

Using Lu Xun's Literature to Enhance Critical Reading and Intercultural Understanding in a Secondary School Chinese Language Course in Thailand

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the effects of integrating Lu Xun's literature into secondary Chinese language instruction in Thailand, focusing on students' reading comprehension, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking. A mixed-methods design was employed with 54 Grade 12 students over six weeks. Participants engaged with adapted literary texts and completed 1) pre- and post-tests assessing reading comprehension, 2) an intercultural awareness questionnaire, and 3) a critical thinking questionnaire, along with 4) semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data was analyzed using paired-sample *t*-test. Quantitative results showed statistically significant improvements across all domains, supported by large effect sizes. Furthermore, qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Qualitative findings revealed that students enhanced their reading strategies, reflected critically on cultural similarities and differences, and demonstrated increased independent thinking. Literature-based instruction can broaden Chinese secondary students' cognitive and cultural skills, challenging the traditionally utilitarian focus in Thai secondary curricula. Using authentic texts and themes fosters deeper engagement and helps develop more critical, culturally aware learners. Limitations regarding sample size, self-reported measures, and intervention duration are acknowledged, and recommendations for future research are proposed.

Keywords: Chinese language education, critical thinking, intercultural understanding, Lu Xun, reading comprehension

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Introduction

In recent years, the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) has experienced significant growth in Thailand, especially at the secondary school level, as part of broader economic and cultural exchanges between Thailand and China. While the rise of Chinese language programs indicates increased regional interconnection, many Thai secondary schools' curriculum continues primarily utilitarian, focusing on teaching vocabulary, basic grammar, and everyday communication (Insaard & Kittopakarnkit, 2023). Moreover, educators and policymakers are increasingly encouraged to adopt pedagogical approaches that foster not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural understanding (Jin, 2024; Mingliang, 2024) and critical thinking (Liu & Sihe, 2025). These competencies are essential in preparing students to navigate a complex, multicultural world and to engage thoughtfully with diverse cultural narratives and values (Byram, 1997; Liu & Darling, 2024). The development of higher-order thinking abilities and intercultural awareness through literary texts is not given much attention in TECL. Literature is typically only taught in senior university courses, especially those that have deep cultural and philosophical aspects.

Literary works can facilitate intercultural learning and the development of critical reading skills, especially when they offer complex representations of historical, cultural, and moral issues (Li, 2024; Zhu, 2023). Lu Xun (1881–1936) is widely considered the father of modern Chinese literature. His works, such as *A Madman's Diary* and *The True Story of Ah Q*, offer powerful critiques of feudal society, social inertia, and cultural identity. Lu Xun's literature is distinguished by its philosophical profundity and metaphorical richness, which offer an abundance of opportunities for critical reading and reflection (Lee, 2005). Lu Xun's works are seldom employed outside of university settings, notably in Thai secondary schools, despite his canonical status in Chinese and world literature. This is a result of the sensitive social critique that is ingrained in his work, as well as the perceived difficulty of his language. Nevertheless, these particular characteristics provide his literature a valuable pedagogical instrument for cultivating intercultural understanding and critical thinking, particularly at a time when global competencies are being prioritized in education (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

Nevertheless, Lu Xun's literature has been available only in university-level Chinese or Chinese studies programs in Thailand. His works are rarely, if ever, included in secondary school Chinese language classes, as the curriculum typically emphasizes foundational linguistic skills and daily communication situations (Kanoksilapatham, 2015). This presents a missed opportunity for secondary students to engage with authentic Chinese texts that not only enhance reading proficiency but also stimulate deeper cultural awareness and critical reflection. While previous research has explored the value of literary texts in second language acquisition, particularly for enhancing critical literacy and cultural sensitivity, few empirical studies have examined the impact of integrating Lu Xun's works in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) settings, especially at the secondary school level. There is a significant research

gap in understanding how early exposure to challenging and culturally rich texts might influence adolescent students' intercultural development. The gap is especially obvious in Thailand, where secondary-level Chinese language instruction has never systematically integrated Lu Xun's literature. This research demonstrates how they can help students develop their critical reading skills and intercultural sensitivity. This research addresses the increasing demand for curriculum innovation in TCFL by illustrating how literary engagement can be employed to connect language learning with cultural and critical education. Therefore, here are the research questions:

- RQ 1: To what extent do Lu Xun's literary works enhance secondary students' reading comprehension?
- RQ 2: What is the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on secondary students' cultural understanding?
- RQ 3: What is the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on secondary students' critical thinking?

