



Mode of Existence and Speech Act: Restructuring the Framework of the Essence of the Chinese Discipline

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Abstract: In China, mother tongue education, specifically Chinese education, has long been a focal point for both the educational community and society at large. Traditional theories of Chinese education have predominantly focused on pedagogical methods and techniques, while the understanding and research regarding the essence of the discipline of "Chinese" require further refinement. This paper posits that the essence of Chinese is a mode of existence, enabling students to recognize the various possibilities of language itself, thereby revealing the diverse possibilities of social life. Furthermore, Chinese is a form of speech act — the act through which linguistic communication is realized. Therefore, the essential characteristics of Chinese are to demonstrate the various possibilities of linguistic communication knowledge and linguistic communication competence.

Keywords: Chinese; framework restructuring; speech act; mode of existence

1. Introduction

In China, mother tongue education — referred to as Chinese education — has consistently been a subject of intense debate within the educational sector and society as a whole. For years, disputes surrounding questions such as "What is Chinese?", "How should Chinese be taught?", and "How should Chinese be learned?" have been incessant, making Chinese education a core issue in educational discourse. Is Chinese education merely the instructional act of a specific discipline? Or is it simply the teaching of linguistic knowledge? The cognitive understanding of the behavioral essence of Chinese education stems from the understanding of the essence of "Chinese" itself. However, the academic community has yet to reach a consensus on the definition and perception of "Chinese," and existing research outcomes require further refinement. Based on this, this paper attempts to explore the essential meaning of "Chinese" and restructure its conceptual framework, aiming to provide a better understanding of the behavioral essence of Chinese education.

2. Current Status and Problems in Understanding "Chinese"

2.1 Current Status of Understanding "Chinese"

The use of "Chinese" as the name of a discipline is a relatively recent development. It was not until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when society embarked on a new path of development and reconstruction, that the reform of Chinese education became urgent. Mr. Ye Shengtao, then Director of the Textbook Compilation and Review Committee of the North China People's Government, was the first to propose this new concept.

However, to date, opinions on the meaning of "Chinese" in education remain inconsistent. These can be broadly summarized into four interpretations: (a) Language and Writing; (b) Language and Literature; (c) Language and Articles; and (d) Language and Culture (Li, 2002). While descriptions vary among scholars, the viewpoints generally fall within these categories.

2.1.1 Oral Language and Written Language

In August 1948, the Textbook Compilation and Review Committee of the Ministry of Education of the North China People's Government began compiling new Chinese textbooks for primary and secondary schools. Ye Shengtao, responsible for drafting the Draft Standards for the Secondary School Chinese Curriculum, initiated the use of the name "Chinese". Ye stated explicitly that the term came into use in the latter half of 1949: "Yu refers to oral language, and Wen refers to written language. Combining oral and written language is called Yuwen" (Ye, 1980, p. 138).

Wang (2006) argued that since "Chinese" refers to oral and written language, it should include their carriers—language and script—as well as their application and the cultural content they contain. Therefore, the definition of "Chinese" as comprising oral and written language encompasses interpretations (a) through (c) mentioned above and aligns closely with

(d).

2.1.2 Language and Literature

In March 1951, at the first National Secondary Education Conference held after the founding of New China, then Minister of Education Hu Qiaomu proposed dividing Chinese into two separate courses: Chinese Language and Literature. Thus, it became understood as Language and Literature.

2.1.3 Language and Writing vs. Language and Literature

Lu Shuxiang, in Lu Shuxiang's Collected Essays on Chinese: Issues in Primary and Secondary Chinese Teaching, proposed two understandings of "Chinese": first, language and characters, meaning oral and written language; second, language and literature.

The 1965 trial edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary defined "Chinese" as: "1. Language and writing: e.g., 'Chinese proficiency' (referring to reading and writing abilities). 2. <Abbr.> Language and literature". The 1978 first edition and 1983 second edition retained the first definition, while the second was defined as "Abbreviation for language and literature". Since the third edition in 1996, the first definition has remained the same, while the second definition was directly explained as "Language and Literature: e.g., 'Secondary School Chinese Textbook'".

