

# Four methods of intensive reading of ancient Chinese literary works

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**Abstract:** Currently, students majoring in Chinese Language and Literature generally do not pay much attention to reading ancient works. The reasons for this phenomenon can be attributed to a lack of interest in reading, on one hand, and on the other hand, to not having mastered reasonable reading methods. The intensive reading of ancient Chinese literary works can be summarized into four methods: understanding the author through his life and times, focusing on editions with a "classic theory"; seeking chapters and sentences to "seek a profound understanding"; and engaging in deep dialogue with the text, penetrating to the core. Practice has proven that cultivating students with these four methods can effectively enhance their interest in reading and deepen their understanding of literary works and literary history.

**Keywords:** Ancient Literature, Literary Works, Intensive Reading, Methods

## 1. Introduction

The study of the history of ancient Chinese literature should be based on the reading of literary works. Therefore, many universities provide students with both textbooks on the history of ancient literature and selections of ancient literary works for study. However, students majoring in Chinese Language and Literature currently generally do not place much emphasis on reading these works. A few years ago, I conducted a survey in an elective course on "Appreciation of Masterpieces of Ming and Qing Novels." Among 120 junior students majoring in Chinese Language and Literature, only 9 had read the "Four Great Classical Novels" in their entirety, while most students had only been exposed to isolated fragments. Under such circumstances, no matter how well-prepared the teacher is or how brilliantly the lecture is delivered, it is difficult to resonate with the students, and naturally, it is hard to achieve good results.

The reason for this situation, in the author's view, lies on one hand in the students' lack of interest in reading classic works, and on the other hand in their not having mastered reasonable reading methods. In light of this, in the teaching of the history of ancient literature, teachers should not only focus on imparting knowledge points but also pay attention to cultivating students' reading interest and teaching them methods for intensive reading of works. Based on my long-term reading experience and combined with the characteristics of students' acceptance, I have summarized four methods for intensive reading of works. Practice has proven that these four methods are effective, so I do not hesitate to present my humble suggestions here for exchange with colleagues in academia.

## 2. Understanding author and times

Mencius said: "One can recite his poetry and read his books, but without understanding the man himself, is that enough? Therefore, one must also discuss the times in which he lived." [1] When we read today, we must also have a deep understanding of the authors. The term "understanding" encompasses two levels of meaning.

Firstly, due to the constraints of length and format, the introduction of authors in textbooks on the history of ancient literature is usually in the form of "name cards," such as the introductions to Confucius, Sima Qian, Wang Shifu, Pu Song ling, and so on. However, merely knowing this information is far from sufficient for an in-depth understanding of their works. For instance, when we study the "Analects," we

must reconstruct a vivid and lifelike image of Confucius, including his fallen noble complex, his parents' special status, his struggling and ambitious youth, and his political ideals and bumpy experiences while traveling among the states. We should know that Confucius could also scold, sulk, and joke—this is the image of a "rounded" Confucius, not the "flat" sage image of him dressed in ceremonial robes, sitting solemnly in the temple. Taking the "Sitting in Attendance" chapter of the "Analects" as an example, before explaining this work, I recommended students to read Mr. Li Chang Zhi's "The Story of Confucius," which helped them understand the background of this wonderful teacher-student dialogue: Confucius's many years of political efforts had not been effective, and he couldn't help but express his feelings with the words "If the way is unpracticed, I will ride the raft to float on the sea"; his sigh of "I am with Dian" reflects the mentality of seeking inner peace through mountains and waters. Thus, the "Sitting in Attendance" chapter's "bathe in the Yi River, enjoy the breeze at the Wu altar, and sing on the way back" actually contains a life aesthetics between "advance" and "retreat" of the pre-Qin Confucianists.

