

Exploring Pedagogy Suited to Local Students: Two Teaching Cases of Classical Chinese Literature in Singapore Higher Education

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Abstract

The enrolment at Singapore universities' Chinese Studies courses are generally made up of students from three regions: Singapore, Malaysia and China, with Singapore students forming the majority. These students from diverse cultural backgrounds have different mastery of Chinese knowledge structure and Chinese language, creating unique difficulties and challenges to university Chinese education. Teachers need to explore pedagogy suited to local students. Classroom teaching has shown that the modern transformation of classical literature through contacting reality is an effective pedagogy in this environment. This paper endeavours to elaborate on this observation by looking into two cases—one for prose and the other for poetry. First, through the discussion of Li Si's Jianzhuke Shu, students share their views on the hot topic of migration in Singapore. No doubt, migrants bring considerable social pressure, but the introduction of foreign talent creates practical value and hence the government's policy has been to strike a balance between the two and achieving a win-win situation. The application of classics in real life situations can effectively stimulate student's interest in learning. Second, through the comparison and discussion of poetry translations, Singapore students are able to utilise their bilingual advantage in the analysis of English translations of Chinese poems, deepening their understanding of classical literature by looking at the explicitation of semantics, grammar and cultural connotations of translated Chinese poetry.

Keywords: Pedagogy Suited to Local Students; Singapore; Classical Chinese Literature; Higher Education

1. The Teaching of Literature in Global Chinese Education and the Current Student Pool of Chinese Studies Course in Singapore Universities

1.1 The Teaching of Literature as an Important Part of Global Chinese Education

Generally speaking, Global Chinese Education refers to the teaching of Chinese language to foreigners as a second language or a foreign language. The internationalisation of Chinese language coupled with the rise of China has led to an increasing number of foreigners picking up Chinese to better understand China. However, I see learning literature as a better and more feasible way of overcoming the differences in nationality and identity, thus the teaching of literature should be made an important component of Global Chinese Education (Luo Xiaosuo, 2007). In addition, as an embodiment of Chinese culture, classical literature ought to be the priority of literature education. But due to disciplinary barriers and the exclusion of literature in the teaching of Chinese—especially classical literature—there has been a lack of academic research in this area. Under this backdrop, there is reason to pioneer research in this discipline, and set up a new academic branch of “Literature Teaching” under Global Chinese Education, to enhance the teaching of Chinese internationally.

1.2 Diversity in Culture and Student Pool of Chinese Studies Course in Singapore Universities and its Impact on Teaching

The enrolment at Singapore universities' Chinese Studies courses are generally made up of students from three regions: Singapore, Malaysia and China, with Singapore students forming the majority. These Singapore students are admitted mainly from two education routes: The first route and also that taken by the majority is gaining "A" levels certification through junior college education. The second route is through taking "O" levels examination at secondary school, and gaining entry into a polytechnic before graduating with a Diploma. These same routes are taken by students from China, with most of them holding Permanent Resident status. Malaysians take a different route of applying direct scholarships to Singapore universities reading Chinese. These students from diverse cultural backgrounds have different mastery of Chinese knowledge structure and Chinese language. Some of them might only have an elementary understanding of Chinese language, and they enrolled for a course in Chinese Studies out of practical concerns instead of interest. This diversity in student pool has brought unique difficulties and challenges to university Chinese education.

Goh Yeng Seng (2010:86) argues that while Singapore takes up the inner circle in the World Chinese Three-circle Model and attaches great importance to Chinese language, its language shift away from Chinese to English is inevitable—English becoming the first language (EL1) of an increasing number of ethnic Chinese, relegating Chinese to second language status (CL2). In addition, under Singapore's education system, students are only exposed to classical literature—Tang poems, Song *ci*, Classical Prose and Classical Fiction—at junior college level, and it is only accessible to students doing Higher Chinese at "A" levels.¹ Moreover, not all of these students will read Chinese Studies in university later on.² Therefore, the majority of Chinese Studies undergraduates have a weak grasp of classical Chinese.

