

Chapter 14

Learning the Use of “Irony” from the Perspective of Theory of Literature: A Case Study Using Wang Meng’s *The Stubborn Porridge*

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Abstract Using irony as an example, this study demonstrates how to enhance students’ appreciation of literature through extracurricular reading. We will apply the theories from Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* to analyze Wang Meng (1934, 王蒙)’s well-known novel *The Stubborn Porridge* (1989, 《坚硬的稀粥》). The use of irony in different aspects of narrative fiction, such as plot, characters, setting, and language control, will be examined. Following the ideas of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoLT), some suggestions are made about using digital media with students to encourage them to enjoy and learn from their reading experience.

Keywords Scholarship of teaching and learning · Irony · Theory of literature · Wang meng · The stubborn porridge

14.1 Introduction

The teaching of reading has always been an important part of post-secondary school language and literature study, and extracurricular reading is also an integral element in the learning process of students. Reading involves considering the meaning of the text and seeking understanding of the author’s intentions. Extensive reading, through extracurricular reading, for example, can greatly aid language learning. It helps students to enhance appreciation of the language and to learn about rhetorical and literary techniques. Irony is one good example of the many literary techniques. It is widely used, and understanding its use can facilitate understanding of literary writing that has used it. However, students always complain about the difficulties that they face in learning about theories of irony; for instance, they cannot

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understand the definition and application of ironic settings, ironic characters, ironic plot, and ironic language control, because irony is when someone says or does something, but means another thing or intends for something else to happen, and it is often defined incorrectly. However, with the help of information from the Internet, such as TV series, movies, and dramas, it becomes more interesting and more accessible and easier for this kind of learning and teaching. In this study, we will apply the theories from Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* to analyze Wang Meng's (1934, 王蒙) well-known novel *The Stubborn Porridge* (1989, 《坚硬的稀粥》) using ideas from the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT). The learning and teaching of irony in different aspects of narrative fiction, such as plot, characters, setting, and language control, will be examined.

In this digital technology era, the learning and teaching of irony does not mean only studying printed books, but also reading using electronic media. In 2012, Varsity of The Chinese University of Hong Kong surveyed more than 260 secondary school and university students on their reading habits, finding that in addition to printed books, newspapers, and textbooks, Hong Kong students are likely to read materials in e-books, blogs, and online fiction series and shared articles on social media platforms. Computers and other similar forms of digital technology allow students to continue their studies at home and can be used to provide tutorial assistance for those students who would benefit from it. Digital methodologies are attractive, fashionable, and interesting in students' eyes.

As educators helping students to learn about the use of irony, we need to study the relevant theories of literature, learning and teaching in great depth. *Theory of Literature* (1942) by René Wellek and Austin Warren is a useful book as it encompasses a history of literature, literary criticism, and literary theories. Translated into Chinese in 1984, it has had far-reaching impact in Chinese literature in the last three decades, especially on China's contemporary literature (Cheng, 2009).

Theory of Literature focuses on the nature, function, form, and content of literature; these four elements are important in language education. Sect. 3—The Extrinsic Approach to the Study of Literature—and Sect. 4—The Intrinsic Study of Literature—are two important pillars of the theoretical framework of this book. Wellek and Warren question the Extrinsic Approach which they consider to be only concerned with research into the biographical, social, psychological, and other aspects of a literary piece. They believed that the text's "decisive structure"¹ is the

¹Wellek and Warren thought of literature as a presence, and it is an objective and stable, and readers' experience differ vastly, and therefore, it is relative to different levels of recipients who have some certainty. However, for readers to accept the point of view, the main literary work must explore real experience in order to obtain its real existence. Accordingly, Wellek and Warren's text-centric existence of literary works will be divided into the ontological existence and experience there. There is a body of the text itself the objective existence, there is the experience of the aesthetic text reader who accepted the reality of existence as an object of any art is to accept an ontology exists, it is the text of their own voice, meaning, and the performance of the other things that constitute the aesthetic level. Overall, it determines the existence of fundamental literature; therefore, Wellek and Warren called it 'decisive structure.'

heart of the theoretical basis for analyzing a text and thus focused on “The Intrinsic Study of Literature.”

In this paper, we will apply the theories to study the constituents used by Wang Meng in constructing his famous novel *The Stubborn Porridge*. Our key intention will be how such theories can assist with the teaching of the use of irony. For this purpose, the three constituents will be examined: the plot, characterization, and setting. Also, we will study the language and dialogue control as an additional constituent.

