

Research article

Empowering for the “Belt and Road”: Teaching Applied Chinese as a Foreign Language at Guangdong Nongken University

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Abstract: This article explores the transformative initiatives undertaken by Guangdong Nongken (GK) Rubber, a prominent player in China’s agricultural foreign cooperation, within the framework of the “Belt and Road” initiative. The GK Rubber School has engaged in a multifaceted approach to Chinese language education that not only imparts linguistic skills but also fosters a deep understanding of Chinese culture. The reforms discussed encompass curriculum, teaching objectives, and innovative teaching methods, with an emphasis on promoting sustainable learning. The GK Rubber School’s dynamic integration of online and offline teaching, use of AR and VR technologies, and collaborative learning platform for instructors sets a precedent for excellence in the field of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) education. This article highlights these innovative approaches that align with the objectives of the “Belt and Road” initiative, building bridges of understanding and cooperation between China and ASEAN countries.

Keywords: Guangdong Nongken, Belt and Road, applied talents, AR and VR technologies, Chinese as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Guangdong Nongken (Guangdong Nongken Group Co, n.d.), a prominent player in China’s agricultural foreign cooperation, has actively engaged in various countries and regions along the “Belt and Road” initiative. The organization has undertaken substantial investments and implemented 47 overseas projects focused on high-value crops, including natural rubber, sisal, cassava alcohol, among others. These projects have been established in countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Benin, Ghana, and others. The company has made investments and undertaken the construction of 47 overseas manufacturing and operational projects in various countries including Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Benin, and Ghana. Based on insufficient statistical data, it is observed that the natural rubber sector in Guangdong Agricultural Reclamation is anticipated to generate over 40,000 employment opportunities, directly or indirectly, for the nations along the “Belt and Road” initiative. Additionally, this industry is expected to contribute an annual tax revenue of approximately 40 million U.S. dollar.

Simultaneously, GK Rubber has undertaken initiatives in ASEAN countries to establish the “GK Rubber School” with the aim of fostering the advancement of Chinese international education and the training of foreign language teachers. These endeavors have resulted in the creation of strong and vibrant bonds, characterized by unity, diversity, and a sense of warmth. This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the significant innovations, reforms, and proposals implemented by GK Overseas Rubber Schools, in conjunction with the local practices of GK Schools. The objective is to offer valuable insights and references for the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. This endeavor aims to offer valuable perspectives for the field of Chinese language education and teaching, thereby assisting foreign language instructors in effectively conveying the narrative of China.

There are three notable innovations that have emerged in recent years. Each innovation will be named exactly in the following paragraph.

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Guangdong Nongken has built a network of primary educational institutions in countries along the “Belt and Road” through its collaboration with the GK Rubber Overseas Company. This has been achieved through proactive engagement in cultural education, job and internship programs, as well as community development initiatives in the respective host nations. The introduction of the international Chinese language education system has facilitated a deeper comprehension of China among inhabitants of ASEAN countries, fostering a greater affinity for the nation. The “Confucius Institute of Mahasarakham University (GKR Mekong River) Practice Base”, the “Laos Tai Hua Savannakhet Staff Primary School (GKR)”, and the “Cambodia GKR Chunfeng Co. ‘Rubber Forest School’ in Cambodia”, along with other GKR schools located abroad, have garnered significant acclaim from local governments and residents. These institutions have played a crucial role in fostering cultural exchanges between China and ASEAN countries, as well as strengthening the emotional bonds between the people of China and ASEAN countries (Long et al., 2023; Xiu & Li, 2023; Yang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2019).

Institutional innovation has a pivotal role in facilitating the deep integration of industry, academia, and research through the promotion of cooperation between reclamation and land.

Based on our field surveys, questionnaires, and visits, it has been observed that the state of international Chinese language teaching in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam is commonly marked by a scarcity of Chinese language instructors, disparities in the proficiency levels of foreign language teachers, and a gradual decline in the availability of Chinese language courses. However, it is noteworthy that there is a growing demand among local students for the acquisition of Chinese language skills. Consequently, GK Rubber has incorporated educational assets through the implementation of the “Reclamation Cooperation” initiative and established a network of elementary educational institutions. This strategic move aims to foster mutual benefits between the reclamation efforts and local communities, while simultaneously advancing the integration of “Chinese + Vocational Education”, “Chinese + Green Agriculture”, and “Chinese + Chinese Language” programs. The organization has successfully implemented various projects, such as “agriculture”, “Chinese language + sustainable development”, and others. These initiatives have established a comprehensive framework for collaboration through the implementation of “Guangken + Confucius Institute” and “Guangken + Teaching Points”. This framework has effectively achieved the objectives of integrating Chinese language education with vocational education, agriculture, and sustainable development. Additionally, it has fostered deep cooperation, served the community, and created mutually beneficial outcomes.