Many Singapore students hold the misconception that China students have a better mastery of Chinese language. In actuality, many of these China students began their education in Singapore at secondary school level, with some even earlier in primary school. Chinese might be their first language (CL1), and while they speak and write slightly better than local students, their language foundation is essentially weak. With this in mind, it is not surprising that China students might not have a better understanding of classical literature compared to their local counterparts. However, the misunderstanding that China students enjoy an unfair advantage over Singapore students, has resulted in the former having to bear a heavy burden of living up to the misguided notion of having better language and literary abilities.

As for Malaysian students, they are mostly from Chinese Independent High Schools, where great importance is placed on the learning of classical literature. Needless to say, they tend to have a better grasp of classical literature and excel in it. But due to their rigid and inflexible education that focused on rote learning in primary and secondary school, Malaysian students tend to be passive in learning and lack critical thinking skills.

Since Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Division of Chinese's inception in 2004, it has established a compulsory three-stage learning of classical literature for all undergraduates of the department. The teaching of these three modules—Pre-Qin, Han, Wei and Jin literature; Tang and Song literature; and Yuan, Ming and Qing literature—are spread over three semesters, from their first year to the first semester of their second year in NTU. Each module includes four hours of lectures and two to three hours of tutorials. This arrangement though a commonplace in China and Taiwan, is unique to Singapore and rare in the teaching of Chinese literature internationally.³ Currently, the international practice of teaching literary history compresses its learning into one semester, providing only a brief overview of its development. But believing that classical literature is essential to the development of Chinese talents, we decided to go against students' fear of classical literature by stimulating their interest in it. Classroom teaching has shown that the modern transformation of classical literature through contacting reality is an effective pedagogy. Students are able to appreciate and identify with classical literature, and this appreciation of culture and literary aesthetic will be of great use in their future employment. As educators, we are constantly exploring pedagogy suited to local students. In this paper, I seek to share my experience in this area by looking at two case studies of teaching classical literature—one for prose and the other for poetry.

2. The Past as a Model for the Present: *Jianzhuke Shu* and Singapore's Immigration Policy

2.1 The Classic Charm of *Jianzhuke Shu*

Jianzhuke Shu 谏逐客书 (*Petition Against the Expulsion of Guest Officers*) is a classic piece of petition memorial, and Lu Xun 鲁迅 in his *Han wenxueshi gangyao* 汉文学史纲要 (*A Concise Outline of Chinese Literary History*) complemented “Li Si as the only representative of Qin’s essays”. Li Si 李斯 employed literary devices of metaphor, contrast, parallelism, rhetorical questions in *Jianzhuke Shu* and successfully persuaded King Yingzheng of Qin 秦王嬴政 to withdraw the order to expel guest officers, demonstrating his strong political adaptability and persuasiveness. From my observation, Singapore students are exceptionally fond of Emperor Qin 秦始皇, which is reflected in their interest in his life, controversies, and discussions of his merits and demerits. As Singapore is similarly ruled by an iron fist—also known as soft authoritarian rule—local students might be subconsciously doing a comparison of history with reality, which explains the attention paid to Emperor Qin.

Li Si and Emperor Qin are fascinating historical figures, and anecdotes of their lives easily attract student’s attention. Hence, when introducing these figures, it is important to seize points of interest to narrate their experiences instead of simply recounting their lives. For instance, introducing Li Si’s Rat Philosophy and the Sigh of Yellow Dog—both collected in “Li Si Liezhuan 李斯列传” (The Biography of Li Si) in *Shi Ji* 史记 (*The Records of the Grand Historian*)—and the mysterious relationship between Lü Buwei 吕不韦 and King Yingzheng of Qin. Thereby introducing Lao Ai 嫪毐 and Zhao Ji’s 赵姬 affair as the ultimate cause of the “expulsion”, and Incident of Zhengguo Canal as the proximate cause. With this background information in mind, students would look forward to learning the text, which improves their appreciation of the piece.

