

Sensing the Poetic Habitat – A Study of Middle School Chinese Teaching from the Perspectives of Life Aesthetics

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Abstract: The concept of life aesthetics reflects an individual's cry for life and pursuit of beauty, inspiring individuals to discover their spiritual home, sense their poetic habitat, and enjoy the beauty of life flowing from their fingertips. Chinese education, viewed through the lens of life aesthetics, is founded on the natural characteristics of life, stimulating the aesthetic sense of individual life through the allure of language, and teaching students to view life through the aesthetic lens as well as from an understanding of life's essence. Teachers and students are required to take an aesthetic view of life as theoretical guidance, based on core Chinese literacy, with textbook contents serving as carriers and classroom instruction as the position, closely connected to students' actual lives, in order to help stimulate aesthetic experience among students, improve their aesthetic ability through aesthetic activities, and thus establish a correct view of life.

Key words: Life aesthetics; Life aesthetic education; Middle school Chinese teaching

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1. Concept interpretation: Life aesthetics

Individual existence is governed by the law of life. Human beings are distinct from animals as they possess not only material life – the nature endowed by human beings – but also spiritual aspirations to discover the meaning of life and to break free from the confinements of life, which is self-life. However, due to subjective and objective constraints, the retrospection and exploration of individuals are limited to discrete degrees. As a result, individuals have become critical to the advancement and transcendence of material and spiritual life. The Chinese language and its literatures encapsulate the collective wisdom of all generations. While the pursuit of life wisdom is a universal goal of human advancement, aesthetic thoughts are also profound and appear to reflect one's desire for harmonious perfection. Chinese and western scholars have described life aesthetics independently, and their descriptions reflect markedly different modes of thoughts.

Western life aesthetics is inextricably linked to binary thinking. They will transcend and perfect their lives in personal life, material life and spiritual spirit, moral self-improvement and development, as well as the object world. They can only be baptized by the passive, indirect, and implicit perception of the body, so people can only live in the quagmire of ignorance, at most indirectly perceived through the soul cage of the body ^[1]. In ancient Greece, scholars, represented by Socrates, consistently distinguished the body from the mind and gradually moved toward a dichotomous host-guest reckoning. Socrates believed that "knowledge is virtue" and that one can develop good virtue by mastering various practical knowledge, but he did not believe that moral self-perfection was necessary for a transcendent life. He once said, "The wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime ^[2]". This shows that Socrates did not adhere to the fundamental

characteristics of life. He placed transcendence and the perfection of life outside the body, and it is only after death that one can infinitely come close to the soul; that is, to life's wisdom and the enjoyment of beauty.

In contrast to western aesthetics, Chinese aesthetics emphasizes the invention of the heart, the heart of life aesthetics, advocating through life insights into the heart as well as the continuous improvement of moral views toward truth, goodness, and beauty, in order to gradually achieve the goal of the heart, natural clarity, and realizing the harmonious union of individual material and spiritual lives. As Lao Zi had said, "I have a great sickness because I have a body; if I did not have a body, what mischief would I have?"; "Putting this truth into himself, his virtue will be true and pure"; "If you concentrate on accumulating merit and virtue for the benefit of the people, and if you have the people's support, there is no difficulty you cannot overcome"; "Maintain good virtue and be as pure and natural as an infant." Confucius had also stated, "The golden mean should be the highest standard of morality! However, humans have lacked this morality for far too long." He used the golden mean to distinguish between gentlemen and villains. Confucian aesthetics promoted the view of "cultivate and maintain a serious and respectful attitude through self-denial" to constantly improve self-practice in order to achieve a point of clarity. It is worth noting that in contrast to western aesthetics, Chinese aesthetics did not deny the importance of the basic function for improving the realm of life. As a reference, the constant improvement of one's moral quality through the heart reflects Lao Zi's notion – "promote saints and enforce the rule of law." Mencius once stated, "Great people are childlike." Master Hui Neng stated that self-nature is pure originally and one already possesses the result of perfection. It is worth noting that the path to discovering the meaning of life is open to all regardless of class or race. The statement which goes by "from the son of heaven to the common people" is contingent upon one's cultivation. Since then, contemporary scholars have engaged in an endless debate about the concept of life aesthetics, with the most prominent voices being those of Feng Youlan, Wang Guowei, and Zhu Guangqian. Wang Guowei's *Life Consciousness* is a critical discourse of his aesthetic thought. His own consideration of individual life is referred to as "life consciousness." He categorized consciousness in three ways: ontology consciousness, redemption consciousness, and ideal consciousness. The ontological consciousness of life is compelled by the desire to act in an erroneous manner or sinks into a painful quagmire due to the insatiability of desire. Redemption consciousness refers to how humans should save themselves when confronted with painful life circumstances. Wang Guowei believes that while aesthetic education helps in explaining the consciousness and value of life, suspends the pain of the present world, and saves the present evil, aesthetic activities alone cannot fundamentally resolve the limitations of individual life, and thus true redemption cannot be achieved. Wang Guowei proposed the ideal consciousness of life based on the first two views. While aesthetic activities cannot provide material freedom for humans, they help in placing their beautiful vision in context and provide a measure of spiritual liberation. Wang Guowei discovered art on the path to salvation and believes that the art world with its "realm" is the habitat of a suffering life. Life discovers the "realm" in the artistic realm. In the "realm," the true emotions of life can exist and be expressed; thereby, life regains its natural state and freedom. This truly exists in a state, where life and the outside world are inseparable ^[3].

In a nutshell, life aesthetics is an aesthetic order based on life, with aesthetic activities serving as the means to overcome life's limitations.

2. Correlation between life aesthetics and Chinese education

Chinese's core quality clearly states that students should be educated in four dimensions; namely, language and application, thinking development and improvement, cultural understanding and inheritance, as well as aesthetic appreciation and creation, all of which serve as the foundation for students' lifelong learning and personalized development. Indeed, the requirement for Chinese teaching to implement the core quality

is to restore students' initiative in learning by emphasizing student-centered consciousness and the humanistic care embodied in the Chinese discipline as well as affirming its critical value for cultivating students' personalities in a complete manner and awakening life consciousness. Simultaneously, the Chinese core literacy adheres to the overall view of teaching, requiring harmony between the four dimensions, but in the actual classroom, the majority of teachers insist on one-sided teaching, dividing the core literacy, and limiting the four dimensions to a single dimension. This severely impedes students' multifaceted development potential, and as a result, students' comprehensive literacy gradually evolves into "exam-oriented literacy." At the same time, Chinese parents and teachers frequently use "obedience" as a yardstick for evaluating students' knowledge, ability, and quality, which is a sharp contrast with the Jewish perspective on education. They have always educated their children on the basis of questioning and thinking. The various possibilities of students are always rationalized; this fundamentally violates students' psychological development rules and characteristics. Rousseau stated, "In all of man's functions, reason can be said to be a synthesis of other officials; consequently, it is slow and extremely difficult; but some people must use it to develop other functions! A reasonable person is deemed as an excellent product of good education, for this reason, people try to educate their children with reason! This is a classic case of putting the cart before the horse and using the results as a means to an end. If children truly comprehend rational education, there is no reason for them to receive it ^[4]." Therefore, Chinese education should not devolve into simple knowledge education or be confined to trivial details and knowledge structure, but rather it should be based on fundamental knowledge and skills to develop students' thinking ability, improve students' culture, stimulate their aesthetic consciousness and ability, guide students to experience as many phenomena as possible, and inspire them with a calm, poetic, natural mentality to pursue the mean.

3. Suggestions for the implementation of middle school Chinese life aesthetics education

3.1. Discovering the splendor of life by excavating textbook content and integrating it into text materials

There is an inseparable link between the teaching and learning in China and the aesthetics of life. Taking high school language textbooks as an example, most of their selections are classical works and involve aesthetic wisdom in various fields, such as the spiritual beauty described in *In memory of Miss Liu Hezhen*, the comedic artistic beauty expressed in *Lost on Journey*, the social and cultural beauty revealed in *Li Sao*, and the aesthetic wisdom highlighted in *Moonlight of Lotus Pond*. They embody the intellectual power of human civilization and the wisdom of life. However, most teachers do not recognize the aesthetic value of life selection in practice. Therefore, teachers need to explore the content of the teaching materials and increase the pertinence of life aesthetic education. For instance, Du Fu wrote in *Climbing*, "The wind is blowing, apes are howling, white birds flying homeward, with barren trees around, and the Yangtze River rushing wildly." Through the sorrowful ape, barren trees, high sky, and surging river, the sad yet gorgeous scenery of fall is described as a "climb" through the old years and the disintegration of country feelings. Simultaneously, the poet appreciates nature's sad beauty, regrets the majestic natural scenery, recognizes the smallness and powerlessness of life, falls in love with the landscape, and finds freedom from life in the poignant beauty of nature.

The editor compiles the textbook in such a way to organize the text's content by theme. The selected pieces with their vibrant aesthetics are dispersed throughout. Hence, teachers need to thoroughly study the life aesthetic content in the textbook and integrate it into their lessons. When appropriate, they can conduct special instruction from the perspective of life aesthetics while incorporating aesthetic content from many fields, or they can attempt to conduct teaching activities using the "1 + X" group text reading approaches; that is, via an in-depth interpretation and repeated attempts to activate students' aesthetic vision and foster aesthetic ability in order to further improve students' aesthetic perspective on life.

3.2. Experiencing life's beauty by maximizing the classroom teaching effect and cultivating aesthetic interest

As previously said, high school Chinese textbooks contain a wealth of life aesthetic materials, which are resources that enable life aesthetic instruction to be implemented. Therefore, the critical role of classroom instruction should be emphasized by combining text resources and enhancing the effectiveness of life aesthetic education. To begin, an appropriate entrance should be located to elicit emotions. Literature is a lake, and emotion is its life. Without feelings, creation is pointless. Not only do emotions captivate readers, but they also have the power of enlightening both authors and readers. As it is not possible to personally experience the circumstance of the story in each book, most times, only the protagonist's personal feelings can resonate with the readers, thereby provoking the reflection on life. Teachers should take the chance to sever the text's emotional core. For instance, when it comes to Li Yu's *Corn Poppy*, teachers begin by recounting the life of Emperor Li Yu's generation. At this point, one can read from the music, attempting to immerse students in the country's pain and visualize the weeping emperor. It is stated that when Emperor Taizong of the Song Dynasty saw Li Yu's corn poppy, he became enraged and poisoned her. By taking a moment to admire Teresa Teng's *Corn Poppy* as a timeless song, this would assist students in comprehending the poem and experiencing the emotions. The emotional entry point, of course, is not limited to the import link. Other links may also serve as a guide. Second, extinguish the imagination and engage the text in a spiritual discussion. Imagination is a mental process by which existing representations are processed and recreated. Ye Shengtao once stated, "Literary and artistic works are frequently not suitcases; they contain not only a portion of the so-called words, but also a portion of the string sounds. To comprehend it, we must use our imagination ^[5]." Senior school students have a high capacity for imagination, and they can learn anything they desire as long as there is support from their teachers. The third is a guide to "beauty reading" in order to locate the "beauty spot." The American reading style can be used in conjunction with Li Zehou's three aesthetic principles, which are pleasing to the eye, heart, meaning, and spiritual satisfaction. Through the initial reading, to a detailed reading, and subsequent re-reading, one can develop an awareness of the situation, comprehend the language, sublimate emotions, and experience the aesthetic realm of text communication. Additionally, it is true to life and possesses a strong artistic sensibility. For high school students, the emotions and aesthetic conceptions of some selected essays may be lost on them. They are unfamiliar with the historical context, humanistic feelings, and social experience of great works, given the eras are so distant; thus, only by embedding text emotions and aesthetic artistic conceptions in students' daily lives are we able to touch students' hearts and elicit emotional resonance as well as profound aesthetic feelings.

3.3. Expressing the beauty of life by carrying out ecological writing to enrich aesthetic experience

Writing is a medium for conceptual output to be expressed. Writing instruction focuses on life activities, such as aesthetic observation, aesthetic imagination, aesthetic experience, aesthetic perception, and aesthetic creativity. The writing process is not only about honing writing skills; it is also about discovering, experiencing, expressing, and creating beauty. Therefore, teachers should integrate life aesthetic education into their writing instruction in order to enhance students' aesthetic experiences, stimulate their aesthetic taste, and heighten their aesthetic pleasure. The best way to do so is through ecological writing. On the one hand, teachers can encourage students to explore nature and experience life, observe beautiful mountains, rivers, birds, their morphological features, and the changes in nature, accumulate beautiful materials, as well as experience the magnificent landscape of nature. More importantly, on the basis of aesthetic observation, aesthetic judgment, and aesthetic perception, students can also accumulate aesthetic materials and actual life or social phenomena, and then create new patterns through imagination. Simultaneously, aesthetic experience should be enhanced based on the textbook, outside the classroom, off the campus, and

into the society, integrating classroom knowledge with social practice, and constantly improving one's ability to express and create beauty.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, life aesthetics education is critical for students' fundamental literacy development. It is also a quality requirement that teachers should try to improve. In high school Chinese instruction, the importance of life aesthetic education should be emphasized, textbook resources should be explored thoroughly, the classroom's primary theme should be carried forward, and students should be allowed to venture outside the classroom, in order to enrich their aesthetic experience, effectively cultivate their aesthetic ability, and enhance transcendence in their life.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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