Driven by the institutional innovation of “Cooperation between Reclamation and Land”, the project-based teaching method can be carried out. In recent years, activities such as “Silk Road Cup” Chinese Language and Culture Competition, China-Thai Teachers’ Skills Competition, China-Thai Chinese Camp, etc. have been organized, which have strongly promoted the organic integration of theoretical learning in class and practical tasks outside class. These activities promote the organic integration of theoretical learning in the classroom and practical tasks outside the classroom and improve the practical ability of Chinese as a foreign language teacher to solve the problems they encounter in real life with correct concepts and methods. Guangken School is good at using task-based teaching as a carrier to enhance Chinese as a foreign language teachers’ knowledge of their own subject matter, to continuously improve their teaching skills, and to strive to become application-oriented talents in line with the needs of the times. The task-based classroom teaching method originates from the teaching concept of student center (Liu & Su, 2018). The most common means of task-based teaching are brainstorming, collective discussion, communication and sharing, and PPT reporting. The Guangken Teaching Practice Base, however, can provide an exchange platform for the majority of young teachers, promote deep-level exchanges and cooperation between teachers of Chinese as a foreign language and local foreign language teachers, and continuously improve the teamwork and continuous learning ability of young teachers, thus promoting the deep integration of industry, academia, and research.

From the perspective of upgrading thinking, GK Rubber also considers that the training of young teachers should not only be good at “going out”, but also think about how to better “come in”. Therefore, GK Rubber regularly conducts Chinese language training courses for young teachers in Guangdong Agriculture, Industry and Commerce Vocational and Technical College, focuses on the improvement of the Chinese language quality of ASEAN local teachers, and gradually does a good job in the field of humanities education exchanges and cooperation, and devotes itself to building a bridge for Chinese language teachers both at home and abroad to learn the Chinese language and culture. At present, “Chinese Calligraphy”,

“Chinese Paper Cutting”, “Reciting Chinese Poetry”, “Making Traditional Chinese Pastries”, etc. are all part of the training program. “Chinese Calligraphy”, “Chinese Paper Cutting”, “Reciting Chinese Poetry”, “Making Traditional Chinese Cakes”, etc. are all permanent courses in the workshop, which are loved by international Chinese teachers. Simultaneously, via the collaboration of Chinese language instructors in delivering courses on traditional Chinese culture within the local community, the engagement within the classroom setting may be enhanced. Consequently, this initiative enables local students to gain a deeper comprehension of Chinese culture, thereby facilitating their ability to effectively convey the narrative of Chinese heritage.

2. Management innovation involves the utilization of advanced management concepts to facilitate the integration of interdisciplinary approaches

To enhance the curriculum construction, improve the effectiveness of teaching and training, and enhance the quality of Chinese language teacher training, GK Rubber employs a flexible approach by leveraging the advanced management advantages of state-owned enterprises. This is achieved by integrating the talent cultivation management model of enterprises into the education and training programs for young teachers. When implementing cross-border Chinese teacher training programs, the utilization of a curriculum management system and a lesson plan management system is employed to enhance operational efficiency and facilitate the comprehension of the learning progress of individual Chinese teachers by organizations and educational institutions. In addition, our organization engages in the development of methods for managing teacher-student relationships, while also offering tailored services aimed at fostering a positive and conducive environment for both educators and learners. At present, the program has rendered its services to a total of 120,000 students across 350 educational institutions. Moreover, it has successfully integrated its program model into the ongoing national high school curriculum reform. This integration has been achieved by using the vocational education strengths of Guangdong Nongken Rubber Company. The findings indicate that the “Enterprise + Government + Vocational Education” framework has the potential to enhance employment prospects for Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers. Specifically, the data reveals a 64% rise in the proportion of teachers who express a desire to continue working in GDNK schools, and a 123% increase in those inclined to establish community based CFL programs in their hometowns.