Secondly, there are as many writers who have a place in the history of literature as there are stars in the sky, yet when it comes to first-class writers, they can be counted on one's fingers. In ancient Chinese literary theory, there has always been the saying "the writing is like the person" and "the quality of the writing is like the character of the person." Therefore, how to measure a first-class writer is essentially the same question as how to measure a first-class work. Works of any genre possess both external and internal beauty. External beauty refers to the form and technique of the work, while internal beauty refers to the spirit contained within the work and the character of the author. Classic works become classics because they must possess first-class internal and external beauty at the same time. When we read classic works, we are, in fact, reading the noble character of the author. Reading the works of first-class writers like Qu Yuan, Tao Yuan Ming, Li Bai, Du Fu, Su Dong po, and Xin Qi ji, if one does not have an in-depth understanding of these individuals, it is impossible to grasp the essence of their literature.

Indeed, there are some writers whose character is extremely despicable, yet they have indeed produced commendable works. The late Ming Dynasty dramatist Ruan Da Cheng is an example of this. Does this pose a paradox to the notion that "the writing is like the person"? Taking Ruan's representative works "Spring Lantern Riddles" and "Swallow Notes" as examples, the "History of Chinese Literature" praises them as having "brilliant literary grace and rich emotional expression," and also states that they are "beautiful in language, full of twists and turns in the plot, and quite enjoyable to watch on stage" [2]. However, when looking at the dual standards for measuring a work, Ruan's dramas only possess a good external beauty. As for internal beauty, it is hardly worth mentioning, as it is said to be "of low moral character, mediocre in concept, showy but false, shallow and tasteless, overly craftsman-like rather than being of the master's hand" [2]. These works, on the contrary, prove that the quality of writing must reflect the character of the writer. First-class works must come from the hands of first-class writers; for such classics, can we "read their books without knowing the person"?

### 3. Emphasizing editions, adhering only to the "Canon" theory

During the teaching process, it is also common for students to read works with great interest and spend a lot of effort, yet gain little. The author has inquired into the reasons for the students' confusion and believes that an important issue is the lack of attention to the selection of editions and works.

In terms of editions, there are two issues. First, many ancient works, especially those like "The Analects," "Records of the Grand Historian," and "Dream of the Red Chamber," are published by a large number of publishing houses. For example, when students borrow the "Four Great Classical Novels" from the library, they often find that the entire shelf is full of them. If they do not choose and just pick one to read casually, and the selected one happens to be a version from an irresponsible publisher, then they are likely to be misled during reading. There was once a student who wrote a course assignment discussing the image of women in "A New Account of the Tales of the World." After the paper was submitted, the author found that the version he chose was an extremely poor one from a certain literary and art publishing house, which was not only incomplete but also had many errors in words and phrases. With such a version, it can be imagined how the paper was written. Therefore, it is essential to choose high-standard editions, preferably from publishers who specialize in ancient works and have a good reputation.

Another issue regarding editions is that due to special reasons in the process of writing, copying, and engraving, many ancient works have a complex version system, such as "Journey to the West," "The Plum in the Golden Vase," and "Dream of the Red Chamber." Especially "Dream of the Red Chamber," which is divided into two major version systems based on the issue of continuation; further subdivided, there are dozens of versions within the two major systems. Students must understand the version system of the ancient works themselves before reading. Once a student became interested in "The Plum in the Golden Vase" and bought it online to read. After reading, he asked the author, "Teacher, why does the teaching material say that 'The Plum in the Golden Vase' still retains a lot of traces of storytelling and is relatively rough in form; but my feeling after reading is: it is written very exquisitely, and I can't feel these rough traces at all?" The reason is that she read the "Newly Engraved Embroidered Portraits Criticized The Plum in the Golden Vase." There are two major version systems of "The Plum in the Golden Vase" - the Ci Hua edition and the Chong Zhen edition. The Ci Hua edition is the original work of Lan ling Xiao Xiao Sheng, while the Chong Zhen edition has been processed and organized by literati such as Zhang Zhu po, and the previously rougher parts have been polished, so it gives students a feeling of being "very exquisite." In addition, when reading "Water Margin," pay attention to the differences between the 80-chapter, 100-chapter, and 120-chapter editions; when reading "Journey to the West," pay attention to the differences between the Shi De Tang edition and the Qing publication edition; when reading "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio," pay attention to the differences between the Qing Ke Ting edition and the manuscript edition, and so on.