It should be noted that the concern of this paper is the study of “ironic novels.” Many novels use irony, especially in some dialogue and plot development. However, this does not make them ironic novels.

14.2 The Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT), Development of Irony and Wang Meng’s Novel

The Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT) is an emerging movement of scholarly thought and action that draws on the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning at the post-secondary level (Boyer, 1990). An important goal of SoLT is to enhance and augment learning among and between individual learners by investigating the many features of discipline-specific expertise and best pedagogical practice (McKinney, 2007).

Irony is a language device that we can use in spoken or written form. There are two main kinds of irony: The first one is verbal irony which the real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the literal meanings of the words and the second one is dramatic irony when there is an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs. It is derived from the Greek Eironeia, meaning “a smooth, low-down way of taking people in” (Muecke, 1970: p. 14).

Irony is widely applied in narrative literature and is considered an important technique. It was the crucial technique Socrates (469 BC—399 BC) used to win his debate. The concept later evolved to “ridicule” and other meanings. Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), a German critic and dramatic poet, thought that in irony, “self-creation and self-destruction are often used interchangeably” (Schlegel, 1996: p. 60). Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, considered the “father of existentialism,” wrote in *The Concept of Irony* (1841): “Irony limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content; it disciplines and punishes and thereby yields balance and consistency” (Kierkegaard, 1989: p. 326). In this, Kierkegaard emphasized that properly used irony concentrates the reader’s mind on the truth of the situation described. It does that by deliberately stating the opposite of the truth intended and so encourages the reader to think more actively about what the truth is. For example, at the very beginning of *The Stubborn Porridge*, there is a sentence that describes the “natural rights” ironically: “Elder Sister Xu, age 59. She had been with us for 40 years, and

we all call her Elder Sister Xu. A clear case of all men born equal with natural rights” (Wang, 1994: p. 8).

From Plato to the eighteenth century rhetoric of irony, and from German Romantic irony to the new criticism, irony has become more prevalent in popular literature.

There are different types of irony. Apart from the verbal irony and dramatic irony mentioned above, other types include Socratic irony and situational irony. From a general perspective, irony has two levels of meaning. Rhetoric refers to rhetorical and structural principles used by the writer the text at a microlevel, while having a macrolevel philosophy. Thus, microirony is a means of language structure and style to convey an effect, and macroirony is a way of thinking about the world. This paper focuses on the use of irony at the microlevel.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, verbal irony was commonly used in the *Analects* (540 BC—400 BC, 《论语》), such as the chapter *Eight Yi Part Three* (《八佾篇第三》) and the chapter *Confucius and his Students Talking about Ambition* (《孔子与弟子言志》) and *Zhuang Zi* (369 BC—286 BC, 《庄子》), such as the chapter *World* (《天地》) and the chapter *Horse's hoof* (《马蹄》). One remarkable example of *Zhuang Zi's* ironic allegories is about Confucius trying to convert Robber Zhi (盗跖) to the path of virtue. In this story, the ferocious Robber Zhi was eating a fresh human liver when Confucius arrived, and Confucius praised his “virtues” (mainly physical). This story satirizes the attempts by Mencius and his ilk to induce rulers to discover their innate goodness. But the term “irony” (反讽—*fǎnfěng*) is a relatively new word in Chinese language. It first appeared in the “New Words/New Meanings” (新词新义—*xīncí/xīnyì*) in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (现代汉语词典—*Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn*) in 2002.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a large number of ironic novels were published in China, such as Wang Meng's *Story of Captain, Secretary, Wild Cat, and Half Chopsticks* (1978, 王蒙《队长书记野猫和半截筷的故事》), He Liwei's *White Bird* (1984, 何立伟《白色鸟》), Wang Anyi's *Little Bao Village* (1985, 王安忆《小鲍庄》), Wang Shuo's *Half is Fire and Half is Sea Water* (1986, 王朔《一半是火焰一般是海水》), *I am your Daddy* (1991, 王朔《我是你爸爸》), Hong Feng's *Huge Sea* (1988, 洪峰《瀚海》) Liu Zhenyun's *Unit* (1989, 刘震云《单位》), *Husband* (1992, 刘震云《官人》), *Feather Everywhere* (1992, 刘震云《一地鸡毛》), and Ye Zhaoyan's *About the Toilet* (2012, 叶兆言《关于厕所》). Wang Meng's *The Stubborn Porridge* is one of the most outstanding one among these novels.