“Competition + Training” is one of the characteristics of GKRS, which is mainly oriented to the real needs of the job market, and aims to improve the core competitiveness of Chinese language teachers, with the courses of “Chinese + Communication Studies”, “Chinese + Chinese Painting”. The training of skilled personnel is carried out in various forms, such as “Chinese + Communication”, “Chinese + Chinese Painting”, “Chinese + Music”, “Chinese + Dress” and “Chinese + Makeup”. We will also provide skill-based training in various forms, such as “Chinese + Music”, “Chinese + Dress” and “Chinese + Makeup”, so as to gradually realize the cultivation of “interdisciplinary” international Chinese language applied talents. At the same time, according to the Chinese language level of the young teachers, we will carry out the “Chinese-Thai Language Class”, “Chinese Specialization Class”, “Chinese Elective Class”, “Chinese Cultural Experience Class” and “Chinese Language and Culture Class” in stages and grades. “Chinese Culture Experience Classes”, so that the international education of Chinese as a foreign language can be carried out in a gradual and orderly manner. The “Chinese Language Class in the Rubber Forest of Cambodia” has gradually become a brand program, and over the past five years, it has exported a total of 173 Chinese language teachers to countries along the Belt and Road, and trained 53 specialized teaching staff for primary schools. Over the past five years, 173 Chinese teachers have been exported to countries along the “Belt and Road”, and 53 teachers have been trained to specialize in elementary school. Through the project cooperation, the professional practice and teaching ability of foreign language teachers have been greatly improved. Over the past five years, more than 30 foreign language teachers have entered elementary school in Northern Thailand to engage in Chinese teaching, more than 50 students have become tour guides or engaged in social organizations, and thousands of people have entered GK Rubber Company Limited to become builders of the “Garden Factory”, which has greatly improved the competitiveness of the program and became the builders of the “Garden Factory”, which greatly promoted the local employment.

Driven by advanced management concepts, GK Rubber has improved nearly 50 sections of high-quality courses for each docking school, dispatched corresponding foreign language teachers to serve as lecturers and teaching assistants for the docking teaching practice sites, and the average number of classes held in the Confucius Institute of Mahasakan University each year has increased from 8 to 15, and the total length of teacher training has been extended from 184 to 15 hours. The total duration of teacher training has been extended from 184 to 206, and the number of elementary schools supported has increased from 3 to 15. At present, “Udonfu Tunya Village Primary School”, “Doi Laodong Deng Primary School” and “Lakanglu School” are the main schools of GK Rubber. At present, “Wulongfu Tungye Village Primary School”, “Do Laodong Deng Primary School” and “Lakanglu School” are the main targets of GK Rubber, for which a total of 11 high-quality teachers were trained. At the same time, GK Rubber cooperated with local enterprises to transform students’ calligraphy works into creative products with new ideas based on traditional ancient scripts, so that “cultural creativity” empowers Chinese education. In this process, Guangdong Nongken is also gradually building up Guangken Rubber to become a new type of quality platform for Chinese language teaching, so that “Chinese stories” can be spread on a better platform.

3. Technological Advancement: The Implementation of "Digitalization" Enhances the Chinese Educational Environment

In the post-epidemic period, the adoption of “online teaching” has emerged as a novel approach for training Chinese language educators (Nie, 2023; Luo, 2023; Zhao & Liu, 2022). With the implementation of standardized measures for epidemic prevention and control, educational institutions have increasingly recognized the significance of the “online classroom”. However, there are certain limitations associated with this mode of instruction, including reduced control and interactivity in online teaching, as well as a higher incidence of truancy and absenteeism. Based on survey and statistical data, during the epidemic, GDNK rubber school experienced a 17.8% increase in truancy rates and a 28.9% increase in dropout rates. In response to these challenges, GDNK has identified these critical areas in actual teaching and has made substantial investments in digital transformation to enhance classroom engagement, foster teachers’ professional growth and long-term development, and continuously enhance the quality of online instruction.