2.1.4 Language and Writing, Their Application, and Cultural Content

Wang (2006) posited that the function of Chinese education is closely related to its content. Synthesizing the "Instrumentalism" theory and the "Moral Vehicle" theory, the content of Chinese education should include three aspects: A. Language and Writing; B. The Application of Language and Writing; C. The Cultural Content carried by Language and Writing and their application (including literature, etc).

2.2 Problems in Understanding "Chinese"

The concept of "Chinese" has sparked prolonged debate since its inception. How one understands the term dictates how Chinese education is conducted, making it a matter of significant impact. Previous interpretations — Language and Writing, Language and Literature, Language and Articles, Language and Culture — are essentially disputes over curriculum content and lack fundamental distinction. This represents the primary issue with previous understandings: a failure to grasp the essence of "Chinese," leading to current deviations in the philosophy of Chinese and Chinese education.

3. Distinctive Manifestations of the Chinese Discipline

According to modern curriculum theory, the scientific construction of a course must consider three necessary conditions: "the necessary logical order of knowledge content; the psychological development level of students; and the consistency of the syllabus throughout the curriculum"(Mialaret, Zheng & Zhang, Trans. 1989, p. 97). Regarding the structural layout of subject content, American psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner noted that the difficulty of structuring varies by discipline. Mathematics and physics can be structured quite thoroughly, whereas it is difficult to do so for history and literature (Zhong, 1989, p. 134). In reality, structuring the Chinese discipline is even more difficult than history, as history at least possesses a developmental thread — chronological order. The non-linearity of Chinese is a significant characteristic of the discipline. Some may argue that other humanities and arts disciplines also possess non-scientific characteristics. We do not deny this. However, since Chinese itself bears responsibilities that other humanities and arts disciplines cannot undertake, and is more closely related to people's daily lives, this characteristic appears particularly evident in the discipline of Chinese. While Chinese does have scientific aspects — mainly in the procedural nature of teaching (progressing from words to simple sentences, then to short articles, increasing in difficulty with students' age) — the discipline itself is characterized by a lack of strict scientific linearity. Based on the scientific construction principles of modern curriculum theory, this is discussed in the following aspects:

3.1 Uncertainty in Content Selection and Logical Construction

Soviet didactics expert Skatkin, discussing the sources of discipline composition, pointed out that subjects like physics, chemistry, biology, history, and geography derive from sciences or scientific clusters. In contrast, subjects like language and literature derive from activities. These subjects do not narrate the principles of a corresponding science but point out the methods and rules of the activity; the scientific content and logic corresponding to these subjects serve merely as pointers for selecting activity methods and forming certain rules (Zhong, 1989, p. 435).

Subjects derived from sciences must establish strict and clear knowledge points and teaching procedures because they are supported by a rigorous knowledge system and logic. For example, in mathematics, one must learn that "the sum of three interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees" before learning that "the sum of two acute angles in a right-angled triangle is 90 degrees". Therefore, the selection and ordering of content in science disciplines (STEM) cannot be arbitrary; they must

follow the intrinsic laws of the subject knowledge and the laws of student learning. Their knowledge is linear and tightly interlocked (see Figure 1).

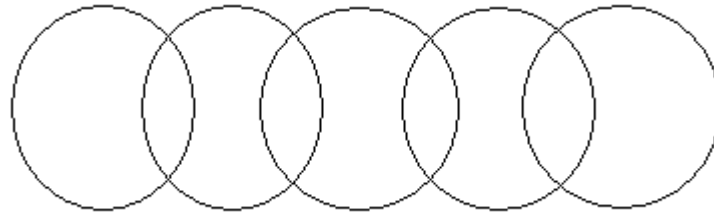


Figure 1. Schematic Diagram of Logical Order Construction in Science Disciplines

The Chinese discipline is different. Although Chinese involves the acquisition of a language symbol system, the primary purpose of the course is not solely this, but also the acquisition of a set of behavioral paradigms. Therefore, "mother tongue education must undertake the task of speech act education while undertaking the education of the language symbol system" (Hu, 2003). In this sense, the lack of speech act acquisition is perhaps the greatest defect of mother tongue education in China, where we often fall into the awkward dilemma of "teaching the mother tongue like a foreign language". "Chinese activities themselves do not possess significant scientific or systematic nature"(Wei & Xing, 2003) because they are not supported by a rigorous system of knowledge logic inherent to the discipline.

