



The Application of Interdisciplinary Teaching Method in the Whole-book Reading of Chinese Language — A Case Study of Red Star Over China

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Abstract. As a teaching model that integrates knowledge, methods and perspectives of different disciplines, interdisciplinary teaching method provides a new approach for the whole-book reading teaching. Among all the whole-book reading texts in junior high school Chinese courses, both teachers and students generally report that Edgar Snow's documentary work *Red Star Over China* is the most difficult one. Unlike pure literary works that possess aesthetic value, this book fails to arouse strong reading interest among students. However, the application of interdisciplinary teaching method can help break through the reading difficulties of this book. By integrating the reading of this book with ideological and political education, geography and history, it is possible to stimulate students' reading interest and enable them to form a comprehensive understanding of the book.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary Teaching Method; Whole-book Reading; *Red Star Over China*

1 Introduction

With the deepening of the educational philosophy centered on core competencies, whole-book reading, as an important component of Chinese language teaching, has increasingly highlighted its value. The Compulsory Education Chinese Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) stipulates that the purpose of whole-book reading is to "improve overall cognitive ability and enrich the spiritual world"^[1]. It transcends fragmented and utilitarian reading modes, emphasizing the holistic grasp and in-depth understanding of works. However, the teaching of whole-book reading from the traditional single-subject perspective sometimes struggles to fully explore the diverse values contained in complex classic texts, and is prone to falling into the single dimension of content combing and literary appreciation. "The epistemological essence of 'interdisciplinary learning' lies in students using perspectives from multiple disciplines and inter-disciplinary connections to understand the world"^[2]. The interdisciplinary teaching method advocates breaking down disciplinary barriers, and organically integrating knowledge, methods and thinking modes of two or more disciplines around

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core issues or themes. Whole-book reading and the interdisciplinary teaching method are consistent in their goals: both are committed to transcending the mastery of single knowledge points and pursuing in-depth understanding and the improvement of comprehensive literacy. The combination of the two is necessary and inherently advantageous.

According to the feedback from frontline teachers and students, *Red Star Over China* can be regarded as the most challenging text among all the whole-book reading materials in junior high school Chinese courses. As a documentary literary work, *Red Star Over China* is mainly composed of factual records and materials. Although it contains some interesting scene descriptions, it does not form a complete and legendary story plot on the whole. Therefore, students often express low reading interest, and teachers also tend to find it difficult to start teaching. Fundamentally speaking, the widespread perception of this book as difficult to read among teachers and students mainly stems from a misalignment of starting points. If students approach it with the same reading expectations and habits as they do when reading pure literary works, they will indeed struggle to adapt to the reading experience of *Red Star Over China*. However, when students try to abandon their preconceived strong expectations for aesthetic experience and instead engage with the book through an interdisciplinary mindset, the pleasure of reading will gradually emerge. Therefore, to address the key pain points in reading *Red Star Over China*, teaching design can start with the "comprehensiveness" principle, adopting the interdisciplinary learning method to promote the cultivation of core Chinese competencies through interdisciplinary integration and convergence.

2 Analysis of Interdisciplinary Teaching Resources for Red Star Over China

2.1 Ideological and Political Education Dimension: Rich and Three-dimensional Images of Great Men

Snow possessed the meticulous observation ability and keen perception capability of an outstanding journalist. When depicting the images of Communist Party cadres, he combined physical description with character portrayal, and integrated direct observation with indirect introduction. With just a few concise strokes, he was able to outline the unique personality of each Communist Party member. In this way, *Red Star Over China* vividly presents the spiritual outlook of the Communist Party of China during a specific historical period, and serves as a vivid teaching material for understanding "why the red political power could exist".

In Snow's portrayal, Zhou Enlai was characterized by his gentle and refined manner, "large and deep eyes full of warmth," ability to speak very accurate English, and steady and mild demeanor in conversation. Mao Zedong impressed Snow as "very much like Lincoln," with "bright and piercing eyes," a robust physique, extensive reading, an astonishing familiarity with world politics, the decisive spirit of a great man, while also possessing profound emotions, with "moist eyes" when speaking of deceased comrades. Although Mao Zedong came from an intellectual background, he possessed the simple

and genuine nature of Chinese peasants, was unconcerned with trivial matters, and lived a frugal life. Zhu De was gentle by nature, modest and composed, spoke softly, and was well-versed in military tactics. Peng Dehuai was lively and cheerful, spoke rapidly, was straightforward and direct in his speech and behavior, possessed extraordinary physical strength and energy, and was very fond of children, enjoying joking with the "little red devils." Xu Haidong had the mischievous appearance of a child and possessed a naturally innate air of innocence. Snow's descriptions highlighted the Communist Party leaders' extraordinary talents and endowments that set them apart from ordinary people, as well as their warm and endearing human qualities that made them relatable to common folk, establishing images of great men who were both respectable and lovable, causing the Kuomintang's propaganda portraying the Communist Party as "bandits" and "robbers" to collapse of its own accord.