Objectives

1. To investigate the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on enhancing secondary students' reading comprehension.
2. To investigate the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on secondary students' cultural understanding.
3. To investigate the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on secondary students' critical thinking

Literature review

Reading Comprehension in Chinese Language Learning

Reading comprehension in CFL involves both understanding the written characters and making meaning from texts. It requires careful alignment between text complexity and learner proficiency. There are four levels of reading comprehension: literal, inferential, critical, and creative. Literal comprehension is the most basic level of understanding. It involves recognizing and recalling explicitly stated information in a text, such as names, dates, places, or events. For language learners at beginner to intermediate levels, literal comprehension is essential as it builds confidence and ensures a basic grasp of the content (Wallace, 2003). Moreover, at the inferential comprehension level, readers go beyond what is directly stated. They must read between the lines to make logical assumptions, understand implied meanings, and predict outcomes. Inferential tasks require more cognitive engagement and background knowledge, and are often seen as a bridge between surface understanding and deeper interpretation (Dong et al., 2019; Lau & Qian, 2024). In addition, critical comprehension asks learners to evaluate and form judgments about the text. Readers assess the author's purpose,

tone, biases, or arguments. This level supports the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as comparing perspectives or questioning the reliability of information. While valuable, critical tasks should be introduced gradually for low-intermediate learners with appropriate scaffolding (Facione, 1990; Paran, 2008). Lastly, Creative comprehension or creative appreciative comprehension is the highest level that involves emotional and imaginative engagement with the text. Learners interpret symbolic meanings, empathize with characters, or reimagine endings. This level fosters aesthetic appreciation and personal response. It is more suitable for advanced learners who have both linguistic competence and cultural familiarity with the text (Van, 2009).

In the study, low-intermediate students should primarily engage in literal and inferential comprehension tasks. This connects with recent findings, for instance, Lau and Qian (2024) demonstrated that junior secondary students' reading improved significantly when instructional design emphasized self-regulated learning strategies and inference rather than critical analysis alone. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Dong et al. (2019) found that metalinguistic knowledge, such as morphological or phonological awareness, is strongly correlated with both literal decoding and inferential comprehension in Chinese learners. These low-to-moderate proficiency learners benefit most from targeted practice in vocabulary and sentence-level meaning (Zhou et al., 2024). However, studies caution against prematurely emphasizing critical comprehension, as students may lack sufficient linguistic and cultural scaffolding (Paran, 2008).

Chinese and Lu Xun's Literature in CFL Pedagogy

In the field of CFL education, literature has traditionally been underutilized, especially at beginner and intermediate proficiency levels. CFL instruction in many international contexts, including Thailand, has largely prioritized linguistic competence over literary and cultural engagement, resulting in a pedagogy centered around memorization, grammatical drills, and transactional communication (Everson & Xiao, 2009). When literary texts are used, they are typically simplified folktales or short anecdotes intended for vocabulary practice, rather than authentic texts that challenge students intellectually or culturally.

This limited use of literature contrasts sharply with the broader field of foreign language education, where literature is increasingly recognized for its potential to support both linguistic development and deeper learning outcomes, such as empathy, critical inquiry, and intercultural understanding (Paran, 2008). Within the CFL context, researchers have begun advocating for a more integrated approach that includes literary works reflecting Chinese thought, history, and identity (e.g., Yuet & Chan, 2003). These texts can serve not only as language input but also as cultural artifacts that expose students to different value systems and modes of reasoning, thereby fostering both intercultural competence and higher-order thinking.

However, significant pedagogical challenges remain. One major issue is the perceived difficulty of modern Chinese literature, particularly in terms of language density, idiomatic expressions, and socio-historical references. This has led educators to confine literary study to advanced or university-level students, leaving secondary-level CFL students with limited exposure to culturally rich texts. As a result, many students complete secondary Chinese programs with little understanding of China's cultural evolution or the complexities of its modern identity.

Lu Xun's literature offers a compelling yet underexplored opportunity to bridge this pedagogical gap. Widely regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun (1881–1936) used his fiction and essays to critique the moral decay, social stagnation, and oppressive traditions of early 20th-century China. Works such as *A Madman's Diary* and *The True Story of Ah Q* are rich in symbolism and psychological depth, portraying characters who struggle with alienation, authority, and identity (Lee, 2005). These themes resonate not only within Chinese history but also within universal human experiences, making Lu Xun's literature a valuable tool for both language learning and intercultural education.

The Thai context, despite the growing popularity of Chinese language programs in Thai secondary schools, there is no known curriculum that includes Lu Xun's literature at this level. This omission represents a missed opportunity to introduce students to the complexities of Chinese society through authentic cultural expression. With appropriate scaffolding, such as simplified vocabulary, guided discussion questions, and multimodal resources, Lu Xun's stories could become powerful instruments for stimulating classroom dialogue about cultural values, identity, and critical reflection.