For instance, regarding the four basic literary genres — poetry, prose, fiction, and drama — while they all hold significant weight in Chinese teaching, there is no strict rule on which must be taught first. Even within genres, there is no fixed order for which poem or novel to read first, nor is there a mandate on whether a specific text belongs in a secondary school or university textbook. Compared to science disciplines, Chinese appears much more arbitrary. Consequently, the selection of knowledge content and the construction of logical order in Chinese are uncertain; its knowledge points are relatively independent, circular, and divergent (see Figure 2).

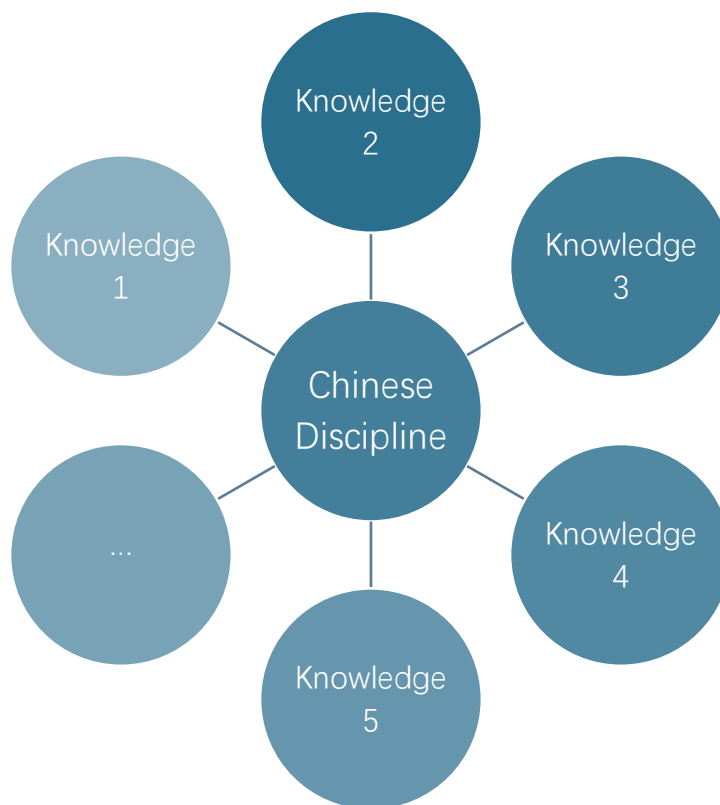


Figure 2. Schematic Diagram of Content Order Construction in the Chinese Discipline

Additionally, Chinese textbooks can be compiled in various ways: integrated or separated. Integrated compilations (common in China) can be ordered by genre, author chronology, or text length. Separated compilations can be organized by ability (listening, speaking, reading, writing), language type (Classical vs. Modern Chinese), or genre. Unit combinations are also flexible. Thus, there is no uniqueness in the system construction or content selection of the Chinese discipline. However, this does not mean the discipline is chaotic. The "scientific nature" of Chinese textbooks is reflected in the compiler's specific educational philosophy and logic, ensuring the content fits the compilation goals and adapts to students' cognitive levels.

3.2 Non-linearity in Required Thinking Levels

"Developmental psychology reveals the general law of adolescents developing from concrete image thinking to abstract logical thinking, and the system construction of the Chinese discipline naturally must conform to this law" (Wei & Xing, 2003). However, it is undeniable that Chinese covers almost all forms of human thinking: image thinking, abstract thinking, intuitive thinking, analytical thinking, inspirational thinking, creative thinking, and divergent thinking. Learning Chinese requires frequent use of non-linear thinking modes such as imagination, association, intuition, and insight. In contrast, science disciplines fundamentally rely on logical thinking and deductive reasoning.