Additionally, if the purpose is solely reading, then reading ancient works should also adhere to the "canon" theory. The ocean of ancient literary works is vast, and speaking only of novels, if one reads through Ming and Qing dynasty novels in chronological order of their publication, it would take a lifetime to finish. This requires us to select the most classic works within our limited time and energy. What are the "most classic" works? They are those that have received high evaluation in the history of literature and have withstood the test of time, such as the "Four Great Classical Novels," "The Plum in the Golden Vase," "The Scholars," and "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio." Since the purpose is purely for reading, one can certainly choose outstanding works of a certain type based on personal interest. Male students who prefer chivalrous and heroic stories might focus on reading "Water Margin"; female students who favor gentle and restrained tales could focus on "Dream of the Red Chamber"; and those who enjoy short and interesting stories might focus on "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio."

Interest is very important for reading. If a person is not interested in a certain type of work (if it is for research purposes, one cannot rely solely on interest), and forces themselves to read it, not only will they fail to gain the pleasure of reading, but they may also form the first impression that ancient works are "not enjoyable to read." An example is as follows: A student had to write an assignment about "Investiture of the Gods," and coincidentally, the author suggested that students focus on reading one work during the semester, so she took the opportunity to read "Investiture of the Gods." In fact, she had no interest in this type of novel. After two months of "intensive reading," she finally finished "Investiture of the Gods," but wrote in an email to the author, "Reading the second half was simply a torment. But I thought I had already invested a lot of energy, so I persisted in reading it, which was extremely painful." Pure reading is entirely for oneself, not for others. Therefore, if it is not for research purposes, one must definitely choose works that suit their reading interests and are also classics in their category.

#### 4. Extracting "Thorough understanding"

In Tao Yuan Ming's "Biography of Mr. Wu Liu," there is a famous saying: "He enjoyed reading but did not seek a thorough understanding." [3] Some people take this as a "golden rule," believing that when encountering difficult doubts while reading, there is no need to pay attention, just turn the page and continue reading. However, this is indeed a misinterpretation of Mr. Jing Jie's meaning. Nowadays, most college students do not have a profound academic cultivation, and when reading ancient works at this time, it is necessary to read repeatedly and earnestly, not letting go of a single word or sentence easily. With this kind of hard work, until they have a profound academic cultivation, then when reading, they can be like Zhuge Liang who "sees the general outline alone," or like Tao Yuan Ming who "does not seek a thorough understanding" — but how easy is this to achieve!

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Searching for chapters and extracting sentences to "seek a profound understanding," there are many concrete examples in the reading of literary works. Take, for example, the story of "The Duke of Zheng Defeats Duan at Yuan" in the "Zuo Zhuan"; this is a famous text, and when the Qing dynasty scholars Wu Chucai and Wu Diao Hou compiled "Gu wen Guan Zhi," they listed it as the first piece. The linguistic artistry of the "Zuo Zhuan" can be described as "subtle yet evident, intended yet obscure, gentle yet structured, exhaustive yet refined"; however, such hollow praise is difficult for students to grasp. When I explain "The Duke of Zheng Defeats Duan at Yuan," I use the method of "searching for chapters and extracting sentences to seek a profound understanding" to lead everyone in experiencing it together:

(The Duke of Zheng) then placed Lady Jiang in the city of Ying and swore an oath, saying, "Until we reach the yellow springs (of the underworld), we shall not meet again." Soon after, he regretted it... The Duke said, "You all have a mother's legacy, while I alone am left without!" Ying Kao Shu asked, "Dare to inquire about the meaning of this?" The Duke told him the reason and confessed his regret. He replied, "Why is Your Lordship worried? If you dig down to the spring, meet in the tunnel, who would say that is not possible?" The Duke followed his advice. The Duke entered and recited: "In the midst of the great tunnel, the joy is warm and harmonious!" Lady Jiang exited and recited: "Outside the great tunnel, the joy is bright and cheerful." Thus, they became mother and son as before. [4]

The two sentences with underlined parts contain two verbs, "enter" and "exit," which are indeed used with a subtlety that is clear yet profound, and a meaning that is intended yet veiled. Why does the Duke of Zheng "enter and recite"? It is because he is about to see his long-missed mother, and he cannot suppress his emotions. As soon as he enters the tunnel, he cannot help but start singing. Why does Lady Jiang "exit and recite"? Lady Jiang had been imprisoned by the Duke of Zheng for many years, and suddenly being brought to the dark tunnel must have filled her with fear and confusion; upon seeing her son and the truth revealed, their relationship mended as before, her mood then turns to joy, so when she exits the tunnel, she too cannot help but start singing. These two words, "enter" and "exit," encapsulate the rich psychological activities of the mother and son. Imagine reading this passage, if one only focuses on the interesting plot and overlooks such subtleties, isn't it like swallowing a date whole? The profound meaning in subtle words is precisely the linguistic artistry of "Zuo Zhuan," and it is also the reason why reading ancient literary works should involve "searching for chapters and extracting sentences to seek profound understanding."

## 5. Behind the dialogue, delving deep into the essence

Students reading ancient novels, especially those long masterpieces, often like to skim through the lines, focusing on the exciting plots, yet overlooking some dialogues that seem ordinary but are actually infinitely charming. Take "Water Margin" as an example. In Chapter 41, after the heroes of Liangshan robbed the Jiang Zhou execution ground and rescued Song Jiang to the mountain, the story entered a transitional phase. After Song Jiang came to the mountain, he said two paragraphs of words. These two paragraphs are usually not particularly noticed by readers, but they contain a profound portrayal of Song Jiang, which is like "seeing a spot and knowing the whole leopard," and they strongly imply the direction of Liangshan's cause. It can be said to be "behind the dialogue, delving deep into the essence." These two paragraphs are:

"Dear brother, in terms of age, you are a full decade older than me. If Song Jiang were to take the seat, would he not be overwhelmed with shame?" [5]

Song Jiang said, "Let us not distinguish between the high and low of our contributions. The old leaders of Liangshan Marsh, please take your seats on the left at the place of honor. The newly arrived leaders, please sit on the right as guests. As for the distribution of our efforts, we will make a decision at a later time." Everyone agreed in unison, "Brother's words are most appropriate." On the left side were Lin Chong, Liu Tang, the Ruan brothers, Du Qian, Song Wan, and nine others; on the right side were Hua Rong, Qin Ming, Dai Zong, Li Kui, Li Jun, Zhang Shun, Wang Ying, and forty others in total. [5]

The first passage is Song Jiang's modest refusal to Chao Gai's offer to cede the leadership of Liangshan. Chao Gai sincerely wanted to give the position to Song Jiang, but Song Jiang's refusal was not a genuine one. Song Jiang was not unwilling to be the "big brother"; so why did he decline? Because the timing was far from ripe. As the saying goes, "A strong dragon does not suppress a local snake." Song Jiang had just arrived at Liangshan and had not yet established himself. If he were to take the position of the leader at this point, Chao Gai's close brothers would inevitably feel discontented, and it might even lead to a big mess.

