

Teaching Methodology of Ballads in the Post-method Era

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[**Abstract**] The field of international Chinese education is flourishing, with an increasing number of teaching methods emerging, especially under the broader context of the post-method era. Dynamic, integrated, and innovative teaching methods are gradually becoming mainstream, though traditional methods are not necessarily outdated or undesirable. Therefore, this paper first analyzes the teaching methods of Chinese as a second language from both vertical and horizontal macro perspectives, and then selects the song-based teaching method for a detailed analysis. Considering the broader context and trends in international Chinese education, the emergence of the song-based teaching method aligns with the trend of younger learners studying Chinese. The advantages of this method cater to the characteristics of young learners, such as difficulty in maintaining focus, incomplete cognitive development, and being in a critical period of learning. However, the song-based teaching method also faces challenges, including a limited number of relevant textbooks. Textbook development has been identified by Mr. Zhao Jinming as one of the most critical factors for the advancement of international Chinese education in the 21st century. Zhou Xiaokang's *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* is a significant textbook in the song-based teaching method, offering important guidance. Analyzing its strengths and weaknesses can provide constructive insights for future textbooks in this approach. Finally, the paper discusses specific teaching strategies for the song-based teaching method, drawing on the author's practical teaching experience.

[**Key words**] Chinese teaching methods; post-method era; song-based teaching; *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese*

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In recent years, with China's rising international status, the global enthusiasm for learning Chinese has continued to grow, leading to a flourishing international Chinese education sector. Consequently, an increasing number of teaching methodologies have emerged, especially under the backdrop of the post-method era, where teaching philosophies are constantly evolving. More comprehensive and innovative teaching methods are gradually replacing traditional ones. Among these, the ballad teaching method stands out as a representative approach. Developed to meet the needs of young children learning Chinese, this method aligns with the characteristics of young learners, such as short attention spans, underdeveloped cognitive abilities, and their critical period for language acquisition, making it widely recognized by educators and scholars.

This paper aims to provide a macro-level overview of the development of Chinese as a second language and its teaching methodologies, comparing the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Building on this foundation, the paper explores the application value of the ballad teaching method in international Chinese education. Additionally, it addresses the challenges associated with this method and conducts an in-depth analysis of the textbook *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese*, summarizing its advantages and disadvantages to offer guidance for future textbook development. Finally, drawing from the author's teaching experience, the paper provides practical strategies for frontline teachers to enhance teaching effectiveness through the ballad method.

1 A macro perspective on teaching Chinese as a second language

Teaching Chinese as a second language has a history of nearly a century, during which it has contributed significantly to China's soft power and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. As language serves as a carrier of culture, its dissemination and learning are crucial. The effectiveness of language dissemination is closely tied to

teaching methodologies. Therefore, this paper first examines the teaching methods of Chinese as a second language from a macro perspective, analyzing them both diachronically and synchronically.

1.1 Diachronic perspective on teaching Chinese as a second language

1.1.1 Historical origins of teaching Chinese as a second language

Zhao Jinming (2010) argued that the earliest history of teaching Chinese as a second language dates back to the 1920s, rather than the 1950s when China began accepting its first cohort of international students. During his tenure at Harvard from 1922 to 1924, Zhao Yuanren proposed that “seeing is not as good as hearing, and hearing is not as good as speaking”. Initially, international Chinese education was primarily conducted by Chinese teachers abroad, laying a solid foundation for later domestic teaching. Many scholars developed groundbreaking theories during this period.

In the 1940s, during World War II, the shortage of foreign language talents in the United States led to extensive language training, giving rise to the Audio-Lingual Method. Chinese as a second language was also influenced by this trend, emphasizing listening and speaking skills. Early teaching methods often followed global trends, lacking exploration tailored to the unique characteristics of Chinese.

Following its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China welcomed its first group of international students, significantly increasing the demand for international Chinese education. Scholars continued to advance research on teaching methodologies. In 1965, Zhong Zhen noted in his 15-year teaching summary that China's teaching methods had made significant progress by integrating the strengths of both the Direct Method and the Grammar-Translation Method. This marked the beginning of exploring teaching methods suited to the characteristics of Chinese and characters.