Regrettably, because Chinese education in China currently bears the additional function of talent selection via examination scores, it has become utilitarian. Teaching often forces the conversion of non-linear thinking modes — which Chinese should foster — into linear logical thinking modes required by science disciplines (e.g., memorizing standard answers, guessing question intent). This abandons the appreciation, reflection, and introspection inherent to Chinese, violating the original intention of the discipline. In this sense, the "Scientization of Chinese Education" is a major misconception in China's current educational landscape.

3.3 Irreplaceability of the Chinese Discipline

Chinese is the discipline with the strongest foundation and the widest application. First, it serves as the prerequisite for learning all other subjects by facilitating the acquisition of the language symbol system and improving comprehension abilities. Second, its wide application is irreplaceable. One can survive socially without specific knowledge of physics or advanced mathematics, but life and work capabilities rely heavily on skills acquired from Chinese. Therefore, Chinese is the foundation and mode of an individual's existence in society, whereas other disciplines are prerequisites for professionalization. In this sense, the foundational nature of the Chinese discipline is irreplaceable by any other subject.

4. The Function and Mission of the Chinese Discipline in Constructing Existential Value

One of the fundamental concepts of the "Curriculum Standards for Chinese" is to persist in fostering virtue through education and to exert the educational function of the Chinese course (Xu, 2023, p. 7). It aims to "help students possess a correct attitude towards life, better understand themselves, and enhance their sense of historical mission and responsibility to strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"(Xu, 2023, p. 7). This describes the social function of Chinese. In reality, the Chinese discipline bears an even more significant mission in the construction of individual existence and social existence.

4.1 The Primary Channel for Acquiring Knowledge of Language Symbol Systems

German philosopher Ernst Cassirer proposed that "man is a symbolic animal" (animal symbolicum)(Cassirer, 1944/1985, p. 35). This view suggests that "it is precisely because human beings utilize symbols that all cultural forms, such as language, myth, and art, can be produced and created"(Hua & Jing, 2024). Language symbols make individual existence possible; people use them to construct their thoughts, conduct social activities, and maintain interpersonal relationships. The acquisition of knowledge regarding language symbol systems is crucial for work and life, serving as a guarantee for their smooth conduct. Both work and life are inseparable from communication with others, and the language symbol system is the medium for interpersonal communication. Simultaneously, language symbols are the channel through which people enrich their inner worlds and engage in self-reflection.

Language symbols are a combination of sound and meaning, enabling them to refer to real-world phenomena. They include oral language and written language appearing in the form of written symbols. To acquire knowledge of language symbol systems, one must learn the sounds and meanings of symbols and the modes of expression for both oral and written language. Although relevant knowledge can be learned in daily life, the Chinese discipline remains the primary channel for acquiring systematic knowledge of language symbol systems. Only with a solid foundation in these symbols can individuals apply them flexibly and comprehensively in their work and lives.

4.2 A Necessary Pathway for Cultivating Expression and Communication Abilities

Chinese plays a vital role in cultivating oral and written expression abilities. It enables people to correctly understand others' thoughts and feelings while accurately expressing their own. It also allows for the enrichment and reflection of one's inner world, thereby improving the quality of life. Whether in work or life, interaction with others is constant; good expression and communication skills are undoubtedly essential conditions for effective communication. Conversely, a poor vocabulary or lack of expression skills can easily lead to misunderstandings, causing confusion in interpersonal communication and unnecessary trouble, potentially even affecting one's psychological health. Therefore, cultivating expression and communication abilities is an urgent task for Chinese education and a necessary pathway for achieving these skills.