According to *Encyclopedia of China*, the literary phenomenon from late 1970s to the early 1980s, which occupied a dominant position in the Chinese mainland literary world, is known as the “scar literature.” Scar literature refers to a literary phenomenon which first appeared in China at the end of “Cultural Revolution” (1976). It is the mainstream literary style of that period. The main catalyst was the enormous psychological damage caused by the Cultural Revolution as well as people's reflection on the future of the nation. It was a literary phenomenon emerging at a historical turning point and had a wide impact on Chinese society at

that time (1985, *Encyclopedia of China*). One of the most popular literary techniques used in “scar literature” is irony.

The Stubborn Porridge by Wang Meng is a good example of how these writers used irony. Wang Meng, one of the leading writers in this “scar literature,” used ironic description skillfully (Hu, 2009: pp. 21–22). He was among many Chinese people starting to look for a new road for China after many years of social turmoil. After 4 years of farming life in Beijing rural areas and 15 years of “rural labor reformation” in Xinjiang, he returned to the China Writers Association in Beijing and resumed his writing life in 1978. Undoubtedly, the twists and turns of a tough life gave lots of material to Wang Meng for his writing. He was reinvigorated. With the attitude of ridicule for the new era, he created many unique works.

Many of his novels, such as *The Kite Streamers* (1979, 《风筝飘带》), *A Changing Human Form* (1986, 《活动变人形》), and *The Stubborn Porridge*, were products of his search for a new way of living in China. These books seek to expose the reality of life for Chinese people, not using a direct attack, but using irony, humor, and other creative methods to “understand the world and feelings of humans deeply with an unemotional attitude, and presented us the faults and bad habits among the traditional moral, political system, and humanity indirectly” (Hu, 2009: pp. 21–22). By using “a lot of ironic description in his novel and textual content, so that his text is full of power” (Guo, 2006: p. 20), Wang Meng hoped that the readers could understand the reality that he described in his books.

From 1986–1989, Wang Meng was appointed as the Minister of Cultural Department of The People’s Republic of China, and also with his outstanding works, he had a great impact on China’s literary world. However, there is little research about Wang Meng’s work in the English world, nor in the Chinese one. This paper intends to fill, in a small way, this gap in the literature.

14.3 Constituents of Narrative Fiction

The novel as a literary form is a relatively modern product both in the Eastern culture and Western culture and has been increasingly valued. “The Novel as an art form is, as one can say in German, a form of Dichtung; is, indeed, in its high form, the modern descendant of the epic—with drama, one of the two great forms. The reasons are rather, one thinks, the widespread association of the novel with entertainment, amusement, and escape rather than serious art—the confounding of the great novels, that is, with manufactures made with a narrow aim at the market” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 212).

These authors attached high value to the novel, a stance shared by Liang Qichao (1873–1929, 梁启超). In *Review on The Relationship between the Novels and the Control of the Masses* (1902, 《论小说与群治之关系》), Liang proposed that “today if we want to improve our governance, we should start from the novel Revolution; if we want to refresh our people, we should start to refresh the novels,”

though one focus is on “practical” and one focus is on “art,” but all points to the importance of the novel.

In *Theory of Literature*, Wellek and Warren believe: “analytical criticism of the novel has customarily distinguished three constituents, plot, characterization, and setting; the last, so readily symbolic, becomes, in some modern theories, ‘atmosphere’ or ‘tones’. Each of these elements is a determinant of the others” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 216).

Among these three constituents, plot is the overall storyline of a fiction, ordering the events of a story. “The plot (or narrative structure) is itself composed of smaller narrative structures” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: pp. 216–217).

A character is any person whose existence originates from a fictional work or performance. There are two main types of characterization; they are the direct and indirect ones. Direct characterization occurs inside of the narrative; the author describes the nature and appearance of it directly. In contrast to this, indirect characterization occurs outside of the narrative; the author describes it indirectly by dialogue, comments, and so on. Both of these kinds of characterization are equally important.

Wellek and Warren suggest:

Modes of characterization are many. Older novelists like Scott introduce each of their major persons by a paragraph describing in detail the physical appearance and another analyzing the moral and psychological nature. ... There are static characterizations and dynamic or developmental (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 219).