Through Snow's accounts, we can identify a common trait: the ideological seeds of these Communist Party members took root in their childhood. Though born into a rich peasant family, Mao Zedong had sympathized with the poor just like his mother ever since he was a child. In his early years, he witnessed the despair and misery of peasants under the oppression of landlords, and a consciousness of resistance sprouted in his young mind, laying the groundwork for his efforts to seek interests for peasants and the poor in later years. Peng Dehuai also came from a rich peasant background, yet he suffered abuse from his stepmother from an early age. In his adolescence, abhorring evil as he did, he kicked over his grandmother's opium pipe tray. His authoritarian grandmother then ordered the whole family to drive him out of the house. After that, Peng Dehuai did all sorts of hard labor. When a famine hit Hunan, he led peasants to storm the rice shop of a wealthy landlord who made exorbitant profits from the disaster. By this time, he had already developed a revolutionary spirit of pursuing justice. The purity embodied in Xu Haidong was closely related to his background as a pure proletarian. For generations, his family had been kiln workers. During his growth, he endured constant bullying by the rich, which fostered a strong class consciousness in him. Xu Haidong was extremely proud of his proletarian origins, and his pure and profound class feelings strengthened his conviction to eliminate evil forces, making him firmly believe that "one Red Army soldier is equivalent to five White Army soldiers".

As he gained a deeper understanding of the Soviet Area, Snow deeply felt the Communist Party members' commitment to upholding democracy and equality. Mao Zedong talked earnestly with peasants on the streets, integrating himself wholeheartedly into the masses without any reserve; during the performances by the Red Army Troupe, such cadres as Mao Zedong, Zhang Wentian (Luo Fu), Lin Biao and Lin Boqu scattered themselves among the audience and sat on the grass; Zhu De helped peasants with their farm work in his spare time; a Hui villager poured out his grievances to Peng Dehuai continuously for two hours... The Communist Party shared weal and woe and stood through thick and thin together with the soldiers and the people. It restored their status and dignity as human beings, changed their vulnerable position of being insulted and trampled upon, and aroused their enthusiasm to strive for a happy life.

Snow himself also experienced the democratic atmosphere in the Soviet Area. Cadres such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai fully respected Snow's freedom as a journalist,

imposing no restrictions on his photography, material collection or interviews, and never censoring his writings or photos, thus placing Snow in a friendly and safe working environment. In the end, Snow had unconsciously developed a profound affection for the Soviet Area. "As an outsider who intruded into this context, Snow is undergoing a thought-provoking transformation of perspective, evolving from an ordinary journalist gathering and writing news from a humanitarian viewpoint into an international friend speaking for China from a left-wing progressive perspective."^[3] At the moment of waving goodbye to the Red Army soldiers, he could not contain his emotions—"Perhaps I am the last foreigner to see them alive. I feel deeply sorrowful. I do not feel like I am going home, but rather leaving it."^[4] At this moment, the friendship that transcended national borders shone brightly.

2.2 Geographical and Historical Dimension: A Magnificent and Grand Revolutionary Picture Scroll

Red Star Over China is a magnificent and grand revolutionary picture scroll that vividly depicts the arduous struggles waged by the Communist Party of China and the Red Army to overcome hardships and dangers in pursuit of national independence and people's liberation. In this scroll, the Long March stands out as the most brilliant stroke. The book records the Long March route of the Central Red Army (the First Front Red Army), which lasted 12 months and 7 days from October 11, 1934 to October 19, 1935, passing through 11 provinces including Jiangxi, Fujian, Guangdong, Hunan, Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, Xikang, Gansu and Shaanxi, covering a distance of 25,000 li. Along the way, the Red Army surmounted the enemy's pursuit, interception, and encirclement, harsh natural environments, and predicaments of shortage of food and clothing, staging a series of thrilling battles such as the Four Crossings of the Chishui River, the Flying Capture of the Luding Bridge, the March across the Grasslands, and the Climb over the Snow Mountains. The Long March is a great feat in the history of the Chinese revolution and a miracle in the history of world military affairs. At that time, public awareness of the Long March at home and abroad was extremely limited. Snow wrote the magnificent epic of the Red Army's Long March, which not only provided precious historical materials, but also enhanced and inspired the revolutionary enthusiasm of a large number of patriotic young people.

After arriving in Yan'an, Snow also documented the cultural, economic and political landscape of the Northwest Soviet Area through interviewing Party cadres, consulting materials and conducting research among the masses. In his conversations with local peasants, all of them expressed that they were unwilling to live the life they used to have and were willing to embrace the life they were leading now. Most of the peasants referred to the Soviet as "our government". This was because the Communist Party, in order to realize the goal of "land to the tiller", implemented four economic reform measures that were of the greatest significance to peasants: redistributing land, abolishing usury, rescinding exorbitant taxes and levies, and eliminating the privileged class. The Communist Party not only transformed the Northwest economically, lifting local peasants out of the long-standing poverty and weakness under the oppression of the old regime, but also sowed the seeds of civilization here. It eradicated opium,

prohibited foot-binding and infant drowning, organized women into agricultural production and political work, promulgated the Marriage Law to safeguard women's rights and interests, and launched literacy campaigns among the masses, thus bringing a brand-new look to life in the Northwest. Snow's trip to Suiyuan in 1929 once made him extremely disappointed with the Chinese people, but his visit to Yan'an changed his mind and convinced him that Chinese peasants were not cowards. As long as there were reliable people to lead and organize them and let them see hope, they would rise up and fight.

Snow was filled with great interest in the Red Army led by the Communist Party of China. To figure out the reasons why this army maintained such strong morale and proved invincible in battles, he collected a series of statistical data. This was an army brimming with youthful vitality: the majority of its soldiers were young peasants and workers, with the average age of ordinary soldiers being 19 years old and that of officers 24 years old. This was an army that pursued civilization and self-improvement: 60 to 70 percent of its soldiers were literate, a level much higher than that of ordinary armies in the Kuomintang-controlled areas. This was an army with excellent conduct: from the most senior commanders down to ordinary soldiers, everyone shared the same food and clothing, and there was no such thing as high salaries or embezzlement. After leaving Yan'an for the northwest frontline, Snow no longer relied solely on paper-based data to understand the Red Army; instead, he was able to witness their battles and daily lives on the spot. Snow recognized that the Red Army were "a new type of Chinese soldiers", and their fundamental advantage lay in their firm faith in victory. This strong conviction drove them to resist the enemy with superior weaponry with extraordinary endurance, and no other army in the world could endure such harsh living conditions. The image of the Chinese Red Army was restored in an objective and impartial way in Snow's writing. Overseas impressions of Chinese soldiers were still stuck on the late Qing Dynasty's "comical" army, whose troops were cowardly, afraid of death and poorly equipped, while the Red Army in Kuomintang propaganda was depicted as corrupt and degenerate "bandits". Red Star Over China clarified these misunderstandings and made the world sit up and take notice of this vibrant and well-trained army.

3 Interdisciplinary Teaching Design of Red Star Over China

3.1 Integration of Chinese Language Teaching and Ideological and Political Education

Teachers can show students the photo taken by Snow of Mao Zedong, which is also one of Mao Zedong's most famous photos. They can ask questions about this photo: What are the characteristics of Mao Zedong in this photo? In the photo, Mao Zedong has a firm look in his eyes and a straight posture, wearing a military cap, and the majestic bearing of the Red Army leader is clearly visible. This photo is vastly different from the image of Mao Zedong as a "bandit" depicted in the Kuomintang's propaganda. Once released, the photo restored the noble integrity of the Communists and exposed the

deceptive propaganda tricks of the Kuomintang. Taking this photo as a starting point, teachers can assign a task: read *Red Star Over China* and compile a brief biography of Mao Zedong, including his basic information, personality, hobbies, major revolutionary experiences and other aspects. The same method can also be adopted to compile brief biographies of other figures such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai. In this process, the firm ideals, hardworking style, outstanding wisdom and dedication to the people of Mao Zedong and other leading figures are materialized. It helps students connect the core socialist values with specific figures and deeds, realizing the value construction that progresses from cognitive understanding to recognition, and then from recognition to internalization.