Moreover, integrating Lu Xun's literature into secondary CFL instruction aligns with broader educational goals in Thailand and beyond, where global citizenship, critical thinking, and intercultural sensitivity are increasingly prioritized in curriculum design. As students analyze Lu Xun's critiques of tradition and social hypocrisy, they are encouraged not only to understand Chinese perspectives but also to interrogate their cultural assumptions, an essential step in the development of intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

Thus, this study responds to an urgent need in CFL pedagogy by exploring how Lu Xun's literature might be productively adapted for students at the secondary level. In doing so, it seeks to expand the boundaries of literary instruction in Chinese language education and contribute to a more culturally responsive and cognitively engaging curriculum.

Literature and Critical Thinking in Language Education

Critical thinking has become a central educational objective in both first and second-language learning contexts. It encompasses a range of cognitive skills and dispositions that include interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation (Facione, 1990). In language education, critical thinking is not only vital for academic success

but also for developing students' ability to analyze meaning, recognize perspective, and engage thoughtfully with content.

Scholars have increasingly argued for the integration of literature into language learning as a means of fostering critical thinking (Paran, 2008; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011). Unlike functional texts or standard language exercises, literary texts often contain ambiguity, irony, and complex character motivations that require interpretive engagement. As readers encounter characters in morally complex situations or societies changing, they are invited to question assumptions, draw inferences, and critically assess both content and form (Lazar, 2009). These skills align with the broader goals of critical literacy, which emphasize reading not only for comprehension but also for reflection and transformation (Wallace, 2003).

In the context of foreign language education, literature has been shown to support deeper cognitive engagement. For instance, Khatib et al. (2011) found that students who studied short stories developed more nuanced analytical thinking compared to those using traditional language textbooks. Similarly, Van (2009) emphasized that literature provides authentic, meaningful contexts that push students to think beyond the literal and explore implicit meaning, symbolism, and cultural context.

Despite these benefits, critical thinking remains underemphasized in many language curricula, especially in settings where language education is exam-driven or where textbooks prioritize rote memorization and grammar drills. In Thailand, secondary Chinese language programs are often structured around standardized assessments, with little room for open-ended discussion or interpretive analysis (Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009). This has resulted in a pedagogical gap where students may achieve surface-level proficiency without developing the analytical and reflective skills needed for meaningful language use.

Introducing literature into the Chinese language classroom, particularly texts with philosophical and socio-political depth such as those by Lu Xun, holds promise for addressing this gap. Literature's potential to promote higher-order thinking is not limited to native speakers; with appropriate scaffolding, even language students at intermediate levels can engage critically with texts, ask questions, and form interpretations (Luke & Dooley, 2011). As such, using literature becomes a strategic pedagogical tool, both for language development and for cultivating critical consciousness.

Intercultural Competence in Literature-based Language Learning

Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures based on intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Deardorff, 2006). In foreign language education, the development of this competence has become a core objective, moving beyond linguistic accuracy to include cultural sensitivity, perspective-taking, and the ability to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. Byram's (1997) influential model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

(ICC) outlines several key components, including knowledge of social groups and their practices, attitudes of openness and curiosity, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness.

Literature is uniquely positioned to support the development of intercultural competence in the language classroom. As Kramsch (1993) argued, literary texts serve as cultural artifacts that represent the perspectives, values, and assumptions of other societies. Through narratives, students encounter alternative worldviews and moral frameworks, allowing them to reflect not only on the target culture but also on their cultural norms and biases. This decentering process is vital for fostering empathy and intercultural understanding (Alptekin, 2002).

Studies in foreign language contexts have shown that engaging with literature can enhance students' intercultural awareness. For instance, Porto and Byram (2015) emphasized that literary narratives offer authentic and emotionally resonant contexts in which students can grapple with cultural complexity. Similarly, Li and Lai (2012) found that Taiwanese students who read cultural texts became more adept at identifying cultural differences and engaging in intercultural reading. These experiences help students acquire more complex and critical viewpoints on different cultures, rather than simplified or stereotypical ones.

In the context of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) education, the integration of literature that reflects historical and social tensions in Chinese society is especially promising for intercultural learning. While traditional instructional materials may present idealized or static views of Chinese culture, literature offers insight into the struggles, contradictions, and transformations within Chinese society (Lee, 2005). Such texts reveal not only what is culturally different but also what is universally human, thus bridging cultural divides.

However, CFL programs in many non-native contexts, including Thailand, have yet to fully capitalize on the intercultural potential of literature. The curricular focus often remains on language mechanics, leaving limited room for cultural depth and critical engagement. In light of these gaps, the use of literature in secondary-level Chinese classrooms represents a strategic and underexplored opportunity to promote intercultural awareness among adolescent students.

