

A Study on the Pathways of Integrating Zeng Guofan's Educational Wisdom into Comprehensive Chinese Education from the Perspective of New Liberal Arts

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Abstract: *The construction of New Liberal Arts provides a timely opportunity for interdisciplinary integration in the reform of Comprehensive Chinese Education. Zeng Guofan's educational thought, centered on "statecraft and practical application," contains rich wisdom relevant to Chinese language education. Based on the core principles of New Liberal Arts-preserving tradition while fostering innovation, interdisciplinary integration, and competency orientation-this paper systematically examines the essence of Zeng Guofan's ideas regarding the aims, content selection, and methodological application in Chinese language education. It analyzes the inherent alignment between his ideas and the contemporary goals of Comprehensive Chinese Education, which are cultural inheritance, competency cultivation, and character development. In light of existing issues in current Comprehensive Chinese Education, such as cultural detachment and disciplinary fragmentation, this study proposes practical pathways for integrating Zeng Guofan's educational wisdom into Comprehensive Chinese Education from three dimensions: reconstructing curriculum content, innovating teaching methods, and optimizing evaluation systems. The aim is to provide traditional intellectual resources to support the high-quality development of Comprehensive Chinese Education within the context of New Liberal Arts.*

Keywords: *New Liberal Arts; Zeng Guofan's Educational Wisdom; Comprehensive Chinese Education*

Introduction

As a core initiative for enhancing the quality of higher education, the construction of New Liberal Arts has the strategic objective of "promoting the innovative development of liberal arts education and cultivating interdisciplinary liberal arts talents who meet the requirements of the new era." It emphasizes breaking down disciplinary barriers and achieving a deep integration of traditional culture with modern education, which aligns closely with the philosophy of Comprehensive Chinese Education-that is, "using language as the medium, culture as the core, and cultivating comprehensive competencies." Although Comprehensive Chinese Education has moved beyond the limitations of traditional language instruction, it still faces practical challenges such as insufficient exploration of cultural depth, forced interdisciplinary integration, and vague educational objectives. Therefore, there is an urgent need to draw nourishment from traditional educational wisdom.

Zeng Guofan developed a systematic and comprehensive ideological framework in the field of education. His educational discourse, primarily recorded in his Family Letters and Personal Diaries, encompasses the educational aim of "cultivating virtues and enhancing professional competence," the content selection of "the simultaneous study of Confucian classics and historical works," and the application of "tailored teaching methods." These ideas contain profound wisdom for language and literature education. In the current context, where the New Liberal Arts advocate "returning to tradition while preserving integrity and fostering innovation," exploring the modern value of Zeng Guofan's educational thought and integrating it into the practice of Comprehensive Chinese Education represents both an inheritance of China's outstanding traditional culture and a beneficial exploration for addressing contemporary challenges in Chinese language education.

1. The Core of Zeng Guofan's Educational Thought in Chinese Language Education

Zeng Guofan's educational thought is rooted in Confucian culture and, combined with his own scholarly and pedagogical practices, forms a Chinese language education system characterized by “moral character as the soul, learning as the foundation, and practical application as the essence.” Its core substance is reflected in three dimensions: educational aims, content, and methods.

1.1 Educational Aim: The Dual-dimensional Goal of “Cultivating Virtues and Enhancing Professional Competence”

Zeng Guofan positioned the ultimate goal of Chinese language education as "learning to become a sage and a person of virtue." He proposed the core viewpoint that "for us scholars, reading serves only two purposes: one is to cultivate our virtues, and the other is to enhance our professional competence." In his view, Chinese language education was by no means merely training in literary techniques; rather, it was a process of "nourishing the mind with virtue and educating people through literature." In a family letter to his eldest son, Zeng Jize, he emphasized: "A scholar who reads must, first, have ambition; second, possess insight; and third, maintain perseverance. Ambition prevents one from stooping to mediocrity; insight makes one aware that knowledge is boundless and prevents one from becoming complacent with a single achievement; perseverance ensures that no endeavor will fail." Here, "ambition," "insight," and "perseverance" are not only attitudes toward scholarship but also core elements of moral cultivation, embodying the traditional Chinese educational philosophy of "writing as a vehicle for truth."