Finally, setting includes the place, time, and background and sometimes includes the weather of the story. Setting is considered the most important of three constituents in “The Nature and Modes of Narrative Fiction”:

Attention to setting—the literary element of description as distinguished from narration—would at first thought seem to differentiate ‘fiction’ from drama; our second thought, however, would rather make it a matter of period ... Romantic description aims at establishing and maintaining a mood: plot and characterization are to be dominated by tone, effect... (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 220).

“Its (Novel’s) triumphs have been in the presentation of that psychic life which the theatre can handle but awkwardly. Its essentials are the voluntary absence from the novel of the ‘omniscient novelist’ and, instead, the presence of a controlled ‘point of view’” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 223). These views are expressed through dialogue. “This theory admits of a shift of ‘point of view’ (e.g. from the Prince to the Princess in the second half of *The Golden Bowl*), provided it be systematic. It also admits the author’s use of a character within the novel, not unlike the author, who is either telling the narrative to some friends (Marlow, in Conrad’s *Youth*) or the consciousness through which all is seen (Strether, in *The Ambassadors*)” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 224).

Wellek and Warren also believe “literature must always be interesting; it must always have a structure and an aesthetic purpose, a total coherence and effect. It must, of course, stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very

various: the life can be heightened or burlesqued or antithesized” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 212).

To achieve interesting literature in structural and aesthetic senses, there need to be overall coherence and effectiveness. Burlesque and antithesis, both related to “irony,” can be used to achieve this. “There are two ways of deviating from that mixed mode of epic narration: one, which may be called the romantic-ironic, deliberately magnifies the role of the narrator, delights in violating any possible illusion that this is ‘life’ and not ‘art’, emphasizes the written literary character of the book.... The opposite goal for the novel is the ‘objective’ or ‘dramatic’ method” (Wellek & Warren, 1963: p. 223). Such a “romantic-ironic” style approach is typical in its use of “irony.”

Wellek and Warren’s method for reading and studying novels is applicable to all literary novels and is, therefore, a useful one for exploring “Scar literature” as it enables students to recognize and understand the effectiveness of authors using irony to present their ideas in fictional form.

14.4 Learning and Teaching of Irony in the *Stubborn Porridge*

First, we should teach students the background of ironic novels, perhaps using plays or dramas accessed through the Internet. Teachers and students can work together to discover recent settings of novels and plays that use irony. This will require specific teacher guidance. Then, students are given a couple of specific sites to watch and write about. After that, students can write their discovery about the characteristics of the setting and share them with teachers and classmates on Facebook, blogs, and so on. Finally, teachers and students can take *The Stubborn Porridge* as a model lesson to teach and learn ironic setting, and students can surely understand the application of ironic setting.

Wang Meng used an ironic approach to lay out the setting of *The Stubborn Porridge*, the novel. The thread of *The Stubborn Porridge* is a family’s “meal reformation,” i.e., the setting. Four generations of the family undertook the “meal reformation,” a series of seemingly absurd conflicts and contradictions. Although denied by the author, the novel is widely believed to criticize the political structure and culture in an ironical way.²

The description of the setting is full of ironic writing. It begins with “We lived together, peaceably and united as one” (Wang, 1994: p. 8), seemingly suggesting that the family members appreciate this ultra-stable family order. Then, more details

²Wang Meng, “Saying that bowl—I wrote *Stubborn Porridge*”, *I am Wang Meng* (Beijing: Unity Press, 1996), p. 203. Wang Meng denied that he criticized the political structure and culture. It is believed that it is because he had been sent to the “correction camp” for about 20 years, and the political condition at that time was still unstable. So he just could do his criticizing indirectly.

are revealed: “on all issues big or small, such as whether this summer is hotter than usual, whether to drink Dragon’s Well tea at eight yuan an ounce or green tea at forty fen an ounce, or which brand of soap to use,” until we learn the truth: “grandfather had the last word” (Wang, 1994: p. 8). In this way, the ironic theme is clearly set. When the story links this happy family union with “we even shared the same hairstyle, distinguishing between male and female” (Wang, 1994: p. 8), then the ironic effect is reinforced as. It reminds us that “nationwide blue ants” during the Red Era all had the same hairstyle.