1.1.2 Comprehensive teaching methods

The post-method era is characterized by flexibility, dynamism, and openness. Chinese comprehensive courses in this era have broader development prospects. With the advent of new media and Internet, teaching methods and resources have become more diverse and flexible, offering convenience to both teachers and students. Easily accessible resources and advanced teaching equipment provide a solid foundation for post-method theory and Chinese comprehensive courses.

Post-method theory integrates the strengths of various approaches while discarding their shortcomings, forming a unique teaching style. In practice, this theory has proven effective, such as in vocabulary teaching, where words are taught in context to ensure comprehensible input. This approach combines the strengths of both word-based and character-based teaching methods.

Comprehensive teaching methods are not without their own characteristics. They extract theories from various specialized methods and reorganize them according to the features of Chinese, forming a new teaching system. Li Peiyuan argued that comprehensiveness refers to the integration of various teaching methods and the comprehensive training of language skills. International Chinese education continues to evolve, so do teaching methods. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses, catering to different types of students. Therefore, no single method is superior, and the existence of comprehensive teaching methods leverages this by combining the strengths of different approaches.

1.2 Synchronic perspective on teaching Chinese as a second language

In the 21st century, various language teaching methods coexist, each with its own characteristics. Whether early or recent, these methods are still used in teaching, albeit in different contexts and ways. For example, the Audio-Lingual Method, developed in the 1940s to train U. S. military personnel in oral language skills through repetitive sentence pattern drills, emphasizes listening and speaking. This principle is still widely applied in comprehensive teaching methods today, such as the ballad teaching method.

From a synchronic perspective, teaching methods are diverse, incorporating both old and new approaches. Diachronic methods have not disappeared but have been absorbed and integrated into contemporary teaching

methods. This paper focuses on the ballad teaching method, which emerged in the post-method era.

2 A micro perspective on teaching Chinese as a second language: the ballad method

In recent years, with the rapid development of international Chinese education, several trends have emerged: younger learners, fragmented learning times (e.g., weekend classes), and diversified teaching content and forms. In line with the first trend, teaching Chinese to young learners has gained increasing attention. Since children's learning needs differ from those of adults, teaching methods must also differ, such as the Total Physical Response Method, game-based teaching, and the ballad method. Among these, the ballad method has gained popularity due to its fun and ease of implementation.

2.1 Development of the ballad teaching method

As early as the 1960s, the "Suggestopedia" method proposed by Georgi Lozanov incorporated background music into foreign language teaching to enhance student focus. In the post-method era, the ballad method places ballads at the forefront rather than in the background, although both share the commonality of using music as a medium for language teaching. Initially, Chinese learners often face the psychological barrier of perceiving Chinese as difficult to learn. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, learners' emotional factors significantly impact language acquisition. Therefore, helping learners overcome this bias is a crucial task for international Chinese teachers, making the ballad method particularly suitable.

Ballads not only help students relax and focus but also alleviate anxiety and withdrawal. Zhou Xiaokang (2012) highlighted the effectiveness of the ballad method, noting that it leverages the specific formats, rhythms, and rhymes of Chinese poetry, combined with music and melodies, to help learners internalize language points and cultural elements. Additionally, the method creates a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment, stimulating students' interest and motivation, which sets it apart from traditional text-based teaching methods.

2.2 Analysis of ballad teaching materials: *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* as a case study

Published in 2009, *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* is a children's ballad textbook authored by Dr. Zhou Xiaokang. The series consists of four volumes, containing a total of 120 ballads, and follows a single-lesson format for clarity. The textbook combines listening, speaking, and singing, using DVD animations and audio to present ballads in an engaging way, fostering a positive attitude toward learning and promoting language acquisition.