3.2 Integration of Chinese Language Teaching and Geography Teaching

Red Star Over China covers many locations across the motherland. Snow depicted the natural landscapes and folk customs of the Northwest as he saw them with poetic, touching, vivid and witty writing. The geography course in the first volume of the eighth grade happens to focus on the study of China's natural environment, which provides geographical knowledge support for understanding *Red Star Over China*. Teachers can assign students the task of completing a Long March map. Students should obtain information from the book by using reading methods such as the underlining method and the annotation method, and draw the map by themselves with reference to the map of China. In addition to being a simple route map, this Long March map needs to include notes that specify the characteristics of the natural environment at each location marked on it.

Although ready-made Long March maps are easily accessible online or in books, the process of students completing the map independently is highly meaningful. Such a task urges students to read the text more devotedly and carefully. Meanwhile, students will unconsciously develop a sense of involvement, breaking away from being confined merely to the distant textbook figure of "the 25,000-li Long March". They will gain a more concrete understanding of the entire course of the Long March, feel the hardships of the Long March and the bravery of the Red Army empathically, and thus form a strong emotional resonance with Mao Zedong's poem *The Long March*. Similarly, students are required to draw a map of Snow's interview route based on his travel path. This task helps students grasp the narrative sequence of the whole book and also enables them to gain a deeper insight into the living environment of the Northwest Soviet Area.

3.3 The Integration of Chinese Language and Literature with History

The history course in the first volume of the eighth grade covers modern and contemporary Chinese history. *Red Star Over China* has a synchronous connection with Lesson 16 "Mao Zedong Blazes the Path in Jinggangshan", Lesson 17 "The Long March of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army" and Lesson 18 "From the September 18th Incident to the Xi'an Incident". Combining the reading of this book

with the study of history classes can achieve the effect of mutual promotion and mutual complementarity. For example, the "Material Study and Analysis" section in Lesson 16 of the history textbook quotes a sentence from Mao Zedong's work *Why Is It Possible for the Chinese Red Regime to Exist?* and raises the question "What do you think is needed to create the situation of 'the armed independent regime of workers and peasants'?" This question is quite complex and abstract, but it becomes much easier to understand when supplemented by the records in *Red Star Over China*. In *Why Is It Possible for the Chinese Red Regime to Exist?*, Mao Zedong pointed out that "the existence of a regular Red Army with considerable strength is an essential condition for the survival of the red regime"^[5]. Then, what kind of army is the Red Army? Students can learn from *Red Star Over China* that it is an army with firm convictions, strict discipline, a willingness to endure hardships and hardships, and high morale. Students can also find the reasons for the Red Army's strength in the book. These reasons are closely related to the soldiers' family backgrounds, ages, and the military as well as theoretical training they received. Fundamentally, it is inseparable from the strong leadership of the Communist Party. The correct policies of the Communist Party have united and mobilized the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. The red star shines over the Northwest and is bound to shine over the whole of China. By combining *Red Star Over China* with the thinking questions in the history textbook, students can use the vivid examples depicted by Snow to gain an in-depth understanding of the Red Army spirit, thereby comprehending the development direction of China's revolutionary history.

4 Conclusion

The interdisciplinary teaching approach is not merely a superficial combination of knowledge from different subjects, but a profound transformation in teaching that integrates multiple disciplinary perspectives, methods, and thinking models around core texts. First, this approach effectively responds to the current Chinese curriculum standards' requirement to "enhance overall cognitive abilities." By placing *Red Star Over China* within the intersecting contexts of ideology, history, and geography, students move beyond mere literary appreciation. They construct a panoramic understanding of the work and even the Chinese Revolution from multiple dimensions—political ideals, geographical spaces, and historical processes—achieving the integration and transfer of knowledge. Second, the application of this approach reveals new possibilities for text interpretation. For works like *Red Star Over China*, which carry rich historical connotations and social significance, unlocking their teaching value requires teachers to possess interdisciplinary vision and curriculum development capabilities, transforming static texts into dynamic and comprehensive learning resources. Finally, the interdisciplinary teaching method provides an authentic arena for cultivating students' core competencies. Driven by tasks such as mapping the Long March, compiling character biographies, and validating historical perspectives, students' language proficiency, critical thinking, aesthetic appreciation, and cultural understanding develop synergistically. In summary, in the era of core compe-

tencies, Chinese language teaching should more actively break down disciplinary boundaries. By adopting an open and integrated approach, it should guide students toward a deep understanding of texts and a comprehensive perception of the world within complex and authentic learning contexts.

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