In order to further improve the sense of accomplishment of teaching Chinese as a foreign language teacher and enhance the learning benefits of online courses for students, GKR has created a more vivid contextual atmosphere oriented to fun and three-dimensionality, promoting students' situational exchanges and enhancing their classroom participation. In Huey Na Dang Primary School in Guanjarong District, Sa Kaeo Province, Thailand, GK Rubber utilized its own financial and technological advantages to provide a vivid digital classroom, where the foreign language teacher used the Face Book platform to create a more vivid contextual atmosphere and promote students’ situational exchanges to enhance their participation in the class, Foreign language teachers interacted with Facebook through “animated scenes”, “Chinese song MVs”, “intelligent Chinese games”, etc., which gradually perfected the online teaching mode of foreign language teachers and improved their online teaching skills. With the continuous improvement of the “online” mode, the training of Chinese as a foreign language teachers can also be carried out better. Teachers can share their teaching achievements online and use the Internet to contact more peers for exchanges and sharing, making group lesson planning and communication no longer difficult. For example, foreign language teachers in Laos’ Thai Hua Savannakhet Vocational Primary School (Guangken Rubber) have formed a “Teaching Mutual Aid Group” through the information network, and often carry out group discussions and academic exchanges in network meetings.

With the support of AR and VR technologies, GK School has developed a new application that helps Chinese language teachers learn the best Chinese teaching programs in the world from their own offices and have first-hand virtual contact with the teachers who teach the courses, which greatly breaks the boundaries of time and space, and allows young teachers to experience excellent teaching practices. At the same time, the 3D visual effects and 2D videos based on AR technology will enhance students’ interest and improve their engagement, comprehension and memory. In order to make the "online classroom" more standardized,

GK Rubber has developed a small program to strengthen the management of the online teaching classroom by punching cards, so that more students can learn and feel something. At the same time, with the support of science and technology innovation, Guangken School has established a smart classroom database. In it, more than 30 sets of high-quality lesson plans and handouts, 58 videos of teachers' lectures, 82 course PPTs, 86 step-by-step cases of teaching Chinese phonetics, more than 4,000 pictures of electronic databases, more than 2,000 theoretical test questions, and 78 designs of course activities have been collected. At the same time, the company has also combined the latest technology to develop "cloud classroom" to enhance students' participation in the classroom. For example, the cloud class "Chinese Learning Class" held by GKRC Thainam Company in Yick Village, Phetchaburi District, Surat Thani Province has been very effective.

There are two significant reforms that have been implemented. The topic of discussion pertains to the reform of teaching objectives.

The teaching objectives of GK Rubber School encompass the acquisition of Chinese language skills in the domains of "Knowledge", "Learning", "Utilization", "Integration", and "Emotion". These domains encompass the development of knowledge, the cultivation of effective learning strategies, the practical application of language skills, the integration of language proficiency into various contexts, and the fostering of emotional engagement and personal value in language learning. The objective is to provide students with a strong proficiency in Chinese language and writing through classroom instruction, enabling them to effectively utilize writing skills in Chinese language-related tasks. In this context, students will employ many techniques, including the analysis of theories, the interpretation of character shapes, the recitation of poems, and the practice of experiential writing, in order to enhance their comprehension of the Chinese language and writing. The instructors will employ several methodologies, including academic study, character interpretation, singing poetry, and experiential writing, to further their comprehension of Chinese traditional culture and optimize their teaching effectiveness. It is desirable to enhance teachers' proficiency in utilizing digital network resources for online classroom instruction and gradually introduce students to independent learning in order to continually enhance their awareness and capacity for sustainable learning. The proposed approach involves the integration of the problem-based learning (Problem-Based Learning (PBL), n.d.) and project-based learning within the context of Chinese language instruction. This integration aims to develop a curriculum that embodies the distinctive features of Guangken and offers a range of exemplary courses.

In practical terms, this implies that students can acquire proficiency in Chinese character usage and develop their abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing for everyday situations through a comprehensive learning approach. The primary focus is on delivering detailed lectures and providing ample opportunities for practice. The ultimate objective is to enable students to successfully pass the HSK and HSKK examinations. This approach encompasses various aspects such as phonetic reading, stroke order practice, structural understanding, text comprehension, composition writing, as well as reading and writing skills acquisition. The primary objective of this curriculum is to attain proficiency in phonetics, enhance penmanship skills, develop a strong understanding of structural principles, engage with high-quality texts, cultivate effective essay writing abilities, and foster the ability to make thoughtful inquiries. In the context of integration, it primarily pertains to the capacity of Chinese educators to effectively amalgamate their individual talents and relevant professional expertise, while employing innovative thinking to facilitate instructional implementation. This approach aims to enable students to synthesize theoretical concepts more effectively with practical applications. Integration encompasses the amalgamation of theoretical instruction and practical application, the fusion of in-class exercises and extracurricular exercises, as well as the amalgamation of online and offline pedagogy. An illustration of this may be seen in the "Rubber Forest School" operated by the Guangken Rubber Chun Feng Company in Cambodia. This educational institution employs a project-based instructional approach, facilitating a meaningful integration of classroom learning with real-world applications through hands-on projects conducted on-site.