4.3 An Important Pathway for Improving Thinking Abilities

If the acquisition of language symbol knowledge is the prerequisite for normal work and life, then the improvement of thinking abilities ensures they are conducted more effectively. How can thinking abilities be improved? As mentioned earlier, the Chinese discipline covers almost all forms of human thinking — image, abstract, intuitive, analytical, inspirational, creative, and divergent thinking. Learning Chinese requires the extensive use of non-linear thinking modes such as imagination, association, intuition, and insight. Everything learned has the potential to be internalized into one's character and thinking. Thus, Chinese is an important pathway for enhancing thinking abilities.

4.4 An Important Method for Improving the Quality of Spiritual Life

With social development, frequent international exchanges, and economic growth, material survival is no longer the primary concern for most people. However, material abundance does not necessarily bring the expected sense of satisfaction. On the contrary, many primary and secondary students today exhibit psychological abnormalities such as fragility, isolation, selfishness, narrow-mindedness, and apathy. The root cause lies in the excessive pursuit of material quality of life at the expense of spiritual quality of life. Chinese not only contributes to the growth of knowledge but also to the improvement of spiritual life. It enhances a person's spiritual realm through subtle influence, providing a sense of fulfillment.

4.5 A Powerful Guarantee for Improving Civic Quality

The prosperity of a country depends on the quality of its citizens. "Civic quality refers to the overall level of physique, intelligence, and morality possessed by the people of a country in the process of transforming nature and society"(Liu & Li, 2013). It is "the character, knowledge, skills, and emotions compatible with a country's legal and political systems"(Li & Mo, 2016). It relates to a country's economic and social development, demonstrates comprehensive national power, and is a key factor in international competition. The Chinese discipline vigorously promotes traditional culture; its advocacy of virtues such as gentleness, kindness, respect, thrift, humility, propriety, righteousness, integrity, and honor serves not only as an official channel for improving civic quality but also as a powerful guarantee for citizens to enhance their own self-cultivation.

4.6 An Effective Means of Preserving Excellent Cultural Traditions

It is well known that language and writing are important carriers of culture and means of manifesting national characteristics. The compilation of vast ancient literature has preserved China's excellent cultural traditions. Beautiful poetry allows us to experience the thoughts and emotions of the ancients; majestic architectural records let us share their wisdom and insight; profound traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) texts reveal their reverence for life and wisdom. Books are the main pathway for preserving our excellent cultural traditions, and Chinese is the effective means to achieve this. "The integration of extensive classic literature into unified Chinese textbooks absorbs the excellent achievements of human civilization and fully highlights the important status of traditional culture"(Liao & Tan, 2022).

At the same time, by preserving excellent cultural traditions, Chinese fosters a sense of identification with one's own culture. As President Xi explicitly stated at the Symposium on Literature and Art in October 2014: "Enhancing cultural self-awareness and cultural confidence is an inherent requirement for strengthening confidence in the path, theory, and system"(Xi, 2024). Without language and writing, a nation would lose its soul and the foundation for its national spirit and corresponding thinking.

4.7 An Effective Way to Ensure Social Harmony

A harmonious society values individual rights while respecting and understanding the rights of others; it values universal social rules and possesses perfect laws, regulations, and public policies. These rules and policies are expressed and disseminated through language and text; thus, Chinese helps in understanding social rules. Furthermore, a harmonious

society requires a sound personal security system (e.g., insurance), and understanding complex clauses in contracts relies on Chinese proficiency. Therefore, Chinese is an effective way to ensure social harmony.

In summary, Chinese exists in the life of every individual, runs through the entire history of human development, and functions within social operations. Its function and mission far exceed the "unification of instrumentality and humanism" proposed by traditional Chinese education theories.

5. Chinese is a Mode of Human Existence

Exploring the essence of the meaning of "Chinese" and restructuring its framework aims to advance research on related issues.

5.1 Chinese is a Speech Act

Hu (2007) proposed that a speech act is "an event in which a speaking subject, out of certain intentions within a specific context, constructs and emits a segment of discourse; another speaking subject accepts and believes they understand this discourse, thereby making a response related to the speaker's intent". Hu (2009) further pointed out that language is a symbol system, a social institution, and above all, a speech act. Accordingly, we believe that the mother tongue, i.e., Chinese, is a speech act. The distinguishing feature of being human lies in interpersonal communication. Therefore, Chinese is a speech act through which linguistic communication is realized.