Li Si was originally from Shang Cai in the State of Chu before heading to the State of Qin to lobby the then-King of Qin and he was eventually appointed as a guest officer. Being a guest officer, he was in danger of being expelled from Qin along with the others. Therefore, his sincere petition to King of Qin was to protect his political career as much as to defend the other guest officers. *Jianzhuke Shu*’s impassionate remonstrance, brilliant phraseology and its style of synthesising essay and poetry, are effectual in igniting student’s interest in the essay.

First, in Li Si’s petition, he did not seek to defend himself, he did not criticise the local aristocracy, nor did he discuss any sensitive matters. Instead, he had the interest of the country in mind and successfully convinced the King of Qin with his persuasive argument:

Arguing against the latter’s order to get rid of all guest ministers, drove home the important points, and every word in them hits the right mark. Although [in tendering these memorials, both men] were touching the reversed scales [of the dragon], they succeeded in putting over their ideas. These may be considered the best examples of *shuo* as embodied in memorials. (Liu Xie 刘勰, “*Lun shuo* 论说 [Treatise and Discussion]” in *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龙 [*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*])

Second, *Jianzhuke Shu* is written as an official document to the King of Qin, thus focus is on its utility. However, the brilliant literary expression of *Jianzhuke Shu* impressed upon King of Qin that the author was no simple officer but a well-educated and abled scholar, thereby improving the petition’s persuasiveness. Li Tuzeng 李涂曾 of Song dynasty mentioned that “Objects cited [in *Jianzhuke Shu*] were not from Qin yet used by Qin, but when talents were not from Qin, Qin rejects them, [these] repeated forthright arguments, embodied the rules of writing essays.” *Jianzhuke Shu*’s description of Qin’s early guest officers and King of Qin’s fondness for “women and precious gems”, reflected its rich phraseology and employment of fluent syllables, bringing across Li Si’s imposing manner of the School of Diplomacy during the Warring States and also the beauty of Han prose. Xie Zhen’s 谢榛 of Ming dynasty mentioned in the second volume of his *Siming shihua* 四溟诗话 (*Poetry of Four Seas*) that “Li Si’s memorial to Emperor Qin is the poetry of essays.”

Third, *Jianzhuke Shu*’s technique of writing has been much-admired by later generations. Ming writer, Gui Youguang 归有光 once commented: “Essays with ordinary objectives bore readers easily, one would have to astonish the reader to be considered a masterful writer. Take Li Si’s *Jianzhuke Shu* for instance, it ingeniously spoke of others to mirror his own concerns, and employed metaphors of small matters to reflect larger issues. By getting the knack of these, one’s writing would amaze the world.”

Jianzhuke Shu is a suitable text for learning and reading. Elementary students—undergraduates—after gaining an understanding of the petition are able to draw a comparison between the text and reality, while advanced students—graduates—can engage in deeper analysis of its syntax, grammar and argumentation skills.

2.2 Singapore's Open and Inclusive Immigration Policy

In one of my tutorial classes, students were tasked to look at the issues of migration in Singapore, America, Taiwan etc. and discuss the modern implication of *Jianzhuke Shu*. By looking at pros and cons of immigration to Singapore and the younger generation Singaporeans' attitude towards immigrants and understanding of immigrants, students robustly engaged this hot social topic that is of great relevance to Singaporean students. Not only did this conversation among students improve their language ability, literary sensibility and critical thinking ability, it brings the teaching of literature beyond the scope of historical text and into the realm of cultural and social themes.

