
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of Cultural Transmission Channels on the Cultural Cognitive Attitudes of Chinese Learners in Bulgarian Secondary Schools: A Case Study of School No. 138 in Sofia

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ABSTRACT

Sofia School No. 138, located in Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria, is a public school with high recognition in the local community, and in 2012 the Confucius Institute in Sofia established a Confucius classroom in the school to teach Chinese to learners under 18 years old. This paper examines the spread of Chinese culture among the school's student body through questionnaires and interviews, taking the phenomenon of "Chinese language classes are cold" as a starting point. The study found that Confucius Institutes have played a very important role in spreading the Chinese language and Chinese culture around the world by offering Chinese language classes and organizing cultural activities, and they have been effective to a certain extent. However, the existing means of cultural dissemination, especially in comparison with Japan, has considerable disadvantages, such as the low utilization of mass media channels and the limited impact generated.

KEYWORDS

Bulgaria; Confucius Classroom; cultural transmission channels; cultural cognitive attitudes; teaching Chinese as a foreign language

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

1.1.1 Current status of teaching at Confucius Institute and Confucius Classroom in Sofia

Confucius Institute Sofia is the first Confucius Institute in Bulgaria, established in cooperation with Beijing Foreign Studies University and with the support of the Center for Sino-foreign Language Exchange and Cooperation, located in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. Since its development, the Confucius Institute in Sofia has opened Confucius classes, primary and secondary schools and universities in six cities, including the capital Sofia. School No. 138 in Sofia has a special focus on training foreign language students and has a Confucius Classroom attached to the Confucius Institute in Sofia, which teaches Chinese as a second language to learners under 18 years old. In order to ensure the quality of teaching and effective class management, the school limits the size of each language class. It is worth noting that Japanese, a second foreign language that is also within the scope of the Asian languages program, is popular among the student body when it comes to course selection. The number of applicants for Japanese classes often exceeds the upper limit of the number of classes offered, while the opposite is true for Chinese classes, where the number of applicants often does not meet the lower limit of the number of classes offered. At this point, some students may choose to enter Chinese classes instead because they are unable to take Japanese classes, simply because they both belong to the same Chinese cultural circle and seem to have many similarities. Obviously, the Chinese language and Chinese culture are not attractive enough for these students.

1.2 Significance of the subject

With the popularity of the Chinese language and the development of Confucius Institutes around the world, many countries have introduced Chinese language courses in primary and secondary schools. The correlation between the age stage of younger learners and their landing points of interest is a feature that should be taken seriously in both Chinese teaching research and teaching practice. However, the relevant studies that have been conducted are still relatively weak, and in terms of coverage, they mostly focus on Southeast Asia, Western Europe, North America, and other countries and generally still lag behind the actual needs. In recent years, thanks to the strong training of master's degree in Chinese international education in universities and the selection and dispatch of a large number of Confucius Institute volunteers from graduate students, targeted and country-specific research studies with Confucius Institute teachers and students as the main research objects have sprung up.

For younger language learners, the attraction to a country's language often stems from the culture it carries rather than the obvious motivation of adults to choose whether or not to learn a language, such as business needs. Clearly, the medium and manner in which culture is transmitted is an important influence in attracting children's interest in another country's culture and their willingness to learn more about it and then enter the classroom to learn about the language and culture.

In view of this, the author takes the opportunity of teaching at Sofia School No. 138 to examine the spread of Chinese culture among the school's students by means of questionnaires and interviews, hoping to understand whether and how much Chinese culture has an impact on students' language learning choices. The purpose of this study is to find out whether and how much influence Chinese culture has on students' language learning choices.

1.3 Studies by former scholars

As Zhou Hongduo (2005) points out, "Culture is the culture of communication, and communication is the communication of culture." Culture and communication complement each other, and neither culture nor communication exists without either one. In the long history of society and civilization, culture has undergone integration, value-added, sedimentation, stratification, and change through the facilitation of communication; communication has achieved the growth, integration and recombination of culture. For communication, culture is an important element that permeates the meaning, medium and process of communication. Many scholars, including Cheng Man-Li (2007), Liu Kang (2008) and Wu You-Fu (2009), have argued the scientific validity of this statement from different perspectives.

At present, there are still many shortcomings in China's foreign cultural communication work, and scholars such as Mao Feng (2005), Lin Wenyi (2014) and Li Xue (2019) have offered suggestions on cultural communication work from different perspectives, including the need to establish a perfect communication system, improve communication methods, focus on the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, and give full play to Chinese cultural characteristics.