2.2.1 Strengths of *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese*

A notable strength of this textbook is its seamless integration of cultural content into the text, combining language learning with cultural elements. This approach makes the otherwise monotonous language learning process more engaging. Ebbinghaus' research suggests that interesting materials positively impact memory retention. The textbook covers various cultural themes, with multiple ballads under each theme, offering a multi-faceted exploration. For example, the theme of food includes seven ballads across volumes two and three, covering both Chinese and Western culinary cultures. Language points are introduced within the context of these themes. In *The Western Food Song*, vocabulary focuses on Western cuisine, while grammar points include the "是" sentence pattern and the structure "你想吃什么? 我想/爱/喜欢吃……" to practice expressing preferences and inquiries.

Beyond integrating culture and language, the textbook also localizes cultural and vocabulary choices. Li Yuming and Shi Chunhong (2017) argued that localization reflects the trend of international Chinese education incorporating local elements and characteristics. *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* aligns with Australian life, culture, and values, and its teaching load matches the Australian school system, demonstrating adaptability and tailored teaching. For instance, the song *Animal Song* in Volume 2 includes both Australian and Chinese animals, blending familiar and unfamiliar vocabularies to create a sense of familiarity and stimulate learning interest.

2.2.2 Shortcomings of *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese*

As an early example of ballad teaching materials, *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* shows a sign of outdatedness in today's rapidly evolving digital media landscape. While the use of DVDs and MP3 audio was

innovative in 2009, advancements in technology have rendered these tools somewhat obsolete. Updating and reimagining the materials is now essential.

The ballad method is inherently more suitable for teaching young learners, which limits the applicability of *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* to children. For adult learners, the method may be inefficient, resulting in "more effort, less outcome". Additionally, the localization of the textbook, while beneficial for Australian learners, may not be as effective for learners in other regions. The specificity of country-specific materials is an advantage for the target audience but may not be universally applicable.

3 Practical teaching strategies for the ballad method based on teaching experience

The author has used the ballad method to teach Thai students online. At the time, the author had limited understanding of the method, and there were many shortcomings in lesson design and strategies. Below, the author shares specific teaching strategies for the ballad method, which can be divided into pre-class, in-class, and post-class stages.

3.1 Pre-class preparation

Before class, it is essential to understand the learners' backgrounds. Teachers can distribute questionnaires or conduct introductory quizzes to assess students' Chinese proficiency and prepare accordingly. In addition to language proficiency, teachers should also consider students' cultural backgrounds and characteristics, drawing inspiration from exemplary textbooks like *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* to tailor ballads to students' interests and enhance teaching effectiveness. Teachers should also clarify the course objectives and students' learning styles. For example, if the course focuses on culture, ballads can incorporate cultural elements. If students have a competitive learning style, the proportion of ballads in the lesson can be reduced, using them primarily as a classroom activity.

3.2 In-class teaching strategies

In-class strategies can be divided into teaching formats and content. While *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* uses a single-lesson format, which may seem monotonous, teachers can diversify the format by integrating the Total Physical Response Method or game-based activities into ballad teaching to maintain student engagement. In terms of content, thematic and systematic organization is crucial. The thematic approach in *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* is effective, as it facilitates the repetition and integration of vocabulary and grammar points.

3.3 Post-class reflection

Post-class reflection is vital for both novice and experienced teachers. Reflecting on lessons and making adjustments based on insights can significantly improve teaching outcomes. Seeking feedback from colleagues by inviting them to observe classes is also beneficial, as it provides an external perspective that can reveal issues not apparent during teaching.

4 Conclusion

The author believes that no teaching method is perfect. However, in the post-method era, international Chinese teachers have access to more resources and flexible teaching models, presenting both opportunities and challenges. The key lies in how teachers utilize and adapt these resources. For example, while the ballad method has its strengths and weaknesses, its effectiveness depends on how well it is tailored to learners' needs. Zhou Xiaokang's *Dr. Zhou's Rhymes for Learning Chinese* exemplifies this by perfectly aligning itself with the characteristics of Australian learners. As ballad teaching materials continue to evolve, future international Chinese teachers must also contribute to their development.

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