Introducing literature can provoke meaningful discussion about cultural values, identity, and historical change. As students reflect on the tensions depicted in literary works between tradition and modernity and between individuals and society, they are also encouraged to question and articulate their cultural perspectives. This process of cultural comparison and reflection lies at the heart of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

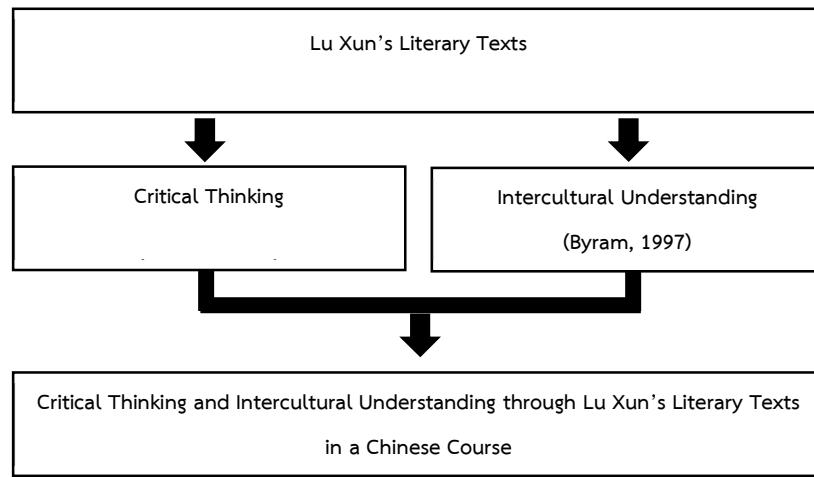


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Critical Thinking and Cultural Understanding through Lu Xun's Literary Texts

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design complemented by qualitative inquiry to explore the impact of using Lu Xun's literature on Thai secondary students' critical thinking and intercultural understanding. The quantitative component involved administering pre- and post-intervention assessments to measure any significant change in students' reading comprehension, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness following a four-week instructional unit centered on selected works by Lu Xun. This design was chosen for its practicality in real classroom settings where random assignment is not feasible (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative component consisted of individual semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of students to gain deeper insights into their cognitive and cultural engagement with the texts. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of both measurable outcomes and the students' subjective experiences (Dörnyei, 2007).

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a secondary school in central Thailand offering Chinese as part of its extracurricular language enrichment program. The setting was a Grade 12 elective Chinese language class comprising students who had voluntarily chosen to specialize in Chinese as their major area of study. As an extracurricular class, it operated outside the core curriculum but was officially recognized by the school as part of its language specialization track. All participating students had studied Chinese for at least two academic years and were considered low-intermediate-level students within the school's Chinese program based on their HSK score at level 2.

A total of 54 students (aged approximately 17–18 years) participated in the study. The sample was selected using convenience sampling, as it consisted of one intact class available during the study period (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). While this method limits generalizability, it is commonly used in classroom-based educational research. For the qualitative phase, a sampling method was employed to select six students for semi-structured interviews based on their academic proficiency in Chinese (low, mid, high), as determined by their cumulative Chinese subject grades. This sampling approach aimed to capture a range of perspectives and enhance the richness of qualitative data (Patton, 2015).

Research Instruments

1. Reading Comprehension Test: A teacher-developed reading comprehension test was administered as both a pre-test and post-test to measure students' engagement with and understanding of two simplified literary texts based on Lu Xun's works. The texts were linguistically adapted to be appropriate for intermediate secondary-level CFL students, preserving core themes and literary features while minimizing syntactic complexity and unfamiliar vocabulary. The test consisted of 20 multiple-choice items, with 10 questions per text. Items were mapped to diverse reading strategies, including literal comprehension, inference, evaluative judgment, figurative interpretation, and cross-cultural understanding. For example, items assessed students' ability to recognize character motivation, interpret symbolic language, apply textual insights to real-world situations, and reflect on cultural differences depicted in the stories.

The test was validated through expert review and item alignment based on established reading strategy categories using The Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). The result is 0.67, meaning the test is valid. It was piloted with 20 non-participants to ensure clarity and reliability using Cronbach's Alpha. The result is .84, meaning the test is reliable. A scoring guide was used to evaluate response patterns across strategy types, enabling analysis of higher-order comprehension skills.

2. Intercultural Understanding and Critical Reading Survey: A 20-item self-report questionnaire was developed and used to assess students' perceived development in intercultural understanding and critical reading, using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). The instrument was divided into two sections.

Section one is intercultural understanding (10 items), adapted from Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, including items such as "I feel more open-minded about cultural differences after reading the story" and "The story helped me see my own culture from a new perspective." This section focused on evaluating changes in students' attitudes, cultural awareness, and openness to perspective-taking.

Section two is critical reading (10 items), developed based on Facione's (1990) critical thinking framework, including items like "I look for evidence in the text to support my

opinions" and "I can distinguish between the author's opinion and the characters' opinions." These items assessed students' metacognitive strategies and depth of literary engagement.

