

# On the Roles of Cultural and Artistic Features of Dialects in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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As a Chinese dialect that bears the greatest resemblance to Standard Mandarin, Northeastern Mandarin is the closest relative of Standard Mandarin in terms of vocabularies, rhetorical devices and grammatical rules. The traditional Chinese folk culture of *Errenzhuan* (two-people rotation)<sup>1</sup> is an epitome of traditional Chinese culture, full of humor and wittiness. This paper aims to explore the necessity and feasibility of incorporating *Errenzhuan* into teaching Chinese as a foreign language as a way to spark greater student interest, increase the fun of learning and enrich teaching methods, which ultimately serves to improve the quality of Chinese teaching worldwide, spread traditional Chinese folk culture and strengthen China's cultural confidence.

*Keywords:* teaching Chinese as a foreign language, cultural and artistic features of dialects, *Errenzhuan*

## Current Issues in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

With China's increasing national strength and growing presence on the global stage, Chinese culture has been gaining ever-increasing popularity. There has been an upsurge of interest in learning Chinese as more people have familiarized themselves with the Chinese language, which in turn holds the promotion of Chinese to a higher standard. The first World Chinese Conference held in 2005 laid out two tasks in promoting Chinese globally—popularizing Chinese as a global language and spreading Chinese culture, highlighting the need to utilize the Chinese language as a vehicle for spreading Chinese culture. This speaks to the fact that teaching Chinese as a foreign language goes beyond language per se but undertakes the major task of culture diffusion worldwide.

Lu Jianming (2009) emphasized that “further research and more practical and scientific understanding are needed to address a wide range of problems in Chinese teaching, including some of the most fundamental issues” (Lu, 2009, p. 26). Some of the prominent problems of teaching Chinese as a foreign languages include:

### (1) Students Gradually Lose Interest and Motivation Due to the Arduous and Boring Learning Process

As one of the oldest surviving language in the world, Chinese is considered the toughest language to master by many foreign students. Due to a myriad of homophones and synonyms in the Chinese language, students need a great deal of practice just to grasp the basics of pronunciations and characters, which is a huge

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: *Errenzhuan* is a form of song-and-dance duet originated in Northwest China, usually involving two performers (one male and one female).

barrier for those who have passion for the Chinese language and culture, and results in a waning of interest to learn the language.

### **(2) Monotony in the Teaching Styles and Methods**

With respect to the styles and methods of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the focus tends to be on listening, speaking and reading Chinese characters. Teachers generally start with teaching Pinyin to let learners grasp the phonetics of Chinese characters, then moving on to teach relatively simple Chinese characters before introducing words and sentences. In this case, students passively take in information presented to them through lectures and instructions, which lacks creativity and renders the learning process rather dull and flavorless.

### **(3) Students Struggle with Practical Use of the Language**

Due to the monotonous teaching method of indoctrination in language education which results in a lack of interaction in the classroom, learners of Chinese often struggle with the practical use of the language, having trouble discerning the meaning of different expressions in different contexts. Lack of liveliness and diversity in the classroom often result in the case that students are able to comprehend the language elements but fail to grasp the techniques in language usage, let alone cross-cultural communication.

### **(4) Difficulties in Understanding Certain Expressions or Figures of Speech Due to Language and Cultural Differences**

Chinese is a time-honored language that rich in figures of speech and contextual overtones such as pun, metaphor, periphrasis, euphemism, metonymy, morphological repetition and anadiplosis. Since most students come from different countries and regions where their native language, worldviews and values drastically differ from those of Chinese, it becomes difficult for them to gain an in-depth understanding of these Chinese language features and apply them properly in real-life interactions.

### **(5) Difficulties in Understanding Chinese Dialects or their Cultural Features**

The Chinese dialects play an essential role in learning the Chinese language and culture. Standard Mandarin is never an isolated language as it is inextricably linked with other the local dialects. Teaching Chinese dialects is conducive to preserving the cultures of dialects and promoting intangible folk culture which is disseminated through dialects. Nevertheless, comprehending Chinese dialects may be a great challenge for students from different cultural backgrounds as they are unable to understand certain dialects and corresponding folk cultures in the context of their historical backgrounds and geological features, which is dubbed “culture shock”.

## **Characteristics of the Intangible Folk Culture in Northeast China**

The roots of *Errenzhuàn* can be traced back as far as nearly 300 years. Inextricably linked to Shamanism, *Errenzhuàn* is an ancient art form and cultural product derived from local folk customs. It is also a crossover art incorporating other art forms such as *Quyí* (or *melodious art*), song and dance, Chinese traditional opera, *Xiaopin* (or *comedic small performances*) and acrobatics. In contrast to other forms of intangible folk art such as Peking Opera and Chinese calligraphy, *Errenzhuàn* is known for its vivid, entertaining performances and universal appeal, primarily reflecting the trivialities and emotions of the common people in everyday life, which can be easily understood and thereby building deeper resonance with the audience.

Linguistically speaking, Northeastern Mandarin is a subgroup of Northern Mandarin, a variation of Mandarin Chinese (or *guanhua*)<sup>2</sup> that bears even more resemblance to Standard Mandarin than the Beijing dialect. It has a degree of similarity with Standard Mandarin in terms of word formation, phonetics and grammar and is characterized by simplicity, wittiness, rhythm and rustic style, which contributes to its universal appeal as a regional culture. The clever fusion of Standard Mandarin and Northeastern Mandarin in *Errenzhuan* has made it the most distinctive folk opera in northeast China and moreover, a unique channel through which traditional Chinese folk culture can be transmitted.