It should be noted that linguistic communication here includes communication with others and communication with the self. As modern individuals, we need both interpersonal interaction and self-reflection. As Whorf (1941/1956) stated, every language is a pattern system different from others, with forms and categories defined by its culture; people use language not only to communicate but also to analyze the external world, organizing their thoughts and building their consciousness. How is linguistic communication realized? We believe the prerequisite is possessing linguistic communication knowledge and linguistic communication competence. Therefore, Chinese is a speech act that stores linguistic communication knowledge and cultivates linguistic communication competence to realize linguistic communication.

5.2 The Essence of Chinese

The greatest difference between humans and other animals is that humans possess a complex, replicable language system that is internalized and promotes mutual communication. From this, human modes of thinking, values, and orientations are derived, forming a cultural community and focusing on the human lifestyle, survival state, and development style — namely, the mode of existence. For humanity as a whole, this language system is abstract; but for the individual, it is concrete and real, spanning the entirety of life. This system is the mother tongue.

The mother tongue is internalized in everyone, and its inherent thinking modes and values signify the human mode of existence. Acquisition and improvement of the mother tongue occur through two pathways: daily life and the mother tongue discipline. While daily life provides initial contact, the mother tongue discipline offers the possibility for better application and for becoming a more multidimensional person. In China, this discipline is Chinese. Therefore, we posit that Chinese is a mode of human existence; this is its essence.

This aligns with the linguistic views of philosophical hermeneutics represented by Heidegger and Gadamer. They argued that language does not exist merely as a tool but is the way the world (including ourselves) manifests itself. Heidegger's famous assertion, "Language is the house of Being" (*Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins*), succinctly summarizes this. Gadamer also believed that language is not just equipment possessed by humans; rather, humans possess the world based on and manifested in language.

5.2.1 Chinese is the Prerequisite and Guarantee for Linguistic Communication

Communication relies on language, and mutual understanding is its cornerstone. Without understanding, communication ceases. Chinese education cultivates comprehension abilities across three dimensions: conversation, listening, and text interpretation.

Understanding in Conversation: Language is the external manifestation of dialogue, through which interlocutors perceive intentions and reach consensus. This process often requires speakers to bridge gaps in perspective, seeking a "common language." The Chinese proverb, "When drinking with a bosom friend, a thousand cups are too few; when words do not agree, half a sentence is too much," metaphorically illustrates how shared cognitive context and mutual understanding are prerequisites for successful interaction. Misalignment in understanding leads to communicative failure. Thus, comprehension ability serves as a critical parameter for sustaining dialogue.

Understanding in Listening: Listening is not a passive reception but an active "dialogic understanding." Listeners inevitably interpret speech through the lens of their own life experiences and horizons. As Gadamer(2002) noted, the essence

of listening is "to understand all passages of speech in a new unified way." In this sense, listening is a silent response and a form of creative interpretation.

Understanding in Text Interpretation: Whether dealing with historical classics, contemporary news, or futuristic narratives, interpretation is omnipresent. The text reveals meaning to the interpreter while the interpreter endows the text with contemporary significance based on their current horizon. This fusion of horizons is a creative act where the reader and text participate jointly in meaning-making.

5.2.2 Chinese Constructs Human Thinking

Psychologists define thinking as an internal cognitive process involving the reorganization of information stored in long-term memory (Zhou, 2011). Since thinking relies on the generalization of memory and experience, it is inextricably linked to language.

First, thinking takes shape through the accumulation of language symbols. Second, language serves as the medium between internal thought and the external world. Third, thinking patterns are solidified through language. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that different languages foster different modes of thinking. For instance, Eastern and Western cognitive styles are deeply rooted in their respective linguistic systems. In this sense, the mother tongue — Chinese — constructs the specific thinking patterns of its speakers.

5.2.3 Chinese Constructs Social Reality

The concept of the "social construction of reality through language" is well-established in Western philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1953; Searle, 1995). Wittgenstein defined meaning through use, while Searle argued that speech acts (e.g., declarations) construct institutional reality.