Both sections were translated into Thai to avoid the language barrier. The questionnaire was reviewed by language education specialists using the IOC. The result was .87, which means valid. Moreover, it was tested for internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) before full administration. The result is 0.97, which means the survey is reliable.

3. Interview Protocol: Following the intervention, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students selected based on Chinese language proficiency (low, mid, high) using maximum variation sampling. The interview questions explored students' reflections on the texts, perceptions of Chinese values and society, and how the stories influenced their thinking about culture and human behavior. Interviews were conducted through ZOOM and video-recorded with students' consent. The interview took approximately 15 minutes per person and was conducted in Thai to ensure clarity and comfort. The videos were transcribed for thematic analysis after the interview. Here are some samples of research questions:

- 1) What do you think about using Lu Xun's work in learning Chinese, especially in reading activities?
- 2) After reading Lu Xun's stories, what new ideas or insights did you gain about Chinese culture or society? Did the stories change the way you see your own culture in any way? How?
- 3) What message do you think Lu Xun wanted to share through his stories? Did any part make you question your own ideas or think differently? Why or why not?

Data Collection

Data were collected over eight weeks during the second semester of an academic year with 54 students in Grade 12. In Week 1, all 54 participants completed a content form and took a pre-test that included a reading comprehension test and a self-report survey measuring critical thinking and intercultural understanding. This served as a baseline to assess students' initial levels of cognitive and cultural engagement with literary texts.

From Weeks 2 to 7, students participated in a structured instructional intervention featuring two simplified stories adapted from Lu Xun's works. Each week included reading tasks, vocabulary scaffolding, class discussions, and reflective writing activities to support comprehension and promote deeper reflection. Instructional materials were designed to align with the survey constructs and reading strategies assessed in the comprehension tests.

In Week 8, students completed the same reading comprehension test and survey as a post-test to measure any change in their critical reading skills and intercultural awareness. After the test, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with six purposefully selected students representing low, mid, and high proficiency groups based on their cumulative Chinese subject grades.



Figure 2 Data Collection Procedure

Data Analysis

A combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis methods was employed to address the research objectives regarding students' development of critical thinking and intercultural understanding. Quantitative data from the reading comprehension tests and Likert-scale surveys were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were used to summarize students' pre-and post-test scores across the three constructs: reading comprehension, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. To examine the effect of the intervention, paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between pre- and post-test scores (Field, 2018).

For the qualitative phase, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns in students' reflections. The analysis followed six steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted manually, and emergent categories were aligned with the constructs of critical engagement and intercultural awareness identified in the survey and literature review. The integration of both data sources allowed for triangulation and deeper interpretation of the quantitative findings, providing a more nuanced understanding of students' learning outcomes and perspectives.

Results

Effect of Lu Xun's Literary Texts on Secondary Students' Reading Comprehension

To investigate the extent to which Lu Xun's literary works enhance secondary students' reading comprehension, a paired sample *t*-test was conducted to compare pre-test and post-test scores. Results indicate a statistically significant improvement in reading comprehension after using Lu Xun's literary texts in a Chinese course, as shown in Table 1. The mean pre-test score ($M = 11.85$, $SD = 4.383$) increased to a post-test ($M = 13.53$, $SD = 4.227$). This suggests that students demonstrated higher comprehension after engaging with the adapted literary texts from Lu Xun. Moreover, the effect size (Cohen's $d = 3.572$) is

considered extremely large (Cohen, 1988). Therefore, this shows the significant impact of Lu Xun's literature on students' reading performance. These findings indicate that incorporating rich literary content, even at the secondary level, can significantly enhance students' ability to understand and engage with reading texts.

Table 1 Comparison of Reading Comprehension using Paired Samples *t*-test

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Std. Error Mean | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | - | Effect Size value |
|----------|----------|-----------|-----------------|----------|-----------|----------|---|----------------------|
| Pretest | 11.85 | 4.383 | .602 | | | | | |
| Posttest | 13.53 | 4.227 | .581 | -3.422 | 52 | .001 | | 3.572 |

**M* = Mean

***SD* = Standard Deviation

***Significant level <.05

Improving Reading Strategies

In addition, the qualitative data revealed that students could improve their reading comprehension through Lu Xun's works because his stories promoted the utilization of the students' reading strategies, such as summarizing and context clues.

“After reading, my teacher asked me to summarize the story, and I tried to write a short summary of the story to check if I understood it. I focused on what happened to the main character and what message the story wanted to tell. This helped me remember the story better and think about its meaning.”

“When I didn’t know some vocabulary in Lu Xun’s stories, I tried to guess the meaning from the sentences around it. For example, I didn’t know one of the words, but I used the situation to understand that people thought he was different or dangerous.”