2.2.1 The Modern “Expulsion of Guests Crisis”: Stress on Society from Immigration

Singapore is a typical immigrant society and is currently the country with the largest proportion of foreigners making up its population.⁴ After learning about *Jianzhuke Shu*'s parallelism argument style, students expressed the pressure brought on Singapore society by immigrants using the same parallelism style. In the past 20 over years, the Singapore government has allowed the entry of over two million foreigners, boosting the population by a third, with foreigners currently making up 36% of the population. The unhappiness with the extent of immigration was exemplified in the Singapore's 2011 general elections and can be summarised in the following points: (1) Lack of employment opportunities caused by immigration. (2) Short supply of public facilities; medical facilities and public transport unable to keep up with the rapid population growth. (3) Astronomical rise of property prices; with immigrants driving up prices of flats beyond the reach of ordinary Singaporeans. (4) Increasing competition for places in local primary and secondary schools, and universities. (5) Lack of assimilation, where new citizens take up citizenship to “take advantage” of the benefits of being a Singaporean. This led to new citizens holding onto their original way of life and failing to integrate into local society. This is demonstrated in a few cases: A Chinese national student's outburst on his Weibo that “there are more dogs than humans in Singapore”; another Chinese national student's war of words with a roast meat stall owner that ended in a fight; and a Sichuan magnate who crashed his Ferrari into a taxi. The negative perception of foreigners formed through such everyday experiences had an effect on how locals treat immigrants, resulting in some immigrants suffering unequal and unfair treatment. Currently, voices to “expel guests”—Chinese migrant workers and new citizens in particular—are still frequently heard.⁵ According to a survey done by the national daily, *The Straits Times*, in May 2012, more than 70% of 400 local respondents hold negative views of new citizens and foreigners.

In their discussion, students drew parallels between Singapore today and Qin of the Warring States. Even though both states exist during a period of high mobility and migration, Singapore is no Qin as it has to take into account the needs of its citizens, and therefore it cannot implement the immigration policy of the latter. A small nation-state like Singapore facing a sudden influx of foreign immigrants with cultural and ideological differences can lead to social conduct issues.

2.2.2 The Contributions of “Guests”: The Need for Immigrants

Any fruitful discourse of whether Singapore should accept immigration must be based on a thorough understanding of issues it faces. First, Singapore is often known as the “little red dot”—gained currency after former Indonesian President Habibie's jab at Singapore—of Southeast Asia, with a landmass of 704 km² and without natural resources. In this ever-changing and highly competitive international environment, to depend on a true blue Singaporean population to maintain the country's economic vitality can be an arduous task. Presently, Singapore's fertility rate stands at 1.04, reflecting a shrinking population. When the shrinking labour force cannot fulfil businesses' vacancies, many of these multinational corporations will move their investments to more competitive countries. Second, Singaporeans are enjoying longer life expectancy with the advance of medical technology, creating an ageing population with more retirees leaving the labour market. Faced with the double whammy of low birth rate and an ageing population, the easiest way to maintain economic competitiveness is to welcome immigrants through various immigration policies. Third, the needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) should be taken into consideration, as the hiring of Singaporeans with higher salary demands drives up the operation costs of SMEs, causing them to be less competitive in the international market.

To achieve a win-win situation, the answer is not to reduce immigration inflow, but to restrict immigration to suitable candidates who can aid the development of local enterprises.

The focus of this discourse should be on the contributions of foreign immigrants to Singapore society. Students stated the following in their submissions: Who are the ones keeping Singapore clean and living up to its reputation of a garden city? Who are the ones clearing your dishes at hawker centres? Many of these low-level and lowly-paid manual jobs requiring long working hours are shunned by Singaporeans and are done by workers from Indonesia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and China. Singapore's two bronze medals from the 2012 London Olympic games were also won by foreign talents: Feng Tianwei 冯天薇 and Li Jiawei 李佳薇. Many other foreign talents also have outstanding achievements in their respective fields, bringing pride to Singapore. Some of them are the musician Tsung Yeh 叶聪; reporter Wang Yanginq 王燕青; writer Du Ping 杜平; and investment expert Jim Rogers. All these are similar to what Li Si wrote in his petition to King of Qin:

Today, Your Majesty holds the fine jade of Kunshan, owns the Suihou beads and Heshi jade, wears the Mingyue beads, grasps the Tai'e sword, rides the Xianli horse, hoists the Cuifeng flag, and raises the Lingtuo drum. For all of these treasures, none are produced in Qin, but Your Majesty likes them, why is this so?

Anyone non-Qin citizen has to leave, and all guest officers have to be expelled. It appears that the King values beauty, music, pearls, gems, and takes his people lightly. This is not the way to unify the world and rule over feudal lords.

Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, called on Singaporeans to accept new citizens and stated that many of them from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan become Chinese teachers and inject vibrancy into the local cultural sphere. Many new citizens involved in education and research, and world-class talents brought in by companies, bring with them new knowledge, new skills, new technology and new teaching methods that contributes to Singapore's overall development. Take NTU's School of Humanities and Social Sciences—where I work at—for instance, half of the faculty staff are foreign academics, it is unimaginable how it can expand and make a name for itself without foreigners. Therefore, it is self-contradicting for Singaporeans to be xenophobic while wanting to reap the economic benefits brought by immigrants.

A country's success or failure lies in the presence of talents. Without the early immigrants, would this little island of Singapore develop into what it is today? If the Chinese of Fujian, Guangdong etc. did not make their way to and settle down in early Singapore, would there be the Singaporeans of today? Would it become the advanced society it is today? Similarly, new citizens' contribution to Singapore's social and economic development should not be taken lightly. Countries employ different strategies to attract and retain talents, if Singapore fails to implement a far-sighted foreign talent policy and instead decides to keep them at bay, it will only worsen its current demographic challenges, affecting economic growth and lowering its standard of living. Like what Li Si said in *Jianzhuke Shu*: "Now it's expelling the guest officers to aid rival countries, benefitting your enemies and harming your people's interest. Bereft of domestic talent and faced with external vendettas with other states, it is impossible for Qin to not face threats of subjugation."

The above classroom teaching experience gives us reason to believe that: if literary history is a narration of past literary culture, then the teaching of literature would be a course on past literary culture (literary culture, see Kang-I Sun Chang & Stephen Owen eds., 2010). In addition to bringing students closer to the ancient culture, they should be guided to understand and consider how classical literature can be a point of reference and inspiration to modern society and contemporary culture.

3. "Tashan zhishi" 它山之石 (Stones from other hills): The Teaching of Poetry and its Explicitation from Translation to English

The concept of explicitation is first proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet in 1958 (see King Klaudy 2004:81), and referred to as "the process of introducing information into the target language which is present only implicitly in the source language, but which can be derived from the context or the situation". In other words, translators can add explanatory phrases or conjunctions to enhance the logic and coherence of the translation, to better bring across the source text's message.

The most significant and fundamental difference between Chinese and English lies in the nature of their grammar, the former being implicit and the latter being explicit. The learning of classical literature can be said to be an uphill task for Singapore students. Besides difficulties in understanding the semantics and grammar of ancient Chinese language, students have more troubles deciphering its subtext and the subtle and refined feelings conveyed. Singapore students who pick up Chinese as a second language, belong to the second circle and hold a bilingual advantage. Chinese annotations might be useful to their understanding of classical texts, but if this is supplemented by an appropriate English translation of poetry, it would certainly enhance student's unique learning experience. We designed the English Translation to Chinese Classical Poetry textbook to aid our student's understanding of poetry connotations through translation comparison and discussion.

We believe that the explicitation of poetry can be seen in three levels: semantic, grammar and culture.

3.1 The Explicitation of the Semantics of Poems from Translation to English

Language is ever-changing, therefore many words and terms in classical poetry that seem simple in vernacular Chinese, might actually mean very different things in classical language, putting off many new learners of classical poetry. First language learners often use annotations and vernacular translation to pick up poetry, this is actually a translation of the same language into another variant, also known as intralingual translation. Correspondingly, second language learners would find interlingual translation a good tool for learning literature, as the explicitation of poetry from translation allows learners to gain a better understanding of the poem's literal meaning.

For example, in Li Bai's 李白 "Gufeng shisi" 古风·十四, there is this verse: "muluo qiu caohuang, denggao wang ronglu 木落秋草黄, 登高望戎虏", where the phrase of "muluo" is likely to be understood literally. Therefore, I began by explaining to my students that "mu" refers to leaves and not trees in this context. Following which, I offered them three English translations of the poem by Ezra Pound, Yip Wai-Lim and Stephen Owen, respectively. Pound translates "muluo" as "tree fall", Yip translates it as "trees stripped of leaves", while Owen interprets it as "trees shed leaves". Evidently, Yip's and Owen's translations are correct. Through such comparison, students gain an accurate understanding of the phrase and can draw inferences from this case to understand what "luomu" refers to in the verse of "wubian luomu xiaoxiao xia 无边落木萧萧下" from Du Fu's 杜甫 "Denggao 登高". Clearly, Pound makes the mistake of translating "mu" literally as "tree", but students postulate that a renowned translator like Pound is probably intentional in translating it into "trees fall", so as to create an atmosphere of fear. As Yip's and Owen's translations are more exact, they can be used as supplementary texts.