For young language learners, motivation and interest are the most important factors that support their learning, and there are many factors that influence learners' motivation and interest, one of which is cultural transmission. Guo Yue (2008) points out that the traditional model of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, which focuses on language functions, can no longer fully satisfy Chinese learners' desire to understand Chinese culture and their need for deeper communication. The effect of cultural communication plays an important role in sustaining learners' interest. As Jiang Lili (2018) points out, effective cultural communication in teaching Chinese as a foreign language is a key influencing factor in making language teaching more efficient, and to better intercultural communication, effective cultural communication must be implemented to eliminate the phenomenon of negative cultural transfer and further meet the needs of intercultural communication, as well as to stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese and improve teaching effectiveness.

2. Preparation for the study tour

At Sofia School No. 138, Chinese is not a popular second language among all available options, and its popularity is far less than that of Japanese, which is also part of the East Asian language program. Initially, we found that many students at the school do not know much about Chinese culture and have little interest in Chinese, while they are more influenced by Japanese culture - some students explicitly said they took Japanese because of their love for Japanese anime and pop songs. Based on this, this paper intends to conduct a survey among students majoring in the Chinese language in grades 8-12, using questionnaires and interviews to understand students' attitudes toward the Chinese language and Chinese culture, their reasons for choosing or not choosing Chinese as a second language elective course, and to examine the relationship between them to understand how cultural transmission channels affect Chinese learners' attitudes toward cultural perceptions.

Based on Wu Ying's (2012) questionnaire design, this study designed the questionnaire based on the local characteristics of Bulgaria and the actual needs of this study and distributed it to students who took Chinese and Japanese in grades 8 to 12. The questionnaire for Chinese language classes, for example, focused on the language and cultural environment the respondents were

in or experienced, their knowledge of the Chinese language and Chinese culture, their level of interest in the Chinese language and Chinese culture, and whether they were willing to choose Chinese as a second language to learn and the reasons for it.

The questionnaires were distributed in two batches. The first batch was a small-scale trial distribution, and after the questionnaires were collected, the form and content of the questionnaires as well as the specific implementation plan of the survey, were adjusted to make it more scientific and reasonable in light of the actual situation encountered during the survey; the second batch was a large-scale formal distribution, and after collation, 42 valid questionnaires from the Chinese class and 40 valid questionnaires from the Japanese class were received for this distribution. In order to ensure the balance of data between the two classes, the author randomly selected 40 questionnaires from the second batch collected in the Chinese class as the subjects of this study in the Chinese class. The questionnaires from the Japanese class were mainly used as auxiliary reference materials to help us understand the students' attitudes and perceptions of Chinese culture.

3. Data and Statistical Analysis

3.1 Respondents' language mastery

It was found that 42.5% of the respondents from the Chinese classes had more than one year of Chinese learning experience, and 55% of the students had a Chinese learning experience between six months and one and a half years. Using HSK as a standard to measure the level, these students reached the highest level of 6 with 2.5%, reached level 3 with 27.5%, level 2 students accounted for the most with 40%, level 1 with 12.5%, and the rest had not participated or passed the exam. Therefore, we can assume that most of the students have some knowledge of Chinese, but not abundantly, and are at about the elementary or intermediate level. In this regard, the situation of Japanese language mastery among the students in Japanese language classes is similar.

3.2 Respondents' motivation for language learning

Sixty-five percent of the respondents from the Chinese classes chose Chinese because they "wanted to learn" it themselves, while some students said they were influenced by teachers, family, friends, media, etc. Eight students (about 20%) said they "had to" choose Chinese. Among them, three students said they would prefer to study Japanese. In the Japanese class, there were significantly more students who chose Japanese spontaneously or were influenced by people around them, while only two students "had to" choose Japanese.

3.3 Respondents' main ways of learning about the culture and their influence on cultural attitudes

The survey listed ten possible ways for students to learn about Chinese culture, including Chinese classes at school, Chinese classes at Confucius Institute, cultural activities at school, cultural activities at Confucius Institute, mass media, Chinese tutoring classes, friends and relatives, gifts and souvenirs, personal experience of visiting China, and others (in descending order of frequency). It can be seen that the main sources of students' understanding of Chinese culture are schools and Confucius Institutes, Chinese language courses and cultural activities, and only 32.5% of students think they can learn about Chinese culture through the mass media. In the Japanese language class, the corresponding item, "learn about Japan through the mass media", was 82.5%, second only to the Japanese language class at school.

This survey also included a survey of learners' attitudes towards their perceptions of Chinese culture. The survey consisted of 17 questions, ranging from disagree/not interested at all to agree/strongly interested. Based on the idea of "field theory" in Malec's sub-mass communication field, the survey mainly investigates whether the respondents are interested in China and whether they are willing to learn about Chinese culture actively. By comparing the students' acceptance of Chinese cultural communication channels and their attitudes toward cultural perceptions with the help of the chi-square test cross-tabulation in SPSS, we found that students' attitudes toward the perceptions of China were generally normal. The higher the level of awareness, the higher the influence of "Confucius Institute Chinese language classes" and "school Chinese language classes", followed by the positive influence of "Confucius Institute cultural activities" on their cognitive attitudes. However, the number of students exposed to "school cultural activities" is high, but their positive influence on cultural awareness is not high. The number of students exposed through the other channels of communication is low, and the impact on students' perceptions is not profound. These results indicate that Confucius Institutes/Confucius Classrooms play an important role in the dissemination of Chinese culture in our schools and are the main way for students to learn about and become interested in Chinese culture; that the cultural activities of Confucius Institutes have a good impact on the group of Chinese learners in local secondary schools; and that the design of school culture classes still needs to be improved to meet the interests and hobbies of students.¹

¹ For more details on the design of the SPSS chi-square test cross-tabulation, please refer to the author's paper "A study of the influence of cultural transmission channels on the cultural awareness attitudes of language learners in secondary schools: the example of Sofia School No. 138".

On the basis of the questionnaire, I also conducted further one-on-one interviews with some of the respondents and some students who met the requirements but were not interviewed for some reason in the hope of gaining a deeper and more specific understanding of the student's thoughts and attitudes. The final interview results not only confirmed the findings of this questionnaire survey but also helped us to obtain more detailed and vivid research materials.

3.4 Preliminary conclusions of the investigation

After compiling the results of the questionnaires and one-on-one interviews and comparing the material of the respondents from both classes, we can conclude that the main way for the students of this school to learn about the Chinese language and Chinese culture is still concentrated in school activities, while the influence of mass media means such as popular music and film productions is relatively insufficient. On the one hand, we can see that, at least in Bulgaria, the means of spreading the Chinese language and culture through the power of Confucius Institutes have been quite effective, forming one of the main forces in the spread of Chinese culture abroad; but on the other hand, we should also note that the influence of mass media, which should be the main force in the spread of culture, is still relatively weak. Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms have the disadvantage of having a narrower audience as a channel of cultural dissemination and are influenced by many factors, such as the level of school operation, the importance of the school administration, the teaching level of teachers, and the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, so the effect of Confucius Institutes on cultural dissemination and the promotion of cultural awareness is obviously limited. As a comparison, Japanese pop culture, represented by anime, pop songs, film and variety shows, has a much wider influence and appeal among the young student population.

4. Reflections and Recommendations

According to the survey results, I believe that Confucius Institutes have played a very important role in spreading the Chinese language and Chinese culture worldwide by means of offering Chinese language classes and organizing cultural events, and they have achieved certain results. However, the existing means of cultural dissemination, especially in comparison with Japan, has not a small disadvantage, such as the low utilization of mass media channels and limited impact. This, of course, is inextricably linked to a combination of historical, economic, and international relations factors. It is worthwhile to learn from the Japanese cultural communication tools, such as anime works, that have had a profound impact on Bulgarian children's language learners.

Nowadays, China's economy is developing rapidly, and its comprehensive national power is rising rapidly, but the situation of spiritual and cultural construction and innovation of communication forms is still not optimistic. Due to this constraint, China's foreign cultural communication channels and forms are still relatively single and not innovative enough, and their overall influence is limited, making it difficult to stimulate the interest of ordinary foreign people, let alone sufficient understanding. Because of its 5,000-year history and pride in its history, China's cultural communicators have always attached great importance to the promotion of traditional culture in the process of foreign cultural communication. There is nothing wrong with this idea, but should we not also pay equal attention to how to tell our own popular culture, pop culture and youth culture? The answer is obvious. It's not that we don't have popular, youth-appealing culture, and we can easily build on that with the help of our rich history to more fully exude our unique cultural charms on the international stage - but to do so well still requires a concerted national effort.

The survey also found that because Chinese language classes and campus cultural activities are the main means of communication, the level of school administration, the degree of attention given to them, and the quality of the teachers themselves have a great impact on students. The "love and hate" of a course because of a teacher's love or hate is a common emotional state of students when they participate in classroom activities. If a teacher's quality or teaching level is unsatisfactory, it is likely to discourage his or her students from learning Chinese and understanding Chinese culture. In contrast, students are unlikely to reject Japanese culture just because they do not like to read a certain Japanese manga. From this perspective, our existing cultural transmission channels are still single and fragile. In addition to the expansion of communication channels, it is also necessary to improve teachers' quality and teaching standards. In addition, in light of our teaching experience, I believe that we should also further improve the organizational system of Confucius classes, innovative teaching materials and contents, and strengthen the training of local teachers and the interaction and cooperation between Chinese teachers and local teachers.

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