Accidental Learning for Vocabulary Knowledge

Most students also reported that they better comprehended the texts because they accidentally found similar words many times through Lu Xun's stories. Another way is that they discovered the word usage through reading. Hence, they could develop their vocabulary knowledge through accidental learning.

“There was a word I didn’t know before, but I guessed its meaning because of the actions in the story. Later in class, when I saw the same word again, I could remember it clearly. I think reading made me remember more than just memorizing a list.”

“When I saw how certain words were used in the story, like ‘face’ and ‘shame,’ I started to understand in Chinese. It was different from just learning one word at a time.”

Impact of Lu Xun’s Literature on Students’ Cultural Understanding

To investigate the effect of Lu Xun’s literary works on secondary students’ cultural understanding, a paired sample *t*-test was conducted comparing students’ scores on a pre- and post-intervention intercultural understanding survey, as shown in Table 2. The results revealed a statistically significant increase in students’ cultural understanding following the instructional intervention. The mean pre-survey score ($M = 22.41$, $SD = 4.035$) increased markedly to a post-survey ($M = 31.04$, $SD = 4.584$), indicating a strong positive change in students’ openness to and knowledge of Chinese cultural values. Moreover, the effect size was calculated at 4.145, which is exceptionally large (Cohen, 1988), suggesting that exposure to Lu Xun’s literature had a profound impact on students’ intercultural development. These findings support the use of culturally rich texts as a powerful tool in fostering global cultural sensitivity in Chinese language learners.

Table 2 Comparison of Cultural Understanding using Paired Samples *t*-test

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Std. Error Mean | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> -value | Effect Size |
|-------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------|
| Pre-survey | 22.41 | 4.035 | .549 | | | | |
| Post-survey | 31.04 | 4.584 | .624 | -15.299 | 53 | <.001 | 4.145 |

**M* = Mean

***SD* = Standard Deviation

***Significant level <.05

Cultural Comparison and Self-Reflection

Interview findings revealed that students mostly compare Chinese culture with Thai culture by reading Lu Xun’s stories. This shows that they understand and have an awareness of Chinese culture as their target language culture.

“In Lu Xun’s story, the character had to follow what his family or community said, even if he didn’t agree. I realized we also do that in Thai culture, like following elders without questioning. It made me think about whether that’s always right.”

“The story made me notice how Chinese people were afraid to be different because of what others might say. I think Thai people are also scared of ‘face’ or losing respect. Reading the story helped me reflect on how this affects us, too.”

Historical and Cultural Awareness

Students' responses revealed that reading Lu Xun's literary works contributed significantly to their understanding of traditional Chinese society and its historical context. Several participants reported gaining new insights into the social structures, beliefs, and values that shaped early 20th-century China.

"I learned that in old Chinese society, people had to follow strict rules about class and family roles. In the story, even if someone didn't agree, they couldn't speak out. It helped me understand how different life was at that time."

"There was one part of the story where people believed in spirits or old medicine, and I didn't know those beliefs were still strong back then. It made me understand that culture affects how people make decisions, not just logic."

Effect of Lu Xun's Literary Works on Students' Critical Thinking

Research question 3 aims to examine the effect of Lu Xun's literary works on secondary students' critical thinking. As illustrated in Table 3, a paired sample *t*-test was conducted on pre- and post-survey scores. The analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' self-perceived critical thinking abilities following the six-week instructional period ($p < .001$). Specifically, students' mean scores increased from 22.87 ($SD = 3.34$) before the intervention to 30.59 ($SD = 3.14$). Notably, the effect size (Cohen's $d = 4.41$) was exceptionally large, suggesting a strong and sustained influence of the literary instruction (Cohen, 1988). These findings underscore the potential of thematically rich literature—particularly texts that challenge cultural norms and provoke moral questioning—as an effective tool for fostering critical thinking in Chinese language education contexts.

Table 3 Comparison of Critical Thinking using Paired Sample *t*-test

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Std. Error Mean | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> -value | Effect Size |
|-------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|----------|-----------|-----------------|-------------|
| Pre-survey | 22.87 | 3.337 | .454 | | | | |
| Post-survey | 30.59 | 3.141 | .427 | -13.704 | 53 | <.001 | 4.414 |

**M* = Mean

***SD* = Standard Deviation

***Significant level <.05

Personal Application of Critical Message

Some students demonstrated critical engagement with Lu Xun's works by applying the messages from the stories to their own lives. The theme of personal application of critical message emerged as students reflected on how characters' struggles and social pressures

resonated with their own experiences. Moreover, some drew a connection between the story's portrayal of a marginalized character and their own classroom experiences.

"Lu Xun's stories made me think about how people sometimes follow others blindly... Now I try to ask myself what I think before I go along with something."

"The story about the 'madman'... helped me feel better about myself when I have different ideas in class."