However, Song Jiang's refusal was nominal, but his words had a deeper meaning. The underlying message behind his words was: Chao Gai held this position, not for any other reason, but because he was older, and everyone respected and yielded to him; in reality, it was as if they did not take Chao Gai seriously. The second passage, however, has an even deeper implication. The leaders' positions were arranged, and it was time to arrange the order of the brothers. Generally speaking, rewards are given according to the contributions, but the heroes who had long followed Chao Gai would naturally be in front in terms of contributions; those who had recently joined with Song Jiang would be behind. This was very unfavorable to the development of Song Jiang's power. So he made a very skillful remark: "Let us not distinguish between the high and low of our contributions... We will make a decision at a later time according to the amount of effort we put in the future." This essentially "reset to zero" everyone's contributions. What followed? "We will make a decision at a later time according to the amount of effort we put in the future." As a result, every time they went down the mountain to fight, Song Jiang would always use the excuse that "Chao Gai, as the leader of the mountain stronghold, should not move lightly," and he would lead the people down the mountain to earn merit; and the people Song Jiang led were basically the brothers who followed him up the mountain. Over time, Song Jiang gradually accumulated prestige for himself; and his confidants also accumulated contributions through battle after battle.

Following this approach, when I explain other works, I often deliberately assign homework, asking students to select typical dialogues that are "deeply insightful" and comment on them in the manner of Jin Sheng tan's critique of "Water Margin." For instance, with "Journey to the West," there are quite a few commendable points in the homework submitted by students. Here are two examples:

Original text: The traveler scrambled up and rushed to Tang Seng's bedside, calling out, "Master." The elder was still awake at this hour; he knew the traveler was prone to startling outbursts and pretended to be asleep. The traveler felt his bald head and shook it chaotically, saying, "Why has Master fallen asleep?" Tang Seng angrily replied, "You rascal! It's so late and you're still not sleeping, shouting about what?" [6]

Student's review: In "Journey to the West," this passage is considered the most interesting. The nature of its interest can only be felt but cannot be fully expressed. Reading "Mencius - King Hui of Liang," I came across the description of the pigs and sheep used for the bell-sacrifice all showing a "fearful and trembling" appearance, which makes one laugh upon reflection. However, what exactly the "fearful and trembling" appearance is, can also be felt but cannot be expressed. It is only when the text reaches a level where it can be felt but not expressed that it can be considered excellent writing.

Original text: Next to him, the immortal Ge laughed and said, "Why does the monkey act so arrogantly before and so respectfully after?" The traveler replied, "Dare not, dare not! It is not really arrogance before and respect after; I, the old grandson, have no staff to play with now." [6]

Student's Review: Wukong is cunning, yet his cunning is honest. "I, the old grandson, have no staff to play with now," speaks volumes about the vicissitudes of the world. Everyone has two eyes, all observing whether he has a staff or not; with a staff, they show respect, without a staff, they show disdain. This extends to the principle that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." The poem says, "The golden monkey brandishes a thousand-jun staff," it can be known that the key to this poem lies in the "staff" and not in the "monkey."

At the beginning of the assignment, students were not confident - how could they, with their own level, make comments like Jin Sheng tan? After trying, everyone had quite a few feelings: first, seemingly ordinary dialogues, when carefully savored and experienced, indeed have a deep connotation behind them; second, imitating the ancients to make comments, not only can the subtle feelings be expressed in words, but also trains one's ability to write simple ancient Chinese, it can be said that the gains are many.

## 6. Conclusion

There are many methods for reading ancient literary works, and everyone has their own unique insights. However, the four methods discussed in this article are generally applicable to most students. Over the past three years, I have insisted on applying these methods in ancient literature classes, leading everyone to read works intensively, and have achieved very good results. As the saying goes, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Classic works are extremely charming. If students do not like to read, it is often not because of the works themselves, but because they have not yet found the correct reading method or have not yet developed an interest in reading. As teachers, we must fully trust our students, encourage them, cultivate their interests, and teach them methods. In this way, what students gain is not only memorizing a few knowledge points and getting high scores, but also a lifetime of invaluable reading wealth.

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