In the Chinese context, Tang (2009) explicitly proposed the "Theory of Language Construction," arguing that language constructs social existence in four key aspects:

- **Constructing Power Systems:** Language legitimizes authority. By defining what is "truth," "madness," or "normative," language maintains rule and distributes discourse power.
- **Reinforcing Gender Differences:** Language often encodes androcentric values. For example, Grice's Cooperative Principle is sometimes criticized for favoring male discourse styles (Grice, 1975). In Chinese, certain diminutive forms of address used by women (e.g., defining oneself relative to a husband or child) can reinforce subordinate gender roles.
- **Building Interpersonal Relationships:** Forms of address in Chinese (e.g., using familial terms for non-relatives) actively construct and modify social distance and intimacy.
- **Creating Institutional Existence:** Social institutions, laws, and rules are generated, recognized, and maintained solely through language.

5.2.4 Chinese Establishes Social History

History encompasses the past, present, and future. Language does not merely describe past facts; it constitutes the fabric of social reality. Political, legal, and economic systems — manifested through constitutions, contracts, official documents, and identification papers — rely entirely on language for their validity and operation. Without the linguistic ordering of these institutions, society would descend into chaos. Thus, Chinese establishes the continuity and structure of social history.

5.2.5 Chinese is the Medium between Self and the World

Gadamer (1960/2004) stated, "He who has language 'has' the world." Language is not just an object in the world but the mode through which the world is presented to human consciousness. It is the medium for understanding both the self and the external environment. Humans exist in the world linguistically; our experiential world is structured by language. Therefore, as the mother tongue, Chinese serves as the fundamental medium bridging the self and the world.

In summary, we believe that Chinese is a mode of human existence, which is the essence of the Chinese discipline.

6. Framework Conception for Restructuring the Meaning of "Chinese"

"It can be said that the basic principle of modern education is to cultivate independent thinkers in social life, creators of knowledge, lifelong learners, and participants in world affairs" (Zhang & Hu, 2012). Since the essence of Chinese is a mode of human existence, the behavioral essence of Chinese education is existential education. Its fundamental purpose is to shape students' sound personalities, foster critical thinking, and discover all possibilities for student development.

Simultaneously, Chinese is a speech act — a speech act through which linguistic communication is realized. The prerequisite for this is possessing linguistic communication knowledge and competence.

Based on this, we propose the following framework for restructuring the meaning of "Chinese" (see Figure 3).

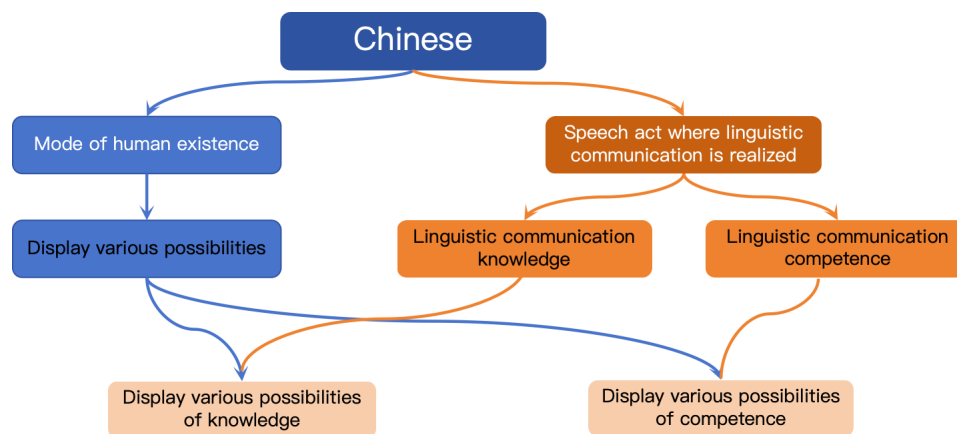


Figure 3. Framework Conception for Restructuring the Meaning of "Chinese"

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