Independent Thinking

The stories also appeared to foster a sense of independent thinking, as students began to form and express their own opinions with greater confidence. Several participants noted that the texts did not offer simple conclusions, which encouraged them to engage in deeper reflection and take ownership of their interpretations.

"Lu Xun's stories didn't give clear answers. They made me think more and decide for myself what was right or wrong."

"Some of my classmates thought one thing, but I had a different opinion... the story made me realize it's okay to think differently."

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the extent to which the integration of Lu Xun's literature could enhance secondary school students' reading comprehension, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking in a Chinese language course in Thailand. The results from both quantitative and qualitative data provided strong evidence that literary engagement using adapted stories from Lu Xun significantly contributed to improvements in all three domains. The quantitative findings demonstrated statistically significant gains in students' reading comprehension scores, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking abilities. These findings were further supported by qualitative data, where students described how the literary texts influenced their reading strategies, cultural reflections, and personal reasoning processes. Collectively, the results suggest that integrating culturally rich and cognitively challenging literary texts into secondary-level Chinese language instruction offers vital pedagogical benefits.

The findings indicate that engagement with Lu Xun's literature significantly enhanced students' reading comprehension abilities. The pre-and post-test comparison showed a statistically significant improvement in students' reading comprehension scores, with a notably large effect size. This suggests that exposure to authentic literary texts, even when adapted for language learners, can promote deeper cognitive processing and improve overall reading skills.

Qualitative responses revealed that students developed important reading strategies through their interaction with Lu Xun's works. Students reported increased use of summarization skills, where they actively synthesized key events and main ideas after reading, consistent with higher-order comprehension strategies (Lazar, 2009). Furthermore, many students described utilizing context clues to infer unfamiliar vocabulary, highlighting the incidental development of lexical knowledge, a finding supported by previous research emphasizing the benefits of extensive reading and authentic texts for vocabulary acquisition (Day & Bamford, 1998; Paran, 2008).

These results align with prior studies arguing for the cognitive value of literature in language learning. Paran (2008) emphasized that literary texts require readers to engage with layers of meaning, ambiguity, and interpretation, thereby fostering deeper comprehension skills. Similarly, Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011) argued that integrating literature into language instruction not only enhances language proficiency but also develops learners' cognitive abilities through inferential reading and critical reflection.

The improvement in reading comprehension seen in this study also implies that students were able to progress beyond the surface-level reading skills commonly highlighted in practical curriculum. As the literature review highlighted, secondary Chinese language programs in Thailand have traditionally focused on vocabulary acquisition and basic communicative functions (Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Zhong, 2022). The successful integration of Lu Xun's literary texts in this study demonstrates that, with appropriate scaffolding, secondary students are capable of engaging with more sophisticated texts that challenge them intellectually while simultaneously supporting language development, as it is also aligned with Li and Lai (2012), who demonstrated that students who read cultural texts could enhance their reading comprehension as well as understand the target cultures more deeply.

In sum, the findings affirm that literature-based instruction, particularly when drawn from culturally and thematically rich sources such as Lu Xun's works, can significantly enhance students' reading comprehension skills. It encourages a shift from purely functional language learning toward a more holistic model that integrates linguistic, cognitive, and cultural competencies, providing a compelling argument for the broader inclusion of authentic literature in secondary Chinese language education.

In addition, the results of this study also demonstrate that reading Lu Xun's literature significantly enhanced students' intercultural understanding. The paired sample *t*-test revealed a strong, statistically significant increase in students' intercultural awareness scores, supported by a very large effect size. This quantitative gain was further illustrated by students' reflections during interviews, where they compared Chinese cultural norms with their own Thai experiences and expressed a deeper understanding of historical and cultural contexts.

The development of cultural comparison and self-reflection emerged as a dominant theme in the qualitative data. Students frequently noted similarities between Chinese traditions, such as strict familial expectations or the value of “saving face,” and corresponding practices in Thai culture. By recognizing these parallels and questioning traditional values, students demonstrated an important step in intercultural development—moving beyond stereotypes to a more nuanced appreciation of another culture (Byram, 1997). This finding supports Kramsch’s (1993) assertion that literature serves as a “cultural artifact” that allows learners to access not only the language but also the lived experiences and value systems of others.

Furthermore, students’ enhanced historical and cultural awareness revealed that reading Lu Xun’s works helped them grasp the broader socio-political realities of early 20th-century China. Students reported learning about historical oppression, traditional beliefs, and societal struggles portrayed in the stories, deepening their cultural empathy. Such responses align with Porto and Byram’s (2015) view that literary narratives are powerful vehicles for promoting critical cultural awareness by exposing learners to alternative worldviews and challenging them to reflect on their own.

These findings are particularly significant when viewed against the backdrop of traditional Chinese language instruction in Thailand. As noted by Kanoksilapatham (2015) and Fan and Pianchana (2024), Chinese curricula at the secondary level often prioritize immediate communicative needs over cultural exploration. The present study offers evidence that the incorporation of culturally rich, thought-provoking literature can bridge this curricular gap, allowing students not only to develop linguistic skills but also to build intercultural competence, which is crucial in today’s interconnected world.

In conclusion, the promotion of intercultural understanding through Lu Xun’s literature illustrates the potential of literary texts to go beyond surface-level communication training. Through carefully scaffolded literary engagement, students were able to develop more critical, empathetic, and reflective perspectives on both the target culture and their own, fulfilling key goals of intercultural communicative competence as outlined by Byram (1997).

Another point is that the findings also highlight the significant role of Lu Xun’s literature in promoting secondary students’ critical thinking skills. Quantitative results from the paired sample t-test indicated a highly significant improvement in students’ self-perceived critical thinking abilities after the instructional intervention, with an exceptionally large effect size. Qualitative data further supported this, revealing two key themes: personal application of critical messages and independent thinking.

Many students reported connecting the struggles of Lu Xun’s characters with their own lives, applying the moral and social messages of the stories to real-world situations. This development of personal relevance reflects a deeper level of cognitive engagement, where

students move from simple comprehension to evaluative and reflective thinking (Facione, 1990). For example, students described questioning conformity, peer influence, and traditional expectations in both the stories and their contexts—an outcome central to the concept of critical thinking as purposeful, self-regulated judgment.

Additionally, the emergence of independent thinking among students underscores literature's power to foster autonomy in interpretation. Students expressed greater confidence in forming and defending their own opinions, even when those opinions differed from those of their peers. This aligns with Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan's (2011) assertion that exposure to ambiguous, open-ended texts in the language classroom promotes critical reasoning and evaluative judgment.

The findings validate the view that engagement with complex, socially critical literature like Lu Xun's encourages students to move beyond passive reading habits toward active interrogation of ideas. In contrast to formulaic language exercises often found in traditional curricula, literary analysis demands that learners grapple with conflicting perspectives, moral ambiguity, and symbolic meaning—essential components of higher-order thinking.

Overall, the results reinforce the educational value of integrating authentic literary texts into secondary foreign language instruction, supporting not just linguistic competence but also critical cognitive development, in line with the goals of 21st-century education.

This study directly addresses a well-documented gap in secondary Chinese language education in Thailand. As noted by Kanoksilapatham (2015) and Zhong (2022), Chinese programs at this level typically emphasize utilitarian goals, such as basic vocabulary acquisition, grammar drills, and everyday communication skills, often at the expense of deeper cultural or cognitive development. Literature, particularly that of canonical figures like Lu Xun, has been largely restricted to university-level Chinese or Sinology programs, rarely making its way into secondary classrooms.

The results of this study demonstrate that secondary students are not only capable of engaging meaningfully with adapted literary texts but that doing so can foster significant gains in reading comprehension, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking. This challenges the prevailing assumption that younger or intermediate-level learners must be limited to simple, transactional language tasks. Instead, the findings align with calls from scholars such as Paran (2008) and Kramsch (1993) to adopt a more holistic, culturally embedded approach to foreign language education.

Moreover, the successful integration of Lu Xun's literature suggests that literature can serve as an accessible bridge between basic language instruction and more sophisticated communicative and cultural competencies. With appropriate scaffolding, such as linguistic simplification, guided discussions, and reflective activities, secondary students can successfully navigate and benefit from exposure to complex texts.

Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for the reimagining of Chinese language curricula at the secondary level. By incorporating authentic literature earlier in the learning process, educators can better prepare students not only for linguistic proficiency but also for global citizenship, critical reflection, and intercultural engagement in an increasingly interconnected world.

Suggestions

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of integrating Lu Xun's literature into secondary-level Chinese language education in Thailand. Through a mixed-methods investigation, significant improvements were found in students' reading comprehension, intercultural understanding, and critical thinking after engaging with adapted versions of Lu Xun's texts. These improvements, both statistically and thematically, suggest that literary instruction can enrich language learning by fostering deeper cognitive and cultural engagement.

The findings challenge the traditionally utilitarian nature of Chinese language curricula in Thai secondary schools, which tend to prioritize grammatical accuracy and functional vocabulary over higher-order thinking and cultural exploration. This study provides empirical evidence that, with appropriate scaffolding, secondary students are capable of engaging with sophisticated literary texts that stimulate personal reflection, critical questioning, and intercultural dialogue.

Ultimately, the integration of culturally rich literature like Lu Xun's invites students to not only acquire linguistic competence but also to understand complex human experiences, question inherited norms, and develop broader global perspectives. These are essential competencies in 21st-century education. Future curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers should consider incorporating authentic literary materials to align Chinese language education with broader educational goals such as critical literacy and intercultural competence.

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