This educational aim of "emphasizing both moral cultivation and professional competence" breaks away from the utilitarian tendency of "studying for the imperial examination," integrating language learning closely with character development. In his family letters, Zeng Guofan often elucidated moral principles through classical texts. For instance, he used the phrase from the Analects, "I reflect on myself three times a day," to teach his descendants the importance of self-reflection and introspection, and employed Mencius's saying, "Life springs from sorrow and calamity, and death from ease and pleasure," to warn them to remain diligent and hardworking. Through these methods, he achieved an organic unity of language education and moral cultivation.

1.2 Educational Content: A Knowledge System of “Studying Both Classics and History, and Connecting Ancient with Modern Learning”

To address the shortcomings of late Qing imperial examination education, which overemphasized contemporary examination essays while neglecting practical learning, Zeng Guofan proposed the content selection principle that “classics and history are the root, while poetry and prose are the branches,” thereby constructing a Chinese language learning system that encompassed both depth and breadth. Regarding classics and history, he emphasized that “The Four Books and The Five Classics form the foundation of scholarship and must never be neglected.” He instructed his descendants to “first read The Great Learning to establish a framework; then read The Analects to lay a solid foundation; next, read Mencius to observe its expansive insights; and finally, read The Doctrine of the Mean to seek its profound essence.” Simultaneously, he valued the educational significance of historical texts, advocating that “reading history clarifies the changes between ancient and modern times and reveals the principles of order and chaos.” He recommended historical works such as Records of the Grand Historian and Book of Han as essential reading to cultivate his descendants' historical perspective.

Regarding poetry and prose writing, Zeng Guofan advocated for "writing as a vehicle for truth and learning for the sake of practical application," opposing empty discussions of abstract principles. He proposed that "in writing, one must avoid being vacuous; in speech, one must steer clear of emptiness," instructing his descendants to ensure their writing was "substantive in content and orderly in structure," thereby integrating what they had learned from classics and history into their literary compositions. Furthermore, in the face of the eastward spread of Western learning, while remaining firmly rooted in tradition, he also advocated "dabbling in practical books of Western knowledge." This reflected an open-minded vision of "connecting ancient with modern learning and harmonizing Chinese and Western knowledge," which aligns closely with the New Liberal Arts concept of "cross-boundary integration."

1.3 Educational Methods: The Practical Wisdom of “Teaching Students in Accordance with Their Aptitude, and Advancing Step-by-Step”

Through his long-term educational practice, Zeng Guofan developed a flexible and diverse set of methods for Chinese language teaching, with “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude” and “advancing step-by-step” at their core. In response to the varying aptitudes and characteristics of his different descendants, he formulated differentiated learning plans: for the highly gifted Zeng Jize, he emphasized "wide-ranging reading to broaden horizons"; for Zeng Jihong, who was of average aptitude, he advocated "intensive study and deep cultivation to lay a solid foundation." This "individually tailored" approach to guidance broke through the limitations of the "one-size-fits-all" model of traditional education, embodying a student-centered educational philosophy.

Regarding learning methods, Zeng Guofan proposed the principles of "combining intensive and extensive reading" and "integrating reading, reflection, and writing." He emphasized that "one should not start another book before finishing the current one," requiring his descendants to "read classics thoroughly, contemplate them deeply, and commit them to memory." At the same time, he advocated that "one should be able to reflect while reading and write based on reflection," achieving the internalization and output of knowledge through practices such as "keeping diaries, writing annotations, and composing family letters." He himself adhered to the discipline of "reading several pages and writing one essay daily." This scholarly attitude of "the unity of knowledge and action" also served as a vivid example in educating his descendants.

2. The Inherent Compatibility Between New Liberal Arts and Zeng Guofan's Educational Thought

The core principles of New Liberal Arts construction—preserving integrity while fostering innovation, interdisciplinary integration, and competency orientation—demonstrate a profound inherent compatibility with Zeng Guofan's educational thought. This compatibility provides a solid foundation for the integration of the two.

2.1 Value Alignment: The Unity of Cultural Heritage and the Essence of Education

One of the core tasks of the New Liberal Arts construction is "to inherit and promote China's excellent traditional culture and strengthen cultural confidence," emphasizing that education should be "grounded in the Chinese context and cultivate talents endowed with a Chinese spirit." Zeng Guofan's educational thought, centered on Confucian culture, consistently regarded "transmitting the Way of the Sages and promoting Confucian learning" as the core mission of education. His principle of selecting content with "classics and history as the foundation" is, in essence, an inheritance and continuation of traditional culture. The two are highly aligned in the educational essence of "cultivating people through culture," both advocating for the holistic development of individuals through cultural immersion. For instance, Zeng Guofan emphasized that "reading classics gives the mind a guiding principle, while reading history clarifies right and wrong," which fully aligns with the goal of Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts framework: "fostering cultural identity through the study of classics." This consistency at the value level enables Zeng Guofan's educational thought to serve as a significant cultural resource for Comprehensive Chinese Education within the New Liberal Arts paradigm.

