society, people and relationships, ups and downs in one’s life, etc. Therefore, even if one adheres strictly to a new critical approach, focuses on the text itself, and dismisses all kinds of intentional and affective fallacies, one can still broaden his vision of life by discovering various visions through the literary works. In the long term, when students have come across enough examples of how people deal with their life problems, they may have acquired more perspectives (or, in de Bono’s terms, more patterns) for their own reference. As a matter of fact, examples abound where a reader is inspired by a literary work.

From the view of promoting the use of thinking skills in a process of solving real life problems beyond the school context, the new critical approach admittedly has its limitations: the thinking skills are applied to analysing the text and are detached from the readers’ own experience, even though the themes of the literary piece may be related to real life. In other words, the training in literary criticism of a new critical approach is only related to real life problems indirectly.

However, if one assumes a reader-oriented approach, then the focus will be shifted to how and why a reader responds in a certain way to a piece of writing. Here one sees immediately that a reader-response approach can be utilised to support the infusing of thinking into teaching of literature. In short, one can say with confidence that the teaching of thinking skills related to real life problems can theoretically be infused into the teaching of literature.

IV) The Classical Chinese Short Story and Transmission of Culture

In the above sections, we have argued that the infusing of thinking into the teaching of literature is theoretically practicable. The remaining question we need to deal with in this paper is: why we choose the classical Chinese short story instead of the philosophical writings of the masters (such as the Confucian Analects) when we talk of the transmission of Chinese culture.

This question cannot be sufficiently answered in this short paper. Nevertheless, it is suffice to say that (1) the classical Chinese short story, as all other genres of traditional Chinese literature, shows an obsession with the idea of the “transmission of the way (i.e. correct cultural values)” (Hu et al. p.153). (2) therefore, core cultural values are expressed and discussed in classical Chinese short stories, while the philosophical works elaborate the concepts and values in abstract terms, short stories give concrete examples of how those values operate in society, (4) besides the high-brow culture, the short story also serve as a window to the feelings, thought and behaviours of people of all walks of life, and (5) the feelings, thought and behaviours of people in the stories are often shared by modern Chinese Singaporeans, and (6) the classical Chinese short story, a major literary genre in Chinese literature, is itself part of Chinese culture.

In section one, we have explained why it is important to transmit Chinese cultural values to modern Chinese Singaporeans. Here, we would also like to add this point: If the aspects of Chinese culture we preserve in Singapore contribute to the well-being of Singapore, we should be proud of ourselves. But if what we have preserved is not conducive to the development of Singapore, we should re-think and abandon those aspects. Whether we are more “Chinese” than the mainland China Chinese should not be our concern (a recent report found that Chinese Singaporeans are in a number of ways more “Chinese” than the mainland China Chinese, see The Sunday Review, Strait Times, 15 Nov 98). In short, the transmission of Chinese values must be Singapore oriented, and therefore critical thinking
must be used in our efforts to transmit Chinese cultural values. The classical Chinese short story is a best means for such a critical transmission of Chinese culture.

V) Infusing Thinking Skills for the Perceptual Phase of Thinking and Critical Transmission of Cultural Values: A Case in Teaching the Story of Yingying

In the above sections, we have argued that the classical Chinese short story can be utilised for training thinking skills. We have also explained that why it is a useful literary form for a critical transmission of Chinese culture. Our remaining task is obviously then to provide a concrete example of how we can infuse thinking skills into the teaching of classical Chinese short stories while at the same time transmitting, in a critical manner, Chinese values.

The example we would use is the Story of Yingying (Yingying zhuan) by the Tang literati Yuan Zhen (AD 779-831). A translation can be found in Lau and Ma (1978, pp.139-145). To facilitate our discussion later, a summary of the story is in order. So that we can illustrate at what points we can bring in the cultural practices while infusing thinking, some details are quoted. We will be using Lau and Ma's translation.