In another example, in "qingshan heng beigu, baishui rao dongcheng 青山横北郭, 白水绕东城" from Li Bai's "Song youren 送友人", "qingshan" is translated as "blue mountains" by Pound, while Yip and Owen translate it as "green mountain" and "green hills" respectively. Again, Pound is unaware of the multiple meanings of "qing" in ancient Chinese language and thus understands it as "blue". Xu Shen 许慎 in *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (*Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters*), wrote "qing, the colour of the east". While Wang Yi 王逸 in *Chuci jizhu* 楚辞集注 (*Annotations of Chuci*), wrote "qing, in the spring position of the east, its colour being qing". In ancient China, "qing" is likened to the colour of spring, representing the budding spring when all comes to life. Similarly, "qing qing" in "keshe qingqing liuse xin 客舍青青柳色新" from Wang Wei's 王维 "Weicheng qu 渭城曲" refers to green. On the other hand, "qing" of "qing, quzhi yu lan er qing yu lan 青, 取之于蓝而青于蓝" in "Xunzi quanxue 荀子·劝学" refers to dark blue, while "qing" of "zhao ru qingsi mu cheng xue 朝如青丝暮成雪" in Li Bai's "Jiangjinjiu 将进酒" refers to black, illustrating that "qing" has multiple meanings dependent on context. With the aid of English translation, students can through specific examples, gain an understanding that lexicons assume different meanings in different poems.

3.2 The Explicitation of the Grammar of Poems from Translation to English

In my teaching of classical literature, it has been observed that grammar has an impact on student's understanding of a poem. Singaporean students' lack of knowledge in ancient Chinese grammar has been a stumbling block in their study of classical literature, leading to the development of an instinctive fear of the subject. Under such circumstances, the inclusion of English translation will greatly diminish the distress caused by classical literature.

Take, for instance, Su Shi's 苏轼 "Dingfengbo 定风波". What does "shei pa" refer to in the verse "zhuzhang mangxie qing sheng man, shei pa? 竹杖芒鞋轻胜马, 谁怕?" This is actually an inversion of "pa shei", expressing the author's calm state of mind. However, this is not easily understood by students and here is where English translation comes into play. Stephen Owen translates "shei pa" as "Who's afraid", Wang Jiaosheng as "Why be afraid", and Xu Yuanchong 许渊冲 as "O I would fain". Owen provides a literal translation that fails to bring across the idea of "pa shei", while Xu's translation that means "I am willing", is not the emotion conveyed by the author. Wang's translation on the other hand, while not entirely consistent with the author's intention, manage to grasp Su Shi's emotional thrust, and is, therefore, the better translation amongst the three. By comparing these three translations, students can appreciate the lexicon's meaning more thoroughly.

In another example, "Qiuxing bashou 秋兴八首" by Du Fu has this confusing verse: "xiangdao zhuo yu yingwu li, biwu qi lao fenghuang zhi 香稻啄余鹦鹉粒, 碧梧栖老凤凰枝". In this verse, the subject and object have been inverted, and the objects "xiangdao li" and "biwu qi" are separated and placed in the positions of subject and object respectively. Baidu turn up an indecipherable translation of the verse: "Fragrant rice so plentiful it is parrot's food, Green jade from Wuqi [in Taiwan] venerable like fenghuang." Owen has a translation that does no better: "Sweet-smelling rice, pecked the last, for parrots, the grains; sapphire beech trees, perch of old, the phoenix's branches." In actuality, "zhuo yu yingwu" and "qi lao fenghuang" are modifiers for "li" and "zhi", which can be understood as "li" for "zhuo yu yingwu" and "zhi" for "qi lao fenghuang". Hence, this verse can be reordered into "yingwu zhuo yu xiangdaoli, fenghuang qi lao biwuzhi 鹦鹉啄余香稻粒, 凤凰栖老碧梧枝", and translated into: "Parrots pecked my sweet-smelling rice grains; the phoenix perched the tall Chinese parasol's (sapphire beech tree) branch." Although this reordering allows students a better understanding of the poem, it has to be highlighted that this new order does not make a good verse. This poem by Du Fu is a reminiscence of Chang'an's beauty, emphasising its extraordinary rice, rice that has been pecked by parrots; describing its unique beech tree as one that the phoenix has perched on; and this is how Du Fu develop his intense verses. With that in mind, Du Fu's verse can be understood as: "sweet-smelling rice—parrots pecked, beech tree—the phoenix perched." This way of writing places emphasis on sweet-smelling and beech tree. On the other hand, the reordered verse of "Parrots pecked my sweet-smelling rice grains; the phoenix perched the tall Chinese parasol's (sapphire beech tree) branch", turns it into a narrative sentence narrating the phoenix's actions. Therefore, the original verse emphasises the unique rice and tree, creating a virtual impression of the parrot pecking and phoenix perching, while the reordered verse turns it into a narrative, relating a reality of the parrot's peck and phoenix's perch. This is a good illustration of how English translation can never replace Chinese explanations of poetry.

3.3 The Explication of the Cultural Connotation of Poems from Translation to English

Culture is a deep and complex concept closely related to politics, law, religion, ethics, customs etc. Language and culture are intimately connected, and as language is a socio-cultural phenomenon and a product of socio-cultural development, it is inseparable from the socio-cultural environment it developed in. As students grew up in a different socio-cultural environment as the authors of classical literature, it becomes inevitable that they encounter cultural misunderstandings during the learning process. Thus, translation can be seen as a cross-cultural activity, or a unity of two cultures (for unity of two cultures, see Mary Snell-Hornby, 1988: Chapter 2). Translation is a contest of two languages, and the translation of literature is a contest of two cultures. Singaporean students' Chinese background allows them a certain level of connection with Chinese culture, while their English education environment created some form of familiarity with English and European culture, placing them in a unique yet awkward situation. There exists some form of cultural void in both English language and Chinese language culture, and hence a translation between the languages will form an unavoidable void. As educators, we assume an important role in filling this void by enhancing the translation with additional information.

For example, in Su Shi's "Jiangchengzi Shinian shengsi liangmangmang 江城子·十年生死两茫茫". The term "huanxiang" in "yelai youmeng huanxiang 夜来幽梦忽还乡", is something abstract to many Singaporean students and thus difficult for them to envisage the scenario—returning to one's homeland in his dream—described in the *ci*. Three translations are then introduced to bridge this void in understanding. For "huanxiang", James Robert Hightower translates it into "back home, Burton Watson translates it as "was home", and Xu Yuanchong presents it as "my native place". The first two translations fail to bring across the cultural significance of "huanxiang"; as Chinese are often guests in the land they stay, "huanxiang" brings with it a connotation of being back with family and friends.

Therefore, “home” is not an appropriate term and “native place” is a better alternative, because it doubles as a form of cultural identifier. This clearly displayed the translators’ different cultural background.

In another example, Li Bai wrote the verse “gupeng wanli zheng 孤蓬万里征” in his poem “Song youren 送友人”, recounting the tragic parting from his friend, where they will henceforth be worlds apart and probably never see each other again. In our world of modern technology, students struggle to understand ancient wanderer’s grief of parting. Going into specifics, many understand “zheng” as “travelling” in contemporary terms, such as the translations of “travel” by Yip Wai-lim, “journey” by Hugh Grigg, “sail” by W. J. B. Fletcher and “go on” by Stephen Owen. However, none of these expressed the cultural connotation of “zheng”. Students conclude that Pound’s translation of “go out through” is slightly better, but “drift out” by Xu Yuanhong and “drift away” by Witter Bynner are closest to the author’s intended meaning. The term “gupeng” in the verse refers to swaying Punta grass, and in Chinese culture, it is a metaphor for lonely wanderers drifting around without a home. In my teaching, it is observed that many translators choose to only translate “gu” and not “peng”, such as Herbert A. Giles and Fletcher, or mistranslate it by ignoring cultural connotations, such as “loosened water-plant” by Witter Bynner, and “dead grass” by Ezra Pound. Other translations of “lonely water-plant” by Amy Lowell, “unrooted water grass” by S. Obata and “lonely thistle down” by Xu, strike a balance between literal meaning and cultural connotation, but they are either direct translations or awkward sounding. All these reflect the limitations to translating cultural connotations.

