

# The Impact of a Traditional Culture Seminar on the Output of College Students' Chinese Creative Writing

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## Abstract

For a long time, traditional culture has been regarded as one of the sources of the inspiration, method and language of Chinese writing. In this article, we studied the medium- and long-term impact of a traditional Chinese culture seminar attended by college students on the output of creative writing. The seminar included traditional Chinese philosophy, history, literature, art, etc. It spanned three years (22 months) and held lectures lasting for approximately two hours once a week. The subjects of the prospective cohort study included 130 first-year college students who participated in the seminar and 130 controls. From September 2016 to June 2018, 72 lectures were held. We measured the creative writing output from the first lecture (September 2016) to December 2021 (64 months in total), including novels, essays, poems, and plays. Two indicators, the total number of words (TNW) and the quality of yield (QY), were evaluated by a 15-member panel. Although the TNW and QY of the participants and their controls were similar before the seminar, we found that the participants have higher TNW and QY than the controls after participating in the seminar. The difference in TNW became significant after month 51 ( $p < 0.05$ ), and the difference in QY became significant after month 46 ( $p < 0.05$ ). After these dates, the differences stabilized. In addition, text analysis indicates that by month 64, traditional cultural elements in the works of the participating group had a higher frequency ( $p < 0.001$ ). The research shows that the traditional culture seminar not only enhanced the yield of college students' creative writing but also improved the quality of their work. The traditional cultural elements enriched the works of the seminar participants.

**Keywords:** Traditional Culture Seminar, Creative Writing Output, Cohort Study, Text Analysis

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the pull of the internet and globalization has had some negative impacts on traditional culture. Fortunately, in the Chinese literary circle and universities, some people have begun to realize the importance of traditional culture for writing, and there has been an upsurge of learning and studying Chinese traditional culture [1]. The literary circle has different views on this topic [2, 3]. Some believe that traditional culture, which is based on the material foundation at that time, mainly reflects the thoughts and views of

ancient people; thus, they feel that it has little to do with the current literary writing, which mainly deals with today's reality and even tends to lead to outdated views [4]. On the other hand, many scholars believe that traditional culture is the source and important driving force of Chinese writing [5]. First, learning traditional culture and understanding its ideological and artistic charm will boost the aesthetic realm and moral cultivation [6]. Moreover, it is believed that learning about the ancient language and literature could enrich and improve skills related to Chinese, which could in turn enable the inheritance of ancient culture and the exchange of advanced culture [7].

Since ancient times, China has had a long history of literary achievements. Chinese literature is deeply rooted in its traditional culture and deeply integrated with other cultural elements, such as philosophy, history, art, and language [8]. To evaluate the impact of the traditional culture seminar on the output of college students' creative writing, we evaluated the medium- and long-term impact of the seminar, which was held once a week for two hours each time. The campus seminar aimed to improve the creative writing ability of college students by strengthening their traditional cultural literacy. We measured and analyzed the overall writing output of each participant and control group. Cohort analysis and text analysis were performed on the output from the seminar for 64 months.

## 2. Experiments

A prospective study was performed on the medium- and long-term results of the Chinese traditional culture seminar spanning three years. A two-hour lecture was held once a week. The seminar aimed to promote the creative writing ability of participants by strengthening the interest and learning of traditional culture. At the same time, text analysis of the works of the participant group and the control group was also carried out to compare the embodiment of traditional cultural elements in creative writing.

### 2.1 Overview of the Contents of the Seminar

The seminar included lectures and group discussions, which covered ancient novels, ancient philosophy, ancient prose, history, traditional calligraphy and painting, traditional poetry, and traditional drama (see Table 1 for details of the seminar). The seminar was organized and held by the literary association of Tongren University as an extracurricular course of cultural quality education. This seminar was launched in September 2010 and is still being offered. The participants in the current study were all college students, and the seminar is open to writing enthