

On the de-historicizing tendency in the teaching of modern and contemporary Chinese literature courses

Oliver Brown^{1, a}, Emily Evans^{1, b, *},

¹Association for Scottish Literary Studies (ASLS), c/o Department of Scottish Literature, University of Glasgow,7 University Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8QH, Scotland, United Kingdom
a.oliver_brown_256948@foxmail.com,b.emily_evans@outlook.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: Recently, a de-historicizing tendency has emerged in the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature courses, manifesting primarily as text-centrism, de-intellectualization, and a drift toward consumerism. This trend is largely driven by the pervasive influence of the "pure literature" concept, the pedagogical shift toward cultivating applied competencies, constraints imposed by insufficient instructional hours, and the failure to clearly differentiate teaching objectives between secondary and tertiary education. Consequently, it is imperative to maintain a vigilant and reflective stance toward this issue. The pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature should restore literary works to their proper historical contexts by establishing a comprehensive "Great Literary History" perspective. This entails expanding the corpus of literary historical materials, returning to the authentic historical scenes of literary production, and rectifying the current bifurcated approach that severs knowledge from capability. Instead, an integrated model of instruction—both inside and outside the classroom—should be advanced, one that synthesizes textual aesthetic appreciation with rigorous literary-historical scrutiny. Throughout the teaching process, whether in the aesthetic selection and recovery of authors and texts or in the judgment and interpretation of their value and significance, a consciousness of literary history must remain thoroughly embedded.

Keywords: Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature Teaching, De-historicization, Great Literary History Perspective

1. Introduction

The relationship between literature and history is exceedingly complex and subject to ongoing debate. It is common knowledge that literature is literature, not history; yet there has never been a literature that transcends history—literature is invariably created within specific historical contexts. Consequently, an accurate grasp of literature necessitates a return to its original historical milieu. In the current pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature, however, a fragmented mode of aesthetic teaching—centered exclusively on textual exegesis—has gained considerable traction. This approach fosters an isolated and speculative aesthetic construction that wholly discards both the internal historical continuities of literature and its external historical contexts, a trend that has nearly become mainstream. Such circumstances indicate that the time has come to reassert the critical significance of literary-historical consciousness in teaching. The de-historicizing tendency in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature instruction, now operating as a dominant pedagogical paradigm, is increasingly revealing its inherent flaws. The perspective adopted in this paper is grounded primarily in Marxist materialist historiography and the dialectical principle of totality, supplemented by judiciously selected insights from contemporary cutting-edge theoretical frameworks. This constitutes both the theoretical background and the practical rationale informing the present discussion.

2. Manifestations of the de-historicizing tendency in teaching

2.1. Text-centered speculation

2.1.1. *Fragmented pedagogy of closed textual exegesis*

For some time now, the "New Criticism"-style closed textual interpretation and the fragmented aesthetic experience that rejects holistic dialectics have become a prevailing trend in the teaching of modern and contemporary Chinese literature courses. There is an excessive emphasis on pure textual appreciation, coupled with a deliberate downplaying of historical scrutiny regarding literary development. At times, interpretations are rendered arbitrarily, entirely divorced from the historical and cultural contexts of the texts. This detached and ethereal, fractured approach to literary pedagogy lacks both the rigorous scholarly attitude of careful verification and the empirical grounding of evidence-based research rooted in historical materials; instead, it frequently drifts into unbridled speculation, even trapping itself in subjective fantasy. By abandoning a holistic grasp of the defining characteristics and trajectories of literary development across different periods, the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has degenerated into a mere "wholesale-to-retail" operation. Students are presented only with isolated fragments and sporadic reflections, neither tracing origins forward nor examining subsequent influences and evolution. Consequently, learners fail to achieve an accurate and thorough understanding of the texts, nor can they develop a coherent conceptual framework of literary history through textual interpretation. This unmoored approach to textual analysis and semantic interpretation leaves students adrift: they acquire neither sufficient contextual knowledge and theoretical concepts nor gain clarity regarding the texts' status, contributions, influences, and limitations within literary history. Ultimately, they are left with only superficial, floating impressions.

2.1.2. The self-imposed confines of "Pure Literature"

The pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has long been constrained within an exceedingly narrow ambit, guided by a utopian conception of "pure literature" that treats the text as a universe unto itself—drawing a circle around it and refusing to step beyond. It is a commonplace that diverse interpretations of writers' texts across different eras must be grounded in a thorough understanding of their historical contexts—what traditional Chinese literary criticism terms "knowing the person and discussing the age" (shire lunch)—to attain a sufficiently profound comprehension. If we deliberately evade the objective determinations of specific historical periods, we will be unable to elucidate the latent profundity embedded within the interstices of texts and documents. In teaching *The Lily*, for instance, instructors would find themselves hard-pressed to answer queries of the sort posed by Chen Xiaoming: "Why, at the very height of the Great Leap Forward, was the author telling such a desperate yet beautiful story?"[1] Teachers must remain acutely aware of the intricate relationship between history and text; otherwise, pedagogical impasses are inevitable. The same holds true for the compilation of textbooks. Neglecting this principle leads to similar deficiencies, as evidenced in Chen Sihe's *A Coursebook on Contemporary Chinese Literary History*. While centering the text and prioritizing literary works, this textbook's preoccupation with "elucidating the internal dynamics of literary works" results in a failure to articulate "the trajectory of literary evolution in response to shifts in the times and society," and it cannot adequately describe "the complex interconnections between literature and other forms of social existence and consciousness during specific historical phases." [2]

2.2. The attitude of de-intellectualization

2.2.1. The drastic marginalization of knowledge transmission

Under the formidable sway of competency-based education, some instructors have adopted an evasive, even apathetic stance toward literary knowledge. There is a widespread disregard for the foundational role of knowledge instruction in talent cultivation, accompanied by a palpable neglect of the systematic and integral nature of literary knowledge. Within the pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature, aesthetic appreciation and skill training are fervently championed, while knowledge transmission is disdained as if a noxious "uselessness of knowledge" theory were making an unwelcome resurgence. Literature and knowledge are thus artificially polarized in the classroom; any perceived shortcomings in university-level literature teaching are conveniently blamed on the intrusive interjection of "knowledge." As Wang Benchao observes, "Literary history has devolved into a mere 'science of literary knowledge,' fixated on cataloging what authors and works are, along with their ideological content and artistic features. At most, it offers perfunctory extensions into the consciousness of the modern nation-state, the socio-historical context, and the putative laws and rationales of literary history. When literature is reduced to the confined

domain of historical data, when literary experience and aesthetic sensibility are forgotten, literary history degenerates into a sterile of abstract theories and concepts, devoid of grounding in textual particulars or rooted in lived experience and aesthetic imagination... Consequently, literary history instruction becomes solely an exercise in the accumulation and transmission of facts, with scant regard for training in literary craft, the cultivation of scholarly inquiry, or the nurturing of aesthetic taste." [3] It is undeniable that literature is not reducible to a mere compendium of knowledge, nor should the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature devolve into the simple parroting of facts—a fatal flaw that rightly drew censure in the past. Yet the current pendulum swing to the opposite extreme—from an erstwhile overemphasis on knowledge to its present drastic marginalization—is equally problematic. Today, knowledge transmission has become a pariah in pedagogical discourse, perpetually subject to blame and universally maligned. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, much contemporary literature instruction simply jettisons knowledge, lest it be deemed unsophisticated or rigorous. This stance, however, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of both the nature of knowledge itself and its intrinsic, symbiotic relationship with literature.

2.2.2. The perils of knowledge expulsion and reflective critique

The expulsion of knowledge has, in truth, rendered classrooms hollow and adrift. Undergraduates yet to cross the threshold of scholarship are left without cognitive anchors, forced to endure lectures akin to "heavenly scriptures" "utterly incomprehensible". Worse still, knowledge is artificially pitted against critical thinking, exploration, and competence; even the transmission of foundational facts is dismissed as superfluous, under the naïve assumption that students can autonomously resolve all epistemic gaps. This has precipitated a new pedagogical crisis. Consider: how can a student lacking even rudimentary mastery of core disciplinary theories and principles, or the basic literacy to parse a scholarly article, possibly identify problems with acuity, address them with professional rigor, innovate, or sustain intellectual growth? The Regulations on Academic Degrees of the People's Republic of China (Art. 4) unequivocally stipulate that bachelor's degree candidates must demonstrate a sound grasp of foundational theories, specialized knowledge, and basic skills, alongside a preliminary capacity for scientific research or technical application. Clearly, undergraduate education demands both theoretical grounding and applied competence. It is axiomatic that knowledge and ability are intrinsically inseparable. A university—or an instructor—that pursues the absurd extreme of teaching only what is deemed "unnecessary" would swiftly forfeit its legitimacy; likewise, literary pedagogy that dogmatically expels knowledge is fundamentally flawed. That foundational disciplinary and curricular knowledge must be taught ought to be beyond dispute.

2.3. The trend toward consumerism

2.3.1. Literary transformation under the impact of consumer culture

Since the 1990s, under the sway of consumer culture, the production, dissemination, and reception of literature have undergone profound transformations: literature has been increasingly marginalized, authorship democratized, readership empowered, and creative practice popularized. Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has shifted from a transcendent spiritual haven to a consumerist arena geared toward stimulating desire—a carnival of linguistic signs and a quotidian textual commodity. Confronted with literature, audiences have progressively abandoned lofty ideals in favor of immediate sensory gratification and pleasurable catharsis. With the collapse of traditional literary value systems, both the psychology and pedagogical practices of instructors have undergone significant reorientation. The teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature now exhibits pronounced consumerist tendencies, pivoting from disinterested contemplation and elitism toward pragmatic utility and secularization. This shift manifests in a marked preference for narrative plot over thematic depth, a penchant for literary gossip and exposés, vulgarized character sketches, indulgence in sensuous spectacle, opportunistic displays of wit, excessive reliance on multimedia, and an obsessive focus on classroom packaging—altogether signaling a blatant capitulation to prevailing consumerist currents.

2.3.2. The consumerist dilemma in literary pedagogy

In the consumer era, literature has effectively devolved into an instrument of desire-driven experience. Studying literature is increasingly pursued not for acquiring knowledge or probing scholarly truths, but for securing transient psychological gratification and convenient cathartic outlets—leaving little time or inclination for deep, genealogical inquiry. Correspondingly, the pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has pivoted from traditional scholarly pursuits toward immediate utilitarian objectives. Once a vehicle for cultivating literacy and refining sensibilities, it has been refashioned into a site of mass-consumerist leisure, increasingly reliant on experiential pedagogies that adhere to the consumerist dictum of "the customer is always right." This entails a decisive shift toward a reader-centric model that caters to student demands. Prioritizing the consumer expectations of the receiving subject has precipitated a steady erosion of the intellectual autonomy traditionally held by the elite intelligentsia. Consequently, literary instruction is now rife with consumerist manifestations: the flattening of content depth, the severance of historical continuities, an inward turn toward hedonic pleasure-seeking, and an outward obsession with spectacular entertainment designed to ride the tide of popular amusement. Present-day instruction, despite its sophisticated technological apparatus, exhibits profound spiritual poverty. It privileges ostentation, pragmatism, and amusement, manifesting in a pervasive neglect of literary knowledge and historical fact, arbitrary textual interpretation, the abandonment of independent critical judgment, a dearth of substantive innovation, and a progressive slide into trivialization and even gamification.

3. Root causes of the de-historicizing tendency in teaching

3.1. The Influence of the "Pure Literature" concept

Deeply influenced by the "Rewriting Literary History" movement of the 1980s, the pedagogy of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has established the legitimacy of a "pure literature" paradigm. In its effort to shake off ideological constraints, however, it has progressively forfeited the necessary diachronic perspective, leading to the proliferation of a fragmented mode of textual instruction. Pure aesthetics has thus transmuted from a former literary utopia into a new hegemony within the actual classroom. Under the banner of aesthetic appreciation, instruction has long been preoccupied with a text-centric manipulation that serves the organic historical connections of literary works, emphasizing hermeneutic methods designed to guide students toward a closed, isolated artistic grasp of texts. In essence, superficial textual appreciation has usurped all other pedagogical imperatives, reducing the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature to the isolated appreciation of select anthologized pieces. The pursuit of literary aesthetic essentialism has become the defining feature of this pedagogy, with a pronounced focus on micro-level textual analysis widely accepted as a cardinal principle. Indeed, operationalizing this course as a de-historicized exercise in pure aesthetic experience is now broadly regarded as the optimal pedagogical approach—a hallmark of the field since the 1990s.

The critical question, however, is to what extent the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature can legitimately sustain an aesthetic mode that severs historical connections and contexts. In truth, the current text-centric, experiential pedagogy represents merely a superficial regression—an attempt to escape the former ideological manipulation of literary instruction. Guiding teaching solely by the standard of isolated aesthetic purity has merely replaced a prior, externally imposed loss of self with a present, self-incurred limitation. Pedagogy has shifted from mechanically illustrating prescribed historical narratives and theories to indulging in the solipsistic "whispers of the inner soul," yet remains trapped within the closed circuit of a de-historicized aesthetic. For too long, this curriculum has erroneously enshrined the "Rewriting Literary History" movement—and its tactical return to "pure literature" as the singular, permanent methodology and ultimate objective. By treating the socio-historical vision of literature as anathema and losing itself in the mythos of "pure literature," the field has suffered from a paucity of holistic theoretical reflection. Consequently, the pursuit of "pure literature" has transmuted from a provisional aspiration into a present pedagogical trap.

3.2. The competency-based education imperative

3.2.1. *Curricular alienation under instrumentalist imperatives*

The question "What is the practical use of studying Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature?" is now ubiquitously posed to instructors, reflecting the stark reality confronting the discipline: an intensifying demand for applicability, vocational alignment, and "short, flat, fast" pedagogical outcomes. Literary education is increasingly mandated to interface directly with immediate social utility. Against the backdrop of university enrollment expansion and the upgrading of vocational colleges to undergraduate status, mounting employment pressures have amplified the instrumentalist orientation of the curriculum. Consequently, the classroom has been repurposed into a training ground for pragmatic skills. Around the turn of the 21st century, the mass upgrade of Chinese vocational colleges to full universities compelled their Chinese departments to operationalize the institutional mandate of cultivating "application-oriented talents." This policy imperative left instructors of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature with little pedagogical agency.

3.2.2. *Unidimensional competency cultivation: text-rich yet history-poor*

Application-oriented talents are defined in contradistinction to academically oriented talents. While the latter innovate knowledge and theories, the former apply such knowledge and theories to practical scenarios. Following this logic, the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature should prioritize cultivating students' capacities for literary appreciation, criticism, and research. Merely lecturing on literary-historical facts is evidently insufficient for competency development; hence, textual appreciation has emerged as the favored pedagogical method. It promises emotional edification, aesthetic refinement, and the cultivation of appreciative skills—all while appearing easily implementable and ideologically compliant. Consequently, it has gained immense traction. In principle, textual appreciation, critical analysis, and historical contextualization should be complementary dimensions of the curriculum. However, divergent pedagogical biases in practice have resulted in a lopsided emphasis on the former at the expense of the latter. This has precipitated a unidimensional model of competency cultivation characterized by an over-reliance on the "textual root" (ben) while severing its "historical connection" (she), resulting in a pedagogy that is "rich in textual analysis but impoverished in historical consciousness."

High-level competence cannot be cultivated through such fragmentary and one-sided approaches. True application-oriented talents must possess both professional proficiency and a robust grounding in theoretical literacy. For undergraduate majors in literature, limiting education to the appreciation of a handful of canonical texts is profoundly inadequate. Without progressing to a systematic organizing of literary history and rigorous scholarly reflection based on textual reading and aesthetic cultivation, the undergraduate specialization fails to advance significantly beyond secondary-level study. It would fundamentally fall short of the requisite competency and theoretical benchmarks expected of a university graduate.

3.3. Insufficient instructional hours and other constraints

3.3.1. *Credit hour cuts and the deepening of de-historicization*

In recent years, the "de-historicization" of teaching in the field of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has also been exacerbated by insufficient instructional hours and a lack of clearly defined, stage-appropriate learning objectives. First, reductions in course credits and class hours have led to the merger of literary history and selected readings into single courses, with an emphasis on textual instruction. This approach appears to satisfy all parties involved—teachers find it easier to deliver, students find it easier to learn, and administrators offer favorable evaluations—seemingly meeting the goals of this tripartite negotiation on the surface. Taking the Chinese Language and Literature Department at the author's undergraduate institution as an example, the curriculum for Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature has undergone several significant revisions since the turn of the century. In the early 2000s, the department offered six separate courses: History of Modern Chinese Literature (I) and (II), Selected Readings in Modern Chinese Literature, History of Contemporary Chinese Literature (I) and (II), and Selected Readings in Contemporary Chinese Literature, each carrying 3 credits and 54 class hours. Today, however, the curriculum has been streamlined into four courses: Modern Chinese Literature (I) and (II), and

Contemporary Chinese Literature (I) and (II), each reduced to 2 credits and 32 class hours. The most notable changes include a one-third cut in both credits and class hours, the elimination of standalone selected-readings courses, and the removal of the word “history” from course titles—ostensibly to downplay literary history by integrating selected readings into the core syllabi. In practice, constrained by limited instructional time, instructors are often forced to focus on a handful of isolated topics, ultimately reducing the course to piecemeal textual exegesis. Essential foundational knowledge and historical-critical perspectives are sidelined, all under the pretext of “cultivating aesthetic appreciation.” Such compromises, born of credit and hour reductions, constitute one of the more complex drivers behind the de-historicization trend—a phenomenon far from unique to a single institution, but rather one replicated, with minor variations, across many universities in China.

3.3.2. *A lack of clearly defined, stage-appropriate learning objectives*

Second, there exists a lack of clarity and ineffective implementation regarding tiered pedagogical objectives across primary, secondary, vocational, and undergraduate education. According to established curricular sequencing, primary school should focus on mastering characters, words, and sentences; middle school on textual structures; high school on expanding reading volumes and cultivating basic competencies; vocational colleges on systematic reading of literary works and professional appreciation; and undergraduate programs on organizing literary history and researching foundational professional theories. However, due to various constraints, these stage-specific objectives remain ambiguously defined or poorly executed. For instance, in junior and senior high schools, the overarching pedagogical mission of Chinese language education is frequently subordinated to the imperative of standardized test preparation, leaving little room for genuine literacy development. Consequently, students’ reading volume is severely limited and narrowly focused. Meanwhile, with the tide of vocational colleges upgrading to undergraduate status, the intermediate tier of systematic literary training has largely vanished. This void precipitated the long-criticized phenomenon of “history without texts” in undergraduate Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature courses. When undergraduates encounter purely historical surveys without adequate textual grounding, they struggle academically, perceiving the material as remote and tediously abstract direct consequence of their deficient reading foundations and fragmented knowledge base.

In response, university pedagogical reforms emerged under the banner of “returning to literature itself.” These reforms unleashed a wave closed off and fragmented textual exegesis and intensive close reading. Their substantive effect was essentially retroactive remediation for neglected reading at the secondary and vocational levels. Yet, constrained by finite instructional hours and the vast ocean of literary texts, universities can only scrutinize a severely limited number of works in class. Often, such analyses lack depth and fail to ascend to the level of literary-historical synthesis, ultimately degenerating into a format barely distinguishable from advanced high school Chinese lessons. Consequently, the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature now finds itself trapped in a dilemma: rampant de-historicization prevails on one hand, while truncated textual appreciation lacks the necessary depth and breadth on the other, leaving the entire pedagogical enterprise in an impossible impasse with no tenable position to advance or retreat.

4. Countermeasures for addressing the issues

4.1. Reintegrating literature with literary history: the macro-historical vision

In contrast to the prevailing fragmented approach to textual instruction, it is imperative to construct a pedagogical framework grounded in a “Macro-Literary Historical Perspective.” This entails organizing coursework in accordance with what is termed the “Great Literary History” (Da Wenxuan Shi) viewpoint. As scholars argue, “The so-called ‘Great Literary History’ perspective transcends the conception of literature as merely a product of ‘pure art’ exploration; it discovers the significance and interest of literary creation within extensive socio-historical networks. Compared to the narrow ideal of ‘pure literature,’ a literary ideology imbued with diverse socio-historical demands is indeed ‘great.’ Yet, ‘greatness’ does not equate to a lack of artistic principles or the cancellation of literature’s intrinsic autonomous value; even the broadest social concerns must be realized through specifically ‘literary’ means.”[4] Adopting this macro-historical lens facilitates a clearer grasp of the diachronic features of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

and deepens our understanding of its aesthetic genealogy and artistic architecture. Confronting the pure aesthetic hegemony that has progressively forfeited the necessary historical purview, the historical consciousness inherent in literary instruction must be reclaimed. Only through the restoration of this historical vision can the inherent complexity of literature be adequately comprehended. As Kuang Xinnian aptly observes, "Corresponding to the 1980s slogan of 'returning literary history to literature,' we should today propose the inverse: 'returning literature to literary history.'"[5] To attain a sound understanding of literature, we must return to the vast facts of literary history and restore literature to the embrace of the Great Literary History.

Currently, Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature pedagogy "often consciously or unconsciously embarks upon various poeticizing paths." While such poeticized teaching may appear aesthetically pleasing or intellectually "cool," it violates "the authenticity of literature and the duty of education"[6] if it fails to return to the totality of literary facts and the path of seeking truth from facts. Pedagogy informed by the "Great Literary History" perspective—which advocates integrating a macroscopic vision with empirical textual research—offers a potent remedy, providing both a broad field and sustained depth. Instruction typically employs specific literary "nodes" (e.g., representative authors, texts, or phenomena) to illustrate developmental trajectories. In handling these nodes, we must attend to both their diachronic connections (preceding and succeeding contexts) and synchronic interactions with contemporaneous arts, society, and history. By situating specific literary details within their historical milieus and establishing bidirectional linkages across temporal and spatial dimensions, students can simultaneously savor literary nuances and grasp underlying cultural significances and historical connotations. If we can both approximate the text itself from an aesthetic baseline and restore the original state of literary history—using historical vision to map poetic traditions—we will achieve a multidimensional grasp of relationships and hierarchies. This approach promises to render our pedagogy both distinctive and expansive, charting a more substantive and viable path forward.

4.2. Archival expansion and historical restoration

4.2.1. *Returning to the historical milieu of literature*

Literature has never existed in isolation; divorced from history, the lyric tradition loses its very footing. To conduct teaching by returning, as extensively as possible, to the historical milieus of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature is not merely superfluous but imperative. This pedagogical approach centers on the literary text to sharpen aesthetic perception, while simultaneously deploying various means to expand literary archives and elevate historical consciousness. Ultimately, it seeks an earnest, holistic grasp of the pedagogical object, achieving outcomes unattainable by simplistic, closed-off textual appreciation alone. For to research or critique an author, a text, or a literary phenomenon, "the scholar must, while mastering literary theory, possess a historical sensibility, adopt historical methodologies, and mobilize historical data, thereby inevitably entering the domain of Literary Historiography." [7] Literary historical materials are grounded in empirical rigor—prioritizing textual criticism and documentation—and constitute the bedrock of literary study and research. Consequently, instruction must involve not only the re-reading of canonical texts but also the consultation of extensive archival materials preceding and following the texts in question. Facilitating student learning through textual discussion and archival engagement, coupled with timely critiques to rectify cognitive biases, establishes a robust foundation. Upon this basis, selectively introducing scholarly debates—directing students' attention to academic frontiers, delineating research trajectories, and highlighting contested issues—provides essential guidance for capstone theses and advanced inquiry.

4.2.2. *Sourcing, expanding, and applying literary archives*

The discovery, expansion, and utilization of historical sources hold profound significance not only for scholarly research but also for pedagogical practice. As Chen Yinke observed, "Every era of scholarship is defined by its new materials and new problems. Employing these materials to investigate these problems constitutes the new academic tide of that era. Scholars who engage with this tide are said to have 'entered the stream' (you Liu, borrowing the Buddhist term for the first fruit); those who do not are deemed 'uninitiated.'"[8] A genuine understanding of literature is impossible without extensive engagement with

diachronic texts and historical sources. Consequently, the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature must cultivate a distinct historical consciousness. When addressing any specific issue, instructors and students alike must consciously consider its contextual antecedents and consequences, trace its origins and influences, locate the precise position of authors and texts within the literary-historical canon, and determine their artistic and scholarly value—rather than confronting texts in isolation to excavate their worth atomistic ally.

In this regard, Wu Xiuming of Zhejiang University has undertaken pioneering explorations. He posits that in university literary history instruction, students should engage in extensive textual reading; beyond the literary texts themselves, "it is necessary to bring historical sources into the pedagogical horizon, providing students with selections that combine 'texts' and 'sources.'" By fostering mutual penetration and verification between texts and sources, students can deepen their understanding of texts based on historical restoration, thereby transforming their original unidimensional knowledge structures. Furthermore, this approach cultivates research awareness and a rigorous scholarly ethos, providing essential academic training that lays a solid foundation for future advanced study and sustainable intellectual development."^[9] Wu's published textbooks, such as *An Authentic History of Contemporary Chinese Literature and Selected Texts and Historical Sources of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*, are distinguished precisely by their integration of literary sources. By evolving from a unidimensional "selected readings" model to a two-dimensional "text-and-source" framework, these works prove immensely valuable for broadening students' knowledge structures and cognitive horizons, as well as honing their capacity to identify and articulate problems. Such explorations merit serious emulation. Nevertheless, given the inexhaustible richness of texts and sources—which no textbook or classroom can fully encompass—the paramount objective remains cultivating students correct literary-historical consciousness and artistic sensibilities, upon which foundation further expansion can be actively pursued through diverse means.

4.3. Integrating knowledge and competence in pedagogy

4.3.1. *Literature, knowledge, and competence: a conceptual clarification*

It is common knowledge that literature is neither reducible to knowledge nor synonymous with competence. In pedagogical practice, however, literature, knowledge, and competence cannot—and should not—be artificially segregated or manipulated in isolation. Yet, amid the current tide that prioritizes competence above all else, the relationship between these three elements has become a pressing subject of inquiry. Here, we focus on two principal issues.

4.3.2. *Literature as a form of knowledge*

First, is literature a form of knowledge? In one sense, literature constitutes both an aesthetic practice and a body of knowledge; literary history itself is a history of aesthetic knowledge. As noted, "Literary history is a structured, ideologically informed knowledge system—constructed through the selection, evaluation, and organization of relevant historical materials according to specific literary and historiographical perspectives, possessing its own internal logical architecture."^[2] Addressing this, Chen Guoqiu, in his seminal work *How Does Literature Become Knowledge?* offers a profound reflection. He elaborates on "the epistemological structure of literature, contemplating how literature constitutes a disciplinable field of inquiry within the university,"^[10] and interrogates whether "'literature' possesses a 'quantum of knowledge' commensurate with modern disciplinary standards."^[10] Tracing the historicization of modern Chinese literature, Chen elucidates the complex process of its epistemologist amidst intersecting relations—between literature and utility, textual criticism, appreciation, criticism, the individual and the collective, politics, history, and the zeitgeist—thereby clarifying inherent tensions and universal issues concerning literary education. He posits that the establishment of a discipline necessitates the construction of a robust epistemic framework. It follows that the field of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature comprises both a scholarly apparatus for critical inquiry and an ordered epistemological sequence. As Chen asserts, "Why study literary history? Its purpose is to transform the vast, disparate experiences of the past into a coherent knowledge system, presenting it before us."^[10] Engaging with literature requires first confronting a monumental epistemological tradition; it is knowledge that structurally undergirds the literary edifice. In literary pedagogy, while immediate aesthetic experience remains vital, the substantive content of knowledge is

indispensable. Whether pertaining to momentary aesthetic encounters, subsequent scholarly research, or their surrounding contexts, such engagements, once documented, gradually sediment into knowledge. The institutionalization of literature within the university curriculum is, in essence, the embodiment of literature's transformation into a knowledge system. Therefore, regardless of pedagogical trends, our instruction must not discard this foundational epistemological inheritance.