Thus, due to English language’s nature of explicitation, a Chinese poem’s semantics, grammar and cultural connotation can be explicitated when translated into English. But students should see English translation as a supplementary tool in the learning of literature, rather than a form of translation studies. The purpose of translation in this context is to aid students in their understanding and appreciation of the original text, rather than for them to study the translated text. In addition, the Chinese language embodies artistic beauty in three areas: meaning, tones and form, while English translation can convey its original meaning, a reader has to read the original text to appreciate its beauty in terms of tones and form.

In summary, Chinese Studies undergraduates in Singapore universities come from diverse cultural backgrounds, have different mastery of Chinese knowledge structure and Chinese language. This paper proposes that the modern transformation of literary classics is an effective pedagogy in this environment and this is proven using case studies: First, by relating classics with daily life through the study of Li Si’s *Jianzhuke Shu*, students share their views on the hot topic of migration in Singapore, enhancing their interest in the text. Second, through the comparison and discussion of poetry translations, Singapore students are able to utilise their bilingual advantage in the analysis of English translations of Chinese poems, deepening their understanding of classical literature by looking at the explicitation of semantics, grammar and cultural connotations of translated Chinese poetry.

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¹ Chinese Language is offered at five levels in Singapore secondary schools: Higher Chinese, Express Chinese, Normal (Academic) Chinese, Normal (Technical) Chinese and Chinese B. Higher Chinese is generally offered in the ten Special Assistance Plan secondary schools, and some neighbourhood schools, giving rise to a number of challenges in Chinese Language education—this would be discussed in another paper.

² Note: Often, students who do well in Chinese, excel in other subjects too. Hence, they tend to read practical subjects such as science and engineering in universities. Only students who are extremely interested in Chinese would choose Chinese Studies as a major. In a society with English as its main medium of communication (English supremacy), Chinese has been relegated to a secondary role, and therefore students would not read Chinese Studies as a major due to pragmatic concerns.

³ Currently, Singapore has three publicly-funded universities offering Chinese Studies courses: the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore; the Division of Chinese, Nanyang Technological University; and the Chinese Language and Culture Division, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. In addition, there are two institutes of higher education offering Chinese programmes: Diploma in Chinese Studies, Ngee Ann Polytechnic; and Programme of Chinese Language and Literature, Singapore Institute of Management; the former offers a diploma certification, while the latter offers an in-service degree.

⁴ According to 2010's statistics, Singapore has a resident population of 5,080,000, of which 3,230,000 are citizens, 540,000 are permanent residents, and 1,300,000 are foreigners holding various residential permits. Non-citizen population takes up 36% of the total population, and this proportion is still increasing. ("Population and Growth Rate," Monthly Digest of Statistics Singapore, August 2010). According to 2015's statistics, Singapore has a resident population of 5,535,000, of which 3,380,000 are citizens, 530,000 are permanent residents, and 1,630,000 are foreigners holding various residential permits. Non-citizen population takes up 38% of the total population. ("Population Size and Growth," Population Trend, 2015, Statistics Singapore)

⁵ For the history of "new" Chinese immigration to Singapore, its problems of integration, and Singapore's immigration policy changes, see You J. H. 游俊豪. (2013). "Yu gongmin hudong: Zhongguo xinyimin zai Xinjiapo" 与公民互动：中国新移民在新加坡. *Huaren yanjiu guoji xuebao* 华人研究国际学报.