Basically, the story is one of conflicts between traditional ethical rules of propriety and passion and love. The gist of the story is this: At the beginning of the story, the young man Zhang, who was described to be “firm and self-constrained, and incapable of improper act”, explained to his friends why he had never dare to be involved with women. As he put it, it was not because he had no feeling for women. On the contrary, it was because he perceived himself to be a true lover on whom “an outstanding beauty never fail[s] to make a permanent impression.” This implied that if he ever fell in love, he would lose self-constrain. One day, he chanced to lodge in the same temple where a Cui family was staying. The patriarch of the Cui family had earlier died. It happened that a mutiny broke out and Zhang saved the lives of the Cui family through his relations with a military commander. In a banquet that Mdm Cui held to thank him, he met the girl Cui Yingying. Zhang fell madly in love instantly. Zhang’s desire for Yingying was so strong that he wanted her immediately and sought the help of Yingying's maid to seduce Yingying. When the maid suggested he formally asked for her hand in marriage, he explained why he could not wait, “If I were to go through a regular matchmaker, taking three months and more for the exchange of betrothal presents and names and birthdates—you might just as well look for me among the dried fish in the shop.” Since he was the saviour of the whole family, the maid felt obliged. So she carried a love poem for him to Yingying. Upon receiving the love poem, Yingying returned an amorous poem, asking him to steal into her bedchamber at night. But when they met, she lashed at him vehemently. “You began by doing a good deed in preserving me from the hands of ravishers, and you end by seeking to ravish me. You substitute seduction for rape—is there any great difference? My first impulse was to keep quiet about it, but that would have been to condone your wrongdoing, and not right. If I told my mother, it would amount to ingratitude.... So I finally composed those vulgar lines to make sure you would come here. It was an improper thing to do, and of course I feel ashamed. But I hope that you will keep within the bounds of decency and commit no outrage.” To the great surprise of Zhang, who thought all hope had gone, Yingying offered herself to his bed a few days later. Thereafter, the two met secretly nightly for a month. Yingying informed Zhang that her mother knew of the situation and realised that there was nothing she could do about it. Yingying said her mother only hoped that Zhang could “regularise things.” But then Zhang had to depart in order to sit for the civil service examination. He failed and stayed on in the capital. In her reply letter to Zhang, Yingying wrote, “Your letter said that you will stay on in the capital to pursue your studies ... such is my fate, and I should not complain ... When I offered myself in your bed ... I supposed, in my innocence, that I could always depend on you. How could I have foreseen that our encounter could not possibly lead to something definite, that having disgraced myself by coming to you, there was no further chance of serving you openly as a wife? To the end of my days this will be a lasting regret.” Eventually, Zhang deserted Yingying. He explained to his friends whom he informed of the affair, “It is a general rule that those women endowed by Heaven with
great beauty invariably either destroy themselves or destroy someone else. Of old, King Hsin (Xin) of the Shang and King Yu of the Chou (Zhou) were brought low by women, in spite of the size of their kingdoms and the extent of their power... and down to the present day their objects are objects of ridicule. I have no inner strength to withstand this evil influence. That is why I have resolutely suppressed my love.” In the end, his contemporaries generally thought that Zhang “had done well to rectify his mistake.”

Here in this summary, I have given the details which reflect some core traditional Chinese beliefs/practices. In teaching the story, these are also the values that a teacher may want to transmit, albeit in a critical manner:

(1) Favour must not be repaid with ingratitude,
(2) Proper marriage procedure must be followed; pre-marital affair was shameful;
(3) A man’s career (in this case, success in the civil service examination) was of utmost importance; passion and love must not hinder with a man’s career;
(4) Since antiquity, kingdoms had fell as a result of a ruler’s infatuation with a concubine. Therefore, beautiful and lovely women could be very dangerous.

A discerning reader will see immediately that all characters in the story, Yingying herself included, shared the first three beliefs. The last one was ingrained in the male Chinese mind. And, I dare say, even today, many Chinese men will still resort to the belief so as to explain away their own failure.

So much for the contents of the story, let us see how we can infuse thinking while at the same time transmitting, in a critical manner, traditional cultural values.