The program is meant to facilitate the engagement of Chinese instructors in collaborative learning, fostering a spirit of cooperation. It aims to provide a platform for them to discuss and collectively showcase their teaching methods and creative strategies for teaching Chinese as a foreign language, thereby enhancing their professional development. Simultaneously, students will derive advantages from the curriculum in terms of dismantling disparities and attaining a genuine comprehension of Chinese culture. The educational institution arranges many competitions, including the “Teacher and Student Creative Design Competition”, the “Teacher Skills Competition”, and the “Top Ten Chinese Singers on Campus”. The school aims to enhance students’ cultural literacy and expressive abilities, enabling them to effectively promote the dissemination and preservation of traditional Chinese culture through the art of storytelling. The educational institution frequently arranges “essay contests” and “speech contests” as a means to facilitate students in producing literary compositions that authentically express their emotions.

Literary endeavors are frequently undertaken in order to facilitate the creation of authentic literary works by students. This serves the purpose of enabling a broader audience, including ordinary individuals, to recognize the existence of alternative and more valuable possibilities through these literary works. Consequently, the ultimate objective is to enhance the well-being of local residents and foster emotional connections between China and ASEAN nations.

4. Revision of Educational Curriculum

Unlike the Confucius Institute, the overseas GK Rubber School breaks away from the old teaching mode of reading from the book, and no longer mechanically teaches “concepts”, “classification”, “characteristics” and so on, but rather “attitude of learning”, “perspective of thinking”, “temperature of teaching”, “latitude of teaching”, “attitude of learning”, “perspective of thinking”, “temperature of teaching”, “latitude of teaching” and “latitude of teaching”. Instead, we focus on five major thinking latitudes: “attitude of learning”, “perspective of thinking”, “temperature of teaching”, “latitude of teaching”, and “precision of curriculum”. More attention is paid to the reform of teaching content to strengthen the teachers’ deep thinking on professional knowledge, and then improve the level of teaching practice. After the research, GK Rubber School has formulated a teaching program of 48 hours, combining “Traceability”, “Guidance”, “Expansion”, “Transmission”. The program combines five elements: “Traceability”, “Guidance”, “Expansion”, “Transmission” and “Innovation”. The teaching content can be restructured into four major modules, namely “the origin and characteristics of Chinese characters”, “the use of Chinese language tools”, “the use of logic in teaching and training”, and “the use of communication in education and teaching”.

The initial module provides an overview of the “origins and attributes of Chinese characters” and is primarily delivered through structured instruction. In this approach, students are initially presented with inquiries and prompted to explore the underlying reasons within a classroom setting. This pedagogical method aims to foster a more profound comprehension of the distinctive allure of Chinese culture. The second module focuses on the study of Chinese culture. The second module is to provide instruction on the utilization of Chinese tools to students.

5. Conclusion

In a world characterized by increasing globalization and interconnectedness, the educational initiatives undertaken by GK Rubber School stand as a testament to the power of innovative and comprehensive approaches to Chinese language education. The profound reforms in teaching objectives, curriculum, and teaching methods demonstrate the school’s commitment to equipping students with linguistic skills and a deep cultural understanding.

As we move forward in the era of the “Belt and Road” initiative, the role of educational institutions like GK Rubber School in building bridges of understanding and cooperation between nations cannot be overstated. The school’s dedication to enhancing local communities, fostering emotional connections, and promoting traditional Chinese culture through the

art of storytelling embodies the spirit of cultural exchange that underlies the “Belt and Road” initiative.

The GK Rubber School serves as a shining example of how education can transcend boundaries and contribute to a more interconnected world. It emphasizes that language is not just a means of communication but a conduit for building lasting relationships. In this endeavor, GK Rubber School inspires us to reach across borders, share our cultures, and embrace the richness of our shared humanity. The journey of learning is one of mutual enrichment, and in the context of the “Belt and Road” initiative, it is through such educational endeavors that we find the path to a brighter and more connected future.

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