2.2 Methodological Alignment: The Resonance Between Interdisciplinary Integration and a Practical Orientation

The New Liberal Arts emphasizes breaking down disciplinary barriers to achieve integrative innovation "within the liberal arts and between arts and sciences," cultivating "interdisciplinary talents who possess both humanistic literacy and practical capabilities." Although Zeng Guofan lived in a traditional society, he already possessed a rudimentary interdisciplinary awareness. His educational content spanned multiple fields, including classics, history, philosophy, literature, military affairs, and economics, and he advocated that "learning must be directed toward practical application," opposing empty discussions of abstract principles. In training his aides, he required both "proficiency in literary composition" and "familiarity with practical affairs." Talents such as Li Hongzhang and Yung Wing, who emerged from his secretariat, were exemplary figures embodying "mastery of both arts and

sciences, applying learning to practice." This "practical-oriented" educational philosophy resonates with the goal of Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts, which "emphasizes language application skills to serve real-world needs." Zeng Guofan's methodology of "studying both classics and history, and integrating learning with application" provides a traditional paradigm that can be referenced for the interdisciplinary integration within the New Liberal Arts framework of Comprehensive Chinese Education.

2.3 Goal Alignment: The Synergy Between Character Development and Competency Cultivation

Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts framework takes the cultivation of "language proficiency, critical thinking, cultural literacy, and aesthetic appreciation" as its core competency goals, and it emphasizes "the unity of instrumental and humanistic dimensions." Centered on "cultivating virtues and enhancing professional competence," Zeng Guofan's educational thought places character development in the foremost position of education. His scholarly requirements of "having ambition, insight, and perseverance" encompass not only the cultivation of learning abilities but also the shaping of moral character. This goal of "co-cultivating ability and character" aligns perfectly with the competency-oriented approach of Comprehensive Chinese Education in the New Liberal Arts. For instance, Zeng Guofan taught his descendants that "writing should align with conduct, as literary quality reflects moral character," demanding that writing be "sincere without pretense, and simple yet powerful." This closely corresponds with the objective of contemporary Comprehensive Chinese Education to "cultivate language competencies characterized by genuine expression and logical clarity," demonstrating the continuity of educational goals across ancient and modern times.

3. Practical Challenges in Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts Framework and the Revelatory Value of Zeng Guofan's Educational Wisdom

Although Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts framework has achieved certain results in practice, it still faces numerous challenges. The wisdom contained in Zeng Guofan's educational thought provides important insights for addressing these issues.

3.1 Alienation of Cultural Connotation: From "Fragmented Quotation" to "Systematic Immersion"

While current Comprehensive Chinese Education emphasizes the integration of traditional culture, it often manifests in fragmented forms such as "quoting classical aphorisms and piling up cultural symbols." This makes it difficult for students to develop a systematic understanding of culture. For example, some classrooms merely cite Zeng Guofan's anecdote of "persisting despite repeated defeats" in writing instruction without delving into the spiritual essence and cultural origins behind it, resulting in a superficial transmission of culture.

Zeng Guofan proposed a content system with "classics and history as the foundation," advocating "starting from the original classics and learning systematically," which provides an approach to addressing this issue. He instructed his descendants to "read The Four Books and The Five Classics comprehensively and study Records of the Grand Historian and Book of Han intensively," thereby forming a systematic cultural understanding through complete engagement with classical texts. Integrating this philosophy into Comprehensive Chinese Education would allow for the construction of a cultural teaching system that moves from "original classics-historical context-spiritual essence-modern relevance." This shift from "fragmented quotation" to "systematic immersion" would enable students to genuinely grasp the core values of traditional culture.

3.2 Mechanized Interdisciplinary Integration: From "Superficial Patching" to "Intrinsic Synthesis"

The New Liberal Arts advocates for interdisciplinary integration, yet some Comprehensive Chinese Education practices suffer from the problem of "mechanically splicing arts and sciences." For instance, when teaching popular science expository texts, scientific knowledge is merely inserted in a simplistic manner without achieving an organic unity between language learning and subject content. This approach to integration not only fails to enhance students' comprehensive competencies but also undermines the integrity of Chinese language teaching.

Zeng Guofan's educational practice of "learning must be directed toward practical application, integrating both arts and sciences" provides a valuable reference. In training military personnel, he

required them not only to "draft well-structured memorials" (language competence) but also to "be familiar with military strategies and tactics" (military knowledge), thereby achieving an intrinsic integration of language application and professional expertise. Applying this approach to Comprehensive Chinese Education can establish an integration model that "uses language as the medium and disciplinary issues as the guide." For instance, when analyzing Zeng Guofan's military documents, one could examine the linguistic features of "rigorous logic and sincere expression" within their historical context, while also exploring the military strategic thinking embedded in them. This achieves an organic integration of Chinese language education with history and military studies.

3.3 Vague Educational Goals: From "Knowledge Transmission" to "Character Development"

Current Comprehensive Chinese Education still exhibits a tendency to "emphasize knowledge transmission at the expense of character cultivation." Some teachers focus excessively on training reading skills and writing techniques, neglecting the essential educational purpose of language and literature instruction. For example, in composition teaching, there is an overemphasis on "structural completeness and ornate language" while overlooking the core requirements of "authentic expression and value guidance." This results in student compositions that often feature "superficial, grandiose, and empty content."

Zeng Guofan's educational aim of "cultivating virtues and enhancing professional competence" provides orientational value for addressing this issue. He emphasized that "one must first cultivate character before composing essays, as speech reflects the inner voice," and required his descendants to "write with a sincere heart and establish themselves based on moral principles." Integrating this philosophy into Comprehensive Chinese Education can embed character development throughout the entire teaching process: in reading instruction, by analyzing the words and deeds of historical figures such as Zeng Guofan, students can be guided to establish correct values; in writing instruction, encouraging students to "express authentic feelings and articulate independent thinking" achieves the synergistic cultivation of "language competence" and "moral character."

4. Practical Pathways for Integrating Zeng Guofan's Educational Wisdom into Comprehensive Chinese Education under the New Liberal Arts Framework

Based on the preceding analysis and aligned with the core requirements of Comprehensive Chinese Education within the New Liberal Arts, this study constructs pathways for integration from three dimensions: curriculum content, teaching methods, and the evaluation system.

4.1 Curriculum Content Restructuring: Building a Content System Centered on "Classics as the Core, Integrated Across Disciplines"

4.1.1 Creating the "Zeng Guofan Classics Study" Module

Select classic excerpts from Zeng Guofan's Family Letters and Zeng Guofan's Diary and incorporate them into the Comprehensive Chinese Education curriculum. For example, Letters to My Younger Brothers can serve as a model for argumentative essay writing, with analysis focusing on its characteristics of "clear stance and rigorous logic." Similarly, Admonitions to Jize and Jihong can be used as material for family ethos education, exploring the modern significance of "self-cultivation and family regulation" in conjunction with contemporary core socialist values. Through direct engagement with the original texts, students can experience the charm of traditional culture firsthand.

4.1.2 Developing Interdisciplinary Courses on "Studying Both Classics and History"

Drawing on Zeng Guofan's idea of "taking classics and history as the foundation," collaborate with teachers from history, philosophy, and other disciplines to develop interdisciplinary courses such as "History Within Classics" and "Philosophy in Classical Chinese Texts." For instance, when teaching sections of Zeng Guofan's Family Letters related to "suppressing the Taiping Rebellion," history teachers can simultaneously explain the historical context of the late Qing Dynasty, while philosophy teachers elucidate the embedded Confucian doctrine of the Mean. This approach achieves a deep integration of Chinese language education with history and philosophy.

4.1.3 Incorporating "Practical Writing" Content

Drawing on Zeng Guofan's concept of "learning for practical application," a "practical writing"

module should be added to writing instruction. For example, students can study the composition of Zeng Guofan's memorials and letters to train their skills in applied writing. Additionally, adopting his method of "reflection through diary-keeping," students should be encouraged to maintain daily journals to cultivate self-reflection and language expression abilities.

4.2 Teaching Method Innovation: Implementing the Teaching Philosophy of "Teaching Students in Accordance with Their Aptitude, and the Unity of Knowledge and Action"

4.2.1 Implementing a Tiered Instruction Model of Teaching Students in Accordance with Their Aptitude

Drawing on Zeng Guofan's approach of designing differentiated learning plans for his descendants, implement tiered instruction based on students' language proficiency foundations and interests. For students with weaker foundations, focus on guiding them in the "intensive reading of classics" to solidify their language base. For students with greater learning capacity, encourage "extensive reading" and facilitate thematic research on topics such as "Zeng Guofan and Late Qing Society" to cultivate their research abilities.

4.2.2 Adopting a "Reading-Thinking-Writing Integration" Teaching Method

Following Zeng Guofan's scholarly approach of "intensive reading-deep reflection-diligent writing," design a teaching process of "reading-discussion-writing." For instance, in teaching Zeng Guofan's Family Letters, first guide students in intensive reading of the text to outline its core viewpoints. Then, organize group discussions on topics such as "the inspiration of Zeng Guofan's concept of 'perseverance' for contemporary learning." Finally, require students to draw on their personal experiences to write an essay titled My Approach to Scholarship, thereby achieving the internalization and output of knowledge.

4.2.3 Implementing "Contextualized Practice" Activities

Drawing on Zeng Guofan's educational practice of "the unity of knowledge and action," organize diverse and engaging practical activities for Chinese language learning. For example, host a "Zeng Guofan Family Letters Recitation Session" to enhance students' language expression skills; carry out a "Family Traditions and Precepts Research Project," where students interview elders and write research reports, closely integrating language learning with social life; and simulate a "Zeng Guofan Secretariat Deliberation" scenario to cultivate students' logical thinking and teamwork abilities.

4.3 Evaluation System Optimization: Establishing a "Competency-Oriented, Multidimensional, and Comprehensive" Evaluation Mechanism

4.3.1 Developing Evaluation Criteria that "Emphasize Both Moral Cultivation and Professional Competence"

Moving beyond the traditional evaluation model centered solely on test scores, and drawing on Zeng Guofan's goal of "cultivating virtues and enhancing professional competence," a three-dimensional evaluation framework comprising "language proficiency, cultural literacy, and moral character" should be established. Language proficiency focuses on foundational skills such as reading and writing; cultural literacy assesses the understanding and transmission of classical texts; and moral character evaluates aspects such as learning attitude and teamwork, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of students' overall competencies.

4.3.2 Adopting an Evaluation Approach that "Integrates Process-Oriented and Summative Assessment"

Drawing on Zeng Guofan's concept of "daily self-reflection and step-by-step progress," process-oriented assessment should be strengthened. This involves documenting students' learning progress through forms such as class participation, reading notes, and practical reports. Summative assessment should adopt a comprehensive format combining "open-book exams, essay writing, and practical presentations" to holistically evaluate students' knowledge mastery and application abilities.

4.3.3 Introducing a "Multi-stakeholder Evaluation" Mechanism

In addition to teacher assessment, incorporate student self-assessment, peer assessment, and parental assessment. Students conduct self-assessment by writing learning reflections; peer assessment is carried out during group discussions to provide suggestions for improvement; parents offer

evaluations based on students' reading habits and diary writing at home. This forms a comprehensive evaluation system that promotes the holistic development of students.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The construction of New Liberal Arts presents a timely opportunity for the transformation and integration of traditional resources within Comprehensive Chinese Education. The components of Zeng Guofan's educational thought—namely, the educational aim of "cultivating virtues and enhancing professional competence," the content system of "studying both classics and history," and the teaching method of "instruction tailored to individual aptitude"—demonstrate a high degree of alignment with the core demands of contemporary Comprehensive Chinese Education, thus possessing significant modern value. Integrating Zeng Guofan's educational wisdom into the practice of Comprehensive Chinese Education, through the restructuring of curriculum content, innovation in teaching methods, and optimization of the evaluation system, can effectively address current issues such as cultural detachment, disciplinary fragmentation, and vague educational objectives. This approach will achieve the goal of "the synergistic cultivation of language proficiency and cultural literacy."

Against the backdrop of New Liberal Arts construction, the traditional educational wisdom represented by Zeng Guofan will continuously infuse momentum into the innovative development of Comprehensive Chinese Education and play a significant role in cultivating new-era talents endowed with cultural confidence and comprehensive competencies.

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