So from the beginning of the story, the author uses irony within the novel’s setting. The meals and reformation linked closely together, as the plot unfolds. The dispute triggered by the reformation will develop and continue as the habit of long historical paternalism and will result in the reformation’s failure again and again. These traditions and customs are “like ‘porridge’, ‘stubborn’, not easy to change. It is just like Sisyphus pushing a stone down a vertex, rolling down like this again and again. Then *The Stubborn Porridge* has the surface meaning and deep significance” (Tong, 2004: p. 125).

We have seen that the family’s “meal reformation” is the setting of this story, and it is just like the reforms that China has had. From the late Qing Dynasty (1840, Opium War—1911, 1911 Revolution) (Zhuo, 2000) to the beginning of China’s reform and opening up in 1978, China has undertaken a series of reforms in science and technology, the political system, and political and cultural thought. Examples include the science and technology reform of the Westernization Movement (1861–1894, 洋务运动), the political system reform of the Hundred Days’ Reform (June 11, 1898–September 21, 1898, 戊戌变法), the 1911 Revolution (1911, 辛亥革命), and the political and cultural thought reform of May Fourth Movement (May 4, 1919, 五四运动). Arguably, these reforms have not succeeded, and China was still very weak and poor. This raises important questions: Was the order of the reforms not right? Or were those reform thoughts from the West insufficiently adapted to the Chinese traditional political culture? Or was the long historical and huge Chinese empire too stubborn? *The Stubborn Porridge* prompts us to think about these issues. Through the above questions, students can not only understand the ironic setting in deep, but also build up their ability in creativity and critical thinking. They can share their thinking to the class by group presentation, and let all classmates learn together.

Second, by the help of Internet, we can also get lots of information about the shaping of characters. For instance, in “Macbeth” by William Shakespeare, Macbeth appears to be loyal to Duncan, but he is planning Duncan’s murder. Duncan does not know Macbeth’s plans, but the audience knows what is going to happen. Teachers and students can integrate them into our curriculum through chat group in Internet. After having the basic understanding of character shaping, we can study *The Stubborn Porridge* which used a great deal of irony in shaping the characters.

As a story, *The Stubborn Porridge* focuses on the stereotype, rather than the pursuit of accurate personalities (He, 2003: p. 467). Various techniques are used to achieve this: Natural fiction and vivid dialogue highlight the characters’ personality;

absurd comic language contrasts each character. Irony is one the key techniques used to shape the characters. Bringing together four generations who come and go and moving from debate to debate, the result was a loyal support of the existing system. In this process, the characters come alive.

In this story, the grandfather cannot said to be too intransigent, as he advocated reform. But he did not change the existing system. The so-called consultation, separation of powers, and democracy are only empty talk as shown by Elder Sister Xu who prayed that this kind of life “would go unchanged from day to day, year to year, generation to generation without end” (Wang, 1994: p. 10). Conversations between family members are full of irony. Mom and Dad’s generation were accustomed to be submissive, just ready to eat meals; brave son who held no regard for reality was doomed to complete failure; returning from overseas, the naive brother-in-law was full of theory, yet his doctrines were dry castles in the air which collapse at the first encounter of any difficulty. The confluence of these characters makes the “porridge” so “stubborn.”

As mentioned above, since the late Qing Dynasty, China has ushered reforms again and again and also revolutions again and again. For 150 years, many new ideas, new thoughts, and new cultures poured into this ancient land: constitutional monarchy, republican system, liberalism, capitalism, Marxism, and so on. However, aside from their enthusiasm, did China’s elites undertake careful deliberation of these ideas? Is China suitable for reform or revolution? Is gradual reform or drastic action more suitable? Like the characters in *The Stubborn Porridge*, different Chinese people had different opinions. Yet, in reality, the road of reforms is immeasurably much tougher than porridge reformation depicted in this novel.

Third, through the Internet, it is very easy for students to find out many examples that use irony in organizing the plot. Such as in Henry’s “Witches’ Loaves,” Miss Meacham had a baker’s shop from which a customer had been buying stale loaves. She thought him to be a poverty-stricken struggling artist and wanted to help him out. One day when he came for his stale loaf, she secretly cut the crust and put in some butter. Students can share their finding in class and discuss with classmates and teachers. Then, teachers can use *The Stubborn Porridge* as an exemplar to help students learn the important element of irony.