### **Analysis of the Significance of Incorporating Errenzhuan in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language**

Ding Qizhen (2003) pointed out that “There is often a narrow interpretation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, that is, it is purely to impart the language skills of Standard Mandarin, which is far from reality. Failure to remedy this situation will impede the development of the whole discipline of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Incorporating Chinese dialects into the teaching process is in line with the overall trend of teaching Chinese as a foreign language” (Ding, 2003, p. 58). Standard Mandarin is a vehicle for a wealth of Chinese literature, customs and cultures which are the key to understanding the Chinese language. Taking into account the notable problems of teaching Chinese as a foreign language and the nature of *Errenzhuan*, it is fair to say that *Errenzhuan*, which is performed by using the closest dialect to Standard Mandarin, can be an asset to teaching Chinese as a foreign language. By integrating the elements of linguistics, it can be concluded that incorporating *Errenzhuan* in teaching Chinese as a foreign language can serve the following purposes:

#### **(1) Enliven the Classroom with Fun and Creativity and Promote Student Engagement**

*Errenzhuan*, both compelling and entertaining in nature, can be watched or performed in Chinese classes as a great way to enliven the classroom, keep students engaged and prevent boredom induced by monotonous teaching methods. Since foreign students learning Chinese generally have a profound passion for traditional Chinese folk culture, the common touch of *Errenzhuan*, coupled with its simple and straightforward style of performance can easily resonate with learners, thereby building up the interest in learning Chinese.

#### **(2) Promote the Transmission of National Culture Worldwide**

The two tasks of promoting the Chinese language are teaching Chinese and disseminating Chinese culture. The ultimate goal is to use the Chinese language as a vehicle for spreading Chinese culture. In the traditional practices of teaching Chinese culture to foreign students, especially those from the Western world where the culture is vastly different from that of China, students lack hands-on experience with Chinese culture and struggle to go beyond the surface-level understanding of concepts to achieve deeper comprehension, not to mention grasping the essence of Chinese culture. This is when regional culture can come into play.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: Mandarin (or *guanhua*) is a group of Chinese languages and dialects that are natively spoken across most of northern and southwestern China. The group includes the Beijing dialect, the basis of the phonology of Standard Mandarin.

### (3) Guide Students into Understanding Chinese Dialects and Salvage the Endangered Dialects and Its Culture

The rich variety of dialects is a prominent feature of the Chinese language and the language ecosystem, as with the natural ecosystem, requires “diversity”. Language serves not just as a communication tool, but more importantly, an epitome of different cultural phenomena. The extinction of a local language means the people who speak the language lose their regional culture which have been passed down from generations. Therefore, the extinction of dialects is as much a loss to human civilization as that of ecological species. The development of society brings with it the pursuit of language efficiency and linguistic fads, which results in the ever-increasing decline of Chinese dialects and consequently the extinction of regional cultures. The incorporation of *Errenzhuan*, which is performed by using the Northeastern Mandarin, into teaching Chinese as a second language also serves to promote and preserve the dialect.

### (4) The Positive Impact of Errenzhuan in Learning Figures of Speech in the Chinese Language

The two characteristics of figures of speech in the Chinese language are first, universally used figures of speech including simile, metonymy, idioms and cohesive devices; second, figures of speech distinctive to the Chinese language such as *Dui Ou* (similar to rhyming couplets), *Ping Ze* (level and oblique tones), *Shuang Sheng & Die Yun* (similar to alliteration and assonance)<sup>3</sup> and *Xie Yin Shuang Guan* (homophonic puns). Some of these figures of speech, which are more explicit and applied in the same or similar ways in other language systems, could be taught by comparing and contrasting similar concepts and deriving new concepts bases on learner’ existing knowledge and cultural background. But those more implicit figures of speech that are unique to the Chinese language such as *Feibai* (or similarly *malapropism*)<sup>4</sup>, homophonic puns and metaphors, are more difficult to understand and apply without specific contexts. However, *Errenzhuan* involves a wide variety of such rhetorical devices and language patterns, which can effectively help students understand the characteristics of Chinese language.

### Things to Bear in Mind

In recent years, the focus of debate on *Errenzhuan* has been on the issue of “elegance” versus “vulgarity”. It must be admitted that *Errenzhuan* is not a very elegant art form in nature, but rather defined by its rustic touch. Nowadays, some performers seek to heighten comedic effects or make money by exploiting “vulgar language” for the appeal to popular taste, which are “impurities” that must be eliminated in the course of promoting traditional folk culture. Meanwhile, we should develop and promote parts of the culture that are useful and healthy. We must strictly prevent these vulgar contents in *Errenzhuan* from undermining the quality of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. It is important to actively rectify students’ misconceptions about *Errenzhuan* and encourage them to promote traditional Chinese folk culture rich in “positive energy”.

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<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: *Shuang Sheng Die Yun*, more common in couplets and poems, is a rhetorical device through which a word or phrase consists of characters with identical initial consonants and vowels.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: *Feibai* (or “flying white”), a figure of speech in Chinese close to malapropism, is a style of calligraphy characterized by hollow strokes, as if done with a half-dry brush. As a figure of speech, it means the intentional use of incorrect word in place of a word with similar sound, usually for humorous effects.

### Conclusion

To sum up, there are multiple reasons for *Errenzhuan* to be incorporated in teaching Chinese as a second language. For language points that are hard for learners to grasp simply by passive accepting what's being taught (or "teacher-centered approach"), *Errenzhuan* can be a great supplement for students to gain a deeper understanding and practical use of the language, which adds liveliness, diversity and fun to the classroom by creating an immersive language learning environment for them to digest theoretical knowledge. At the same time, the incorporation of traditional folk customs helps to preserve language diversity and promote national culture.

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