

# Value Review of Literary Classic Education at the Basic Stage of English Major in the New Era\*

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**Abstract**—As Socialism with Chinese Characteristics enters a new era, Chinese foreign language education undertakes the mission of promoting the building of a community of shared future for mankind and cultivating people who can participate in global governance and play important roles in the great renewal of the Chinese nation. To strengthen the literary classic education at the basic stage of English major, combining morality education with professional skills training, is conducive to improving the quality of foreign language talents. Literary classics show irreplaceable values in foreign language education with their intrinsic values such as aesthetic, ethical and social ones. The literary classic education is not only the route that humans must take to be great and lofty, but also the effective way to shape the values of the New Era, improve empathy and critical thinking, and promote the construction of the community of shared future.

**Keywords**—literary classic education; value review; new era

## I. INTRODUCTION

As Socialism with Chinese Characteristics has entered a New Era, it is the requirement and expectation of our era to promote the building of a community of shared future for mankind and train people who can take part in global governance and shoulder the responsibility of the renewal of the Chinese nation. The newly issued National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors in China has put forward new quality requirements for students majoring in foreign languages: "Students majoring in foreign languages should have a right view on the world, life and values, good moral character, Chinese feelings and international perspectives, sense of social responsibility, humanities and scientific literacy, spirit of cooperation, spirit of innovation and basic discipline accomplishment." Literary classic education is indispensable for the cultivation of high-quality foreign language talents with ideals, abilities and responsibilities. As early as in 2014, at the Symposium on Literature and Art, General Secretary Xi Jinping has expounded the significance of the prosperity of Chinese culture to the great renewal of the Chinese nation, and stressed the importance of strengthening the education and inheritance of literary classics. The elementary stage of undergraduate study is the best time to shape students' values

and cultivate their quality and thinking. Then, what is the value of strengthening literary classic education at the basic stage of English major? In the new era, it is necessary to have a comprehensive review of the value of literary classic education at the basic stage of English undergraduate study, so as to improve the quality of talent training and lay a solid foundation for realizing the long-term goal of education modernization.

## II. THE MAIN CONNOTATION AND INTRINSIC VALUE OF LITERARY CLASSICS

Literary classics, as the name suggests, are elite works. They have strong literary originality and unique characters, narrative structure and language style. With elegant language, original imagination, aesthetic dignity and competitive features, literary classics are the true memory art, the basis of cultural thinking, and their impact is extensive and profound. A work that cannot be re-read is not a classic, Harold Bloom, the prominent contemporary American literary theorist states. Just as the Italian novelist Italo Calvino says, classics are books that can be reread and each reread is as revealing as the first time, and books that will never run out of stories and constitute valuable experiences for readers. Containing special power, they will leave seeds on the people who love them even if they themselves are forgotten. Literary classics have intrinsic lofty values, especially their aesthetic value, ethical value and social value.

### A. Aesthetic Value

Aesthetic value is the essential characteristic of literary classics. Only aesthetic power can penetrate classics. Casius Longinus, an ancient Greek literary aesthetician, illustrates that a work can be regarded as truly sublime only when it commands the affection of all men of all ages. Literary classics have been handed down from generation to generation and have acquired lofty qualities. What we can experience in reading them is the superb, profound, and subtle nature of thoughts, emotions, and expressions. What we are faced with is the great soul, spirit, power, and the appeal as powerful as lightening. Classic works are generally written by ambitious people, and their works are based on the understanding of the charm of human nature, which silently shapes and promotes the living souls of various nations. Reading these works which have grasped the

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universal eternal humanity is bound to infuse people with life, generate strong emotional resonance and cause "aesthetic empathy". We will "stand tall with the elm trees, roar with the wind, and beat against the rocks with the waves" <sup>[12](604)</sup>. Our minds will be controlled by the authors' powerful spirit, and our hearts will be fascinated by the sublime, majestic and other qualities of the work. Our selves will be liberated, our souls will be expanded, and thus a life communication will be achieved. This is the noble aesthetic experience endowed by classic reading.

### B. Ethical Value

Professor Nie Zhenzhao, the initiator of the theory of ethical literary criticism in China, believes that the core value of literary classics lies in their ethical value, and the basic function of literature is edification. For example, it is the thinking of whether revenge is morally just in Shakespeare's Hamlet that makes it a classic among the classics. Hamlet is faced with an ethical dilemma between killing and not killing: revenge for his father is his duty-bound ethical responsibility and obligation, but once the revenge happens, he will commit the great ethical crime of killing father. He cannot choose. And trapped in the ethical predicament, Hamlet is in great pain, which eventually leads to tragedy. "To be or not to be" has become an eternal question for human nature. Similarly, D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers is also a great novel with rich ethical implications. The tragedy of the protagonist Paul teaches us that the morality of life is immutable and invincible, that the harmony between spirit and flesh is the essence of life, and that a rich and more fulfilled life lies in the maintenance of natural and ethical order as well as the reverence for life. Essentially, the ethical value and aesthetic value of literature are mutually integrated.

### C. Social Value

Social value is the most important quality of literary classics. Literature is for conveying truth. Classic works carry the important function of shaping social character. Confucius believes that the education of human beings is derived from poetry, rites and music. Lawrence also writes in his Studies in Classic American Literature that the fundamental function of literature and art is to convey a moral. Those which can become literary classics must be survivors of complex struggles in social relationships. Echoing with the society and echoing with the era, they are a strong positive energy in social life. Walt Whitman's Song of the Open Road, enlightenment about American democracy, has inspired millions of Americans and countless souls around the world. Even to this day, the world is still gathered around his Leaves of Grass. If Whitman has forever changed the image of American's voice, Hemingway has made "a man can be destroyed, but not defeated" become an immortal human voice. The Old Man and the Sea is a work that challenges the limits of human beings and is full of fighting spirit. It is an allegory, a proof of human perseverance and a eulogy of intrepid heroism. Santiago is the symbol of life hero. Facing the vast and dangerous sea, when he utters such a voice as bearing the nobleness and dignity of human beings, how can we not respect him! How can we not admire him!! Hemingway has not only influenced

the feelings and attitudes of American people, but also deeply influenced generations of Chinese people.

## III. VALUE REVIEW OF LITERARY CLASSIC EDUCATION IN THE NEW ERA

The goal of education in the new era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is to build China into a strong modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful, meanwhile benefiting people of all countries in the world. The grand blueprint of building a community of Shared future for mankind put forward by General Secretary Xi reflects the concept of global common interests and the sense of responsibility for the common future of mankind. Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good? published in 2015 by UNESCO, stresses that education should be based on "respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity and shared responsibility for a sustainable future." Indeed, economic globalization has connected all of us as individuals who are far apart but closely related, who are completely strangers before but mutually interdependent now. People face each other across geographic, linguistic and ethnic divides. No one could stand outside this global interdependence. Therefore, we must cultivate an ability in students to regard themselves as members of a community of shared future, to know about the history, culture and characteristics of different groups of people in the world, and to understand the traditions of different countries and nations in addition to their own traditions. Undoubtedly, the excellent literary classics have built a bridge for us. Literary classic education has shown irreplaceable value in the new era at the basic stage of undergraduate teaching.

### A. Literary Classic Education Is the Route That Humans Must Take to Be Great and Lofty

Reading classics has unique value in awakening people. Reading a good book is to engage in a great dialogue. Going into the classics is to benefit from the human hearts since ancient times. Classic works are the best materials from which the intellect obtains foresight and understanding. What the literary classics reflect is the most basic eternal proposition in the world. The classical writers have explained the human thoughts and attitudes with their amazing insight, and provided us with the height and depth to analyze and judge various phenomena in human society. So, reading literary classics will expose students to the accumulated wisdom of human history beyond question. Wisdom is a virtue, a capability of being kind and good, and a kind of knowledge of being value-oriented and problem-conscious in the living world. Being close to wisdom is the need for humans to survive and to extend life. A person with wisdom not only has the reputation of being virtuous, but also has the ability to contribute to the well-being of a community. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's The Little Prince tells us that the essence of things is invisible to the eye, but visible to the mind. The little prince has the best qualities of humans: being kind, pure, and having endless curiosity and creative talent. Staying with the little prince is to better

understand yourself, to think more deeply, and to look at the world in a more novel light, hence to live in the newer hope. Wisdom helps the learners to understand the richness of human world, the meaning of survival and the value of life.

Frequently reading literary classics will bring us closer to greatness and nobility. Immersed in great works, in the long run, we will be imperceptibly influenced, thus sharing the greatness. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is the greatest Victorian novel in Britain. The protagonist Dorothea is like a real heroine. Despite suffering a lot of pain and humiliation, she still strives to do the right things, to be a good person and to pursue the supreme good of morality. If *Middlemarch* has aroused the noble emotions called for by social morality, then Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a powerful indictment of the evils and immorality of slavery. It is an invisible morality education to witness big ambitions, great virtues and terrible deeds. Frequently witnessing the great sublime, people will maintain a firm belief in the great sublime. "The understanding of greatness and nobility is the cornerstone of moral sense."<sup>[1](96)</sup> Noble sentiments need the edification of good books. There is no doubt that, if the freshmen could read great works and receive literary classic education from the moment they enter the university, they will inevitably retain the inspiration for life, the elegance of temperament, the nobility of morality, and the intuition of noble virtue throughout their whole lives.

#### *B. Literary Classics Education Is a Positive Force to Realize Value Shaping in the New Era*

Literary classics could provide students with value guidance, spiritual improvement and aesthetic enlightenment. In the new era, the fundamental task of China's higher education is to cultivate socialist constructors and successors who develop morally, intellectually, physically and aesthetically. The core socialist values we advocate — prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness— are the common values and unique spiritual pillars of the Chinese people in the new era. The extensive and profound Chinese culture and the outstanding culture of the world share the same beauty, which provides us with abundant nourishment to cultivate and practice socialist core values. From Li Bai's *Jing Ye Si* (Thoughts in the Still of the Night): "Raised my head to gaze at the moon, and lowered it to think of home" to Robert Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad*: "Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge, leans to the field and scatters on the clover", from Qu Yuan's *Li Sao* (The Lament): "The road ahead will be long and our climb will be steep" to Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind", they all bear the truest feelings for their homeland and express the highest realm of the pursuit of truth. Reading William Butler Yeats' *When You Are Old*, who cannot be impressed by the poet's unique and sincere emotions? While Meng Jiao's *You Zi Yin* (A Traveler's Song) always makes people cannot help but cry and weep:

The thread in the hands of a fond-hearted mother,

Makes clothes for the body of her wayward boy;

Carefully she sews and thoroughly she mends,

Dreading the delays that will keep him late from home.

But how much love has the inch-long grass

For three spring months of the light of the sun?

People are emotional. Reading works full of beauty will surely produce strong and profound feelings, with our soul cultivated, life enriched. The love inspired by reading literary classics is essential to the realization and maintenance of justice. Love will enhance attention to the well-being of others. And without the reinforcement of emotions such as love and empathy, building a better world for the future will still be out of reach. Fine works are just like sunshine from blue sky and breeze in spring, which will arouse a kind of tranquility and awe in our soul and make our life more vivid and full.

Literature classic education will make students' minds more perfect. In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman puts that the purpose of the university is to cultivate the Intellect, to make him apprehend and contemplate truth, enable him to discharge his duties to society, and fit him for the world in the end. "After reading *Jane Eyre*, I think I have grown up a lot. Different from *Jane Eyre*'s identity as an orphan, I was abandoned by my father when I was born. Later, I had a younger brother and a 'father' in my mother's reorganized family, but I had no love. When I came home, what I was confronted with was only hatred, scolding and even violence. I used to feel inferior, suffer self-reproach, and even think of suicide.... From *Jane Eyre*, I have learned independence, courage and self-esteem. I want to be my own hero and the messenger of peace for my family in the future." A freshman of our university wrote in her *Book Reflection* after reading the literary classics recommended by ELT Advisory Board under the Ministry Education. The socialist constructors we train for the new era should not only have a sound personality and a sense of social responsibility, but also have the ability to think helpfully about various phenomena in human society and pay attention to the destiny of the nation and human society. The shaping of value is a process of silent refinement. This process requires communication with great minds. The works of great writers are all full of compassion and concern for the fate of common people and they are shining with humanity beyond time and space.

#### *C. Literary Classic Education Is an Effective Way to Improve Empathy*

Empathy is a sacred human quality and the foundation of innovation. Empathy is, at its simplest, awareness of the feelings and emotions of other people. It is how we as individuals understand what others are experiencing as if we were feeling it ourselves. But it is more than that. It not only means recognizing a person's feelings, but also means valuing and respecting the person's feelings. Precisely, it means treating others with kindness, dignity and understanding. Empathy is civilization in essence. In a globalized world, empathy extends to all life. Globalization



has created unprecedented opportunities for human development, but it has also led to the deterioration of human environment and natural environment. Human beings are increasingly aware that the planet on which we live is our common homeland: "The earth is the only home on which we live, and to cherish and care for the earth is the only choice for human beings."<sup>[10](328)</sup> Building a community of shared future has manifested Chinese empathy, the global empathy for all human life. To build a community of shared future for mankind, we must cultivate students with sound ethical and moral values: developing students' ability to see the world from the perspective of others, especially from those who are often regarded as inferior by their society; educating students to have a correct view of human weakness and helplessness and learn to regard their own deficiencies and incompleteness as opportunities for cooperation and reciprocity with others; cultivating students' ability to genuinely care about others, including those around them and those far away from them; letting students know the real situation of other communities to eliminate their prejudice and dislike; and vigorously developing students' critical thinking, so that students could have the ability and courage to have their dissent say. This education can all start with reading literary classics.

Science has shown that reading literary fiction improves empathy. Psychologists David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano at the New School for Social Research have proved that reading serious fiction has a demonstrable impact on increasing empathy, social awareness and emotional sensitivity. Of course, not all novels improve empathy; it's the quality of the literature that determines it. A good novel will make us identify with it. Because literary novels often leave people with a wide space for imagination and promote introspective dialogue between readers and imaginary characters, and readers shoulder the task of interpreting or critical thinking, so the process of imagining situations while reading leads to increased empathy and pro-social behavior, which in turn leads to better performance in the real world and helps us become better people. Wouldn't reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* enlarge our imagination and ennoble our moral and social emotions? Empathy is beneficial for society as a whole, and beneficial for humanity as a whole. Nobody can forget Bob Dylan's persistent questions about justice and conscience in his Nobel prize-winning work *Blowing in the Wind*: "How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man? How many seas must a white dove sail, before she sleeps in the sand? How many times must the cannon balls fly, before they're forever banned?" Yes, how can we deny the fundamental rights of others when we look at the human race as a whole and regard ourselves as human beings with the same real emotions and valuable thoughts as others? When we focus on empathy in our lives, how can we go to war to kill, slaughter and murder? When empathy is at the center of our lives, how can we not have dignity, equality, justice and responsibility? Empathy is the foundation for improving human well-being and sustainable development. More importantly, it is the spiritual guarantee for building a new world of lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity and cleanliness.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Standing at the top of the mountain, the horizon is surely wide. Reading great books written by great minds is bound to add incredible power to life. There is no doubt that literary classics are an important educational force. The education of literary classics at the basic stage of English undergraduate teaching is of great significance for improving spiritual state, shaping correct values, improving empathy, developing critical thinking and cultivating innovative talents. It is safe to say that literary classic education is a positive force for justice, social equity and global solidarity. It is connected with the great renewal of the Chinese nation and the beautiful goal of building a community of shared future for mankind, and related with the future of the planet and the future of humanity as well. Only by basing respect, dignity and equality and by cultivating creative people who can coexist with both other people and nature in a peaceful and harmonious way, can education promote human progress and ensure human welfare. In the new era, literary classic education will be bound to add vitality to improving the quality of undergraduate teaching and realizing the modernization of foreign language education in China.

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