Wang Meng uses irony to organize the plot. The novel uses the meal reformation of a four-generation family as the plot, supplemented by a series of reforms which fail. Each reform has auxiliary material which brings subtle irony into the daily lives of ordinary people. The auxiliary material helps promote the development of the overall plot.

The family structure was first introduced: “our whole family, headed by Grandfather and Grandmother, were followers of the maxim that Happiness lies in Contentedness, and were faithful upholders of the existing system of things” (Wang, 1994: p. 10). Given this family order, and because the “new style fashion continues to surge,” Grandfather believed he and his family were reformed, but each “reform” appearing one after another fails one by one through the comments and actions of the members of the family. Each action and comment is shown to be

ironic as each decision made to reform results in the opposite of its supposed intention, i.e., the status quo continues. Reform fails.

The son proposed that for a change, they should have Western food, but Western food proved to be too expensive; many people had indigestion. The family separated into four groups to prepare food, but twelve people had only one stove. As everyone prepared separately on the stove, the gas tank ran empty quickly. Thus, three generations in the family—grandfather, father, and son—concluded that reforms cannot be separated from the material conditions. In this episode, the “wise people” have been mocked by reality, while the person considered to be a “fool,” Elder Sister Xu, was proved to be “the most correct.” The several “reform pioneers,” no matter whether in their joint venture business work, or traveling to a foreign country, finally agreed with Elder Sister Xu that “porridge and pickles” are most important.

At the end of the novel, the author writes “I taped his (The U.K. Ph.D.’s) rhapsody of thin porridge in an impeccable Oxford accent, and played the cassette to my son” (Wang, 1994: p. 38), as the last action in the plot. After all, “Dr. Britain” was the representative of “the best and the truth.” When compared with the true model that Mao Zedong gave to the Chinese people, this plot of the best true model becomes an extreme ironic one. Mao Zedong used Russia as a model for China, and he said, “They (Chinese people) found Marxism-Leninism, the universally applicable truth, and the face of China began to change. ...The salvos of the October Revolution brought us Marxism-Leninism... Follow the path of the Russians—that was their conclusion” (Mao, 1949). This absurd and comical transformation of truth, although beyond the idea of a general sense of right and wrong, reflected the author’s profound experience of political reforms. Wang Meng’s style shows the reader his sophisticated plot through irony. It is the irony that gives his novel its unique charm both ideologically and artistically.

Chinese people have had different kinds of truth during the last 150 years, and these truths and models have been changed many times. Is the truth the real truth? We believe “Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” (Editorial of *Guangming Daily*, May 11, 1978).

Fourth, language and dialogue are the other important elements in irony skill. If we take some ironic language and dialogue from TV series, dramas, or movies by Internet, for example, the Everyday Verbal Irony, such as “Soft like a brick,” “Hard as putty,” “Clear like dirt,” and “As pleasant as surgery”, then students watch them and try to answer specific questions in chat group, and it would be much easier for students to learn ironic language and dialogue. Finally, teachers can teach ironic language and dialogue through *The Stubborn Porridge*.

Wang Meng used irony to control the language and dialogue. The level of language and dialogue control in *The Stubborn Porridge* is outstanding, and there are a lot of “the obvious warping of a statement by the context we characterize as ‘ironical’” (Brooks, 1991: p. 153).

One good example is son’s hilarious speech at a family meeting: “How shockingly primitive! Porridge and pickles-are perfect symbols of the Sick Man of Asia. This is an insidious form of genocide! A disgrace to our ancestors! This is the

root of the decline of Chinese civilization! ... Would the Japanese Army have dared to incite the September 18 Incident in 1931? Would not their regiments have collapsed in fright if they had seen our lips smeared with butter and our chins dripping with cream” (Wang, 1994: pp. 16–17)?

Finally, his son came to this conclusion: “porridge with pickles is the root of our national disasters, the fundamental reason for the ultrastability of our unchanging feudal system! Down with porridge and pickles! So long as porridge and pickles are not wiped out, there is no hope for China” (Wang, 1994: p. 17)!

So, father, touched, thought: “I deeply felt that heaven and earth should give way to my Son. It could be truly said of him that, nourished on porridge and pickles, he harbored visions of butter and ham. It is no exaggeration to say that he had poured forth the sweeping winds of modernization, enveloping everything within the four dimensions. Truly may it be said, the young are to be feared, the world is theirs. ... I feared the way he had seized on all current abuses with his wit and annihilated everything with a sentence. I feared that this kind of exaggerated rhetoric was just so much air and would end in nothing” (Wang, 1994: pp. 17–18).

Son’s and father’s words use a series of parallel sentences, yet their meanings are totally the opposite. The former was concerned about the country and people. He was impassioned, yet full of clichés. The latter’s speech was almost a joke, but the comments were sharp. The author mixed the use of Tang poems, Chairman Mao quotations, and stories from the *Romance of the Three States* together. The absurdity is thought-provoking and strengthens the ironic effect. He (2003) suggested “The novel is like the monologue comic talk. The author express comical effects again and again by strings popular sentences together, causing readers to laugh uncontrollably” (He, 2003: p. 467).

The language and dialogue are full of irony, and the arguments and debates are the scenes of Chinese history. Since the Chinese modern times, people had already talked about theory, talked about ideals, and talked about the truth too much. We can see the fighting among different kinds of doctrine, a variety of ideological debates, and so on almost every day. We can also see many Marxists who actually ruined Marxism. Leninism and Marxism are different, and Stalinism and Leninism are not exactly the same thing, and because all of the countries’ environment, traditions, and culture are not the same, there is no “one-size-fits-all truth” in the world so. As this study mentioned above, “Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” (Editorial of *Guangming Daily*, 11 May, 1978). Also, the old saying “empty talk, hard work make the country prosperous,” is an example of traditional Chinese practical rationalism. This road may be the right one that we can go.

14.5 Conclusion

According to the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoLT), students and teachers can stay in touch with the latest research developments in literature skills, such as the use of irony through the Internet as a vital means of teaching and

learning. Then, we can integrate them into the curriculum by lectures and exercises. Teachers can conduct research on students' feedback and use them to guide the curriculum review and improvement. Shulman (1999) argues that scholarship is evident when one's research on learning and teaching is:

1. made public, e.g., through staff seminars;
2. subject to critical review and evaluation by members of one's community, e.g., in peer-reviewed journals; and
3. used developed by and integrated into the activities of one's academic community, e.g., colleagues make changes to their curriculum design or assessment and feedback practices as a result of hearing about your research on learning and teaching.

As an excellent example of the use of irony by gifted authors, *The Stubborn Porridge* can be used by teachers to help enhance students' appreciation of the literature. Computer technology such as online education system can be adopted to encourage and enable students to develop their understanding and learning of irony and its use in the literature through online discussions. In spite of the above learning and teaching activities, teachers can also upload a list of ironic novels and perhaps a second list of those that use some irony to the online education system. Given the preference of many young people for the computer's and mobile's device screen rather than paper, it would be useful if some novels on the list could be accessible online. This would be a way of guiding students to appropriate novels for study. Students can post their writing related to irony on the forum, share with their classmates and friends, and get feedback immediately. Further, an online resource site should be established to present excerpts of novels and questions to guide the readers. This site should also enable online discussions among students and between students and teachers.

This paper suggests that an in-depth grasp of irony in an artistic text can improve students' reading ability and literary appreciation. A detailed analysis on *The Stubborn Porridge* is used to demonstrate how this can be achieved. When reading, we hope to understand not only the surface of the text, but also deeper meaning. From the origin and development point of view, the concept of irony rhetoric has both micro- and macroperspectives—the ironic language and the ironic narrative structure. Analysis from these two layers enhances the understanding of the text from outside to inside and deepens the understanding of the literary piece.

In *The Stubborn Porridge*, Wang Meng has raised important questions about social reality through irony and fun. He used “romantic mocking style,” one form of irony that encourages the readers to think about the funny, ridiculous, absurd, and counterproductive behavior so that we can question our political, social, and cultural reflections.

The power of irony is revealed right from the title. The title uses “stubborn” to describe “porridge,” the former being “hard” and the latter being “soft.” Thus, the title itself exemplifies the rhetoric use of ironic contrast. The novel's attraction does

not depend on flowery language, but also depend on the way ordinary language and dialogue can help us to see more clearly.

Wang Meng has demonstrated throughout the novel his skills in using irony in the setting, performance, characterization, plot, and language control. He used artistic irony through the exquisite, witty language. He has given us a story that combines laughter with tears and thought with tears. In doing so, he has achieved an excellent artistic effect, which can be enjoyed and appreciated by his readers.

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