4.3.3. *Competence grounded in knowledge*

Second, whence comes competence if not from knowledge? Competence derives fundamentally from the correct acquisition, comprehension, critical reflection, and application of knowledge. The true impediment to learning lies not in knowledge itself, but in its mechanical and ossified assimilation. Knowledge is potency. Without a sound grasp of literary knowledge, genuine literary competence is rarely attainable; literary appreciation and criticism are, in essence, experiential and performative engagements with literature as a body of knowledge. The ontological activities of literature—evoking emotion, fostering sympathetic understanding—and the competencies of appreciation and criticism are inextricably linked to the learner's familiarity with peripheral knowledge: the evolution of genres, biographical details of authors, textual criticism, and philological exegesis. Ultimately, these competencies are historically sedimented within the epistemic architecture of literature as knowledge itself. Confucius, in the *Analects* ("Yang Huo": "Why do you not study the *Odes*?"), delineates the multifunctional efficacy of the *Classic of Poetry*, ranging from "stimulation, observation, sociability, and remonstrance" to "serving one's father and prince" and "acquiring extensive knowledge of the names of birds, beasts, and plants." This illustrates the hierarchical functions of lyricism, utility, and epistemology, underscoring the complex interplay between knowledge and competence. Similarly, Zhu Yiqing posited a direct correlation between poetic competence and knowledge. In *Examples of Polysemy in Poetry*, he observed, "Understanding poetry is no easy task... The barriers of 'grand principles and subtle meanings' stem entirely from our insufficient knowledge... As knowledge accumulates, these barriers gradually diminish... Regarding individual poems... when asked wherein lies their excellence, one can only rely on the power of one's own knowledge, proceeding from detailed analysis." [11] Further, in *An Exegesis of the Nineteen Old Poems*, he noted, "Poetry is refined language... If analysis fails to yield understanding, it is either insufficiently meticulous or hampered by inadequate knowledge and materials... Only those capable of analysis can achieve genuine appreciation; appreciation resides in thorough comprehension. The conventional bifurcation of appreciation and understanding is deeply flawed." [12] Literary appreciation and comprehension are not nebulous impressions, but analytical processes grounded in a methodical and principled epistemological system. Often, what is termed "competence" is, in fact, the innovative generation of knowledge—a process predicated on the prior transmission and acquisition of knowledge. This dialectic clarifies how pedagogy must strategically integrate knowledge transmission with competence cultivation.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the de-historicizing tendency in the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature represents a continuation of long-standing pedagogical fragmentation. Instruction in this field must not artificially polarize "literature," "history," and "scholarship" (she), nor should it devolve into isolated, closed off textual speculation, the mere accumulation of historical data, or the rote transmission of facts. Literary pedagogy must confront more than just aesthetics, history, or knowledge in isolation; it is inherently a synthetic endeavor. No single pedagogical paradigm possesses universal efficacy, nor can any one approach deliver students to all desired educational outcomes. Confronted with the complexities of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature, monocultural methods inevitably breed deficiencies. Consequently, the pedagogical model must evolve—shifting from the erstwhile mode of knowledge transcription, through the current trend of fragmented textual reflection, toward a future paradigm of holistic cultivation. As an integrated system, the teaching of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature requires that any engagement with a text, issue, or phenomenon be grounded in the text itself, centered on aesthetic appreciation, and informed by historical consciousness. Only by sitting instruction within a broad epistemological horizon and constructing a convergent pedagogical synergy can we achieve multilayered educational objectives.

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