Before asking the students to do the following exercises, the teacher may, besides pointing out the beliefs/practices mentioned in a preceding paragraph, also “transmit” the rules of propriety as explained in the Neize chapter (Rules for the Inner Chamber) of the Book of Rites. She can also cite the relevant passages in Song Ruohua’s Nu Lanwu (The Women’s Analects). He should also point out that Yuan Zhen wrote the story soon after the An Lushan Rebellion, which nearly toppled the glorious Tang empire. To the Tang people, the culprit for the downfall of the otherwise sagacious emperor Xuanzong was the Concubine Yang. Therefore, Yuan Zhen was actually reflecting the opinion of his time when he said most people thought Zhang had done well for “rectifying his mistake.”

Alternatively, the teacher may ask the students to do an FI (Information-In) and FO (Information-Out) (de Bono, p.78) exercise for them to sort out the information already available in the text, and to find out what other information they still need to do the exercises.

Some possible answers to the exercises are provided (in italics). But they are not meant to be model answers. They are there to show concretely how such an approach can open up students’ eyes to different perceptions.

(a) First exercise in using various de Bono thinking tools: APC (Alternatives, Possibilities, Choices), C & S (Consequence and Sequel) and OPV (Other People’s View)

Suppose you were Yingying. Upon receiving the seductive poem from Zhang, you wonder what to do. Do an APC (Alternatives, Possibilities, Choices), C & S (Consequence and Sequel) and OPV (Other People’s Views) before you react.

For the APC, one may think of a number of alternatives (here, students should know that “the three words Alternatives, Possibilities, and Choices are there in order to make APC pronounceable. In different situations one other word may seem more appropriate but no attempt should be made to distinguish between them, de Bono, p.31), such as:

- Should I ignore the whole thing and act as if nothing has happened?
- Should I rebuke my maid and forbid her to contact Zhang any more?
- Should I send the maid to relay my anger?
- Should I go and lecture Zhang openly or privately?
- Should I tell Mom and let her handle the case?
- Should I inform the abbot of the temple?
- Should I accept him?
- Should I ask him to come to me secretly?
- Should I go to him secretly?
- Should I rebuke the maid and then secretly go to him?
- Should I test whether he really loves me?
- Should I tell him that I love him also?
- Should I ask him to propose properly?
- Should I politically turn him down by telling a white lie, like, I am already engaged?
- Should I think over the matter more carefully?
- Should I delay the decision by making up some excuse?

The C & S and OPV will vary as the APC varies. But a knowledge of the rules of propriety and social norms of the time are necessary.

(b) Exercise in using various de Bono decision making methods
Suppose you were Yingying. After you rebuked Zhang, you were very confused because in the close encounter with him, you found that your own desire was turned on. Before you made the decision as whether you should succumb to his wish, apply the following of de Bono’s decision making methods: (i) Buriden’s ass (de Bono, p.104), (ii) the ideal solution method (de Bono, p.105), and (iii) decision post-frame method (de Bon, p.110)

(i) Buriden’s ass: an example
My two choices are:
(1) Abide by the rules of propriety.
(2) Follow my heart, and give in to Zhang.
If I abide by the rules of propriety, I will lose Zhang, because he cannot wait. I do not even know whether Mom will agree to the marriage. Mom may scold me, reprimand Zhang and send him away. After sending Zhang away, Mom may marry me off quickly to another man of her choice. That man may not be someone I love. I will live unhappily forever.
If I follow my heart and go to Zhang, people will find out. My maid will tell on me. I may get pregnant. Zhang may only be testing me and see if I am a worthy woman. Zhang may betray me. He may not really love me. He may only want my body and may abandon me after he has me. Even if he does love me now and marry me later, he will look down on me for yielding to a stranger so easily. He will look down on me. He will be suspicious of me. He will divorce me. Even my family will be ashamed of me. Everyone will look down on me. I will live in shame forever. I will lose my chastity, my reputation. Zhang and everything.

(ii) the ideal solution
Zhang knows that I love him too. He respects me and loves me more for turning him down. He is willing to wait. He proposes properly. Mom agrees to the marriage. My family reputation and my own reputation are not tarnished.

(iii) decision post-frame
If I succumb to his wish, I will not be able to consider myself a proper woman. I will be ashamed of myself for the rest of my life.

Here it should be pointed out that Yingying lived in the Tang dynasty, and was very much influenced by the traditional cultural values. A teacher who is feminist may of course use this chance to criticise these values. But in doing the exercise, students should consider the social norms of the Tang times.
(c) Second exercise in using various de Bono thinking tools: CAF (Consider ALL Factors) and OPV (Other People’s View)

Suppose you were Zhang. After you left Yingying for the civil service examination, you found that you missed her so much that you could not concentrate on your studies. You failed in your first attempt at the civil service examination. You were to decide what to do with Yingying. Do a CAF and OPV before making your decision.

(i) CAF

The factors I should take into consideration:
- my love for Yingying
- Yingying’s love for me
- my ability to concentrate on my studies with/without Yingying
- the importance of the civil service examination to me
- the importance of Yingying to me
- my family expectations of me
- my plans for the future
- the ideal wife that I want to have
- what would others think of me

(ii) OPV

- what will Yingying think of me if I can never pass the civil service examination because of my infatuation with her?
- what will my fellow scholars think of me?
- what will my parents and brothers think of me?
- what will Yingying think of me if I abandon her?
- what will my fellow scholars think of me?
- what will my parents and brothers think of me?

(d) Exercise in using the “ideal solution” method of decision making

Suppose you are sympathetic with Yingying and want to change the plots of the story. Think of the “ideal solution” for the story before you start re-writing Yuan Zhen’s story.

In order to do this exercise successfully, students must be very familiarised with the story and the traditional rules of propriety. Therefore, the exercise will kill two birds with one stone: transmitting the cultural values, and providing students the chance to exercise their creativity. Also, this exercise paves way to the following exercise in ADI.

(e) Exercise ADI (Agreement, Disagreement and Irrelevance)

After the Tang Dynasty when Yuan Zhen first published his Story of Yingying, there had been a number of revised versions of the story. One example is the Romance of Western Bower by Wang Shifu the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). In Jin Shengtan’s (1610-1161) edition of the Romance of Western Bower, Yingying’s mother had offered Yingying to any man who could save her family when danger was imminent. It was Zhang who saved the family. Yingying later succumbed to Zhang’s demand for a relationship only because her mother turned back on her words and Zhang had fallen seriously ill as a result. She was the only thing that could save his life. Also, in this later version, Zhang was no longer a heartless lover. He married Yingying after he passed the civil service examination.

Examine the ADI of the two authors’ treatment of the characters and plots. Do an ADI also for Wang Shifu’s treatment and your own new version of the story.
Conclusion

In this paper, we use a story on love and relationship to transmit Chinese values on female propriety and marriage. Among classical Chinese stories, we can find many on friendship, loyalty, patriotism, filial piety, determination and the will to succeed, family values, etc. It will be most useful if educators can build up a repertoire of such stories which can be utilised to transmit cultural values and infuse thinking.

The prevailing practise in teaching short stories is to analyse its structure, the narrative point of views, the characterisation, etc. Such an approach of course provides occasions for students to exercise their critical thinking skills. But such exercises are always text-bound. The approach we suggest above, however, puts students in a more real-life situation and encourage them to change their perceptions. As such, it enriches the ways we can infuse thinking into teaching of short stories. In addition, cultural values can be transmitted in a more stimulating and challenging way. If one agrees that literature is about life, and that we study literature because we want to enrich our "life experience", then an approach that centre on application of thinking skills in real life situation is called for. All it is needed is a change of perception in the teaching of literature.

Before I end this paper, I would like to call on my Chinese colleagues to teach Chinese literature in a more provocative approach. And in a de Bonial fashion, let me rettitle my paper as follows (where Po means Provoactive Operation):

Po Infusing of Thinking Skills and Critical Transmission of Chinese Culture Can Best be Done With Classical Chinese Short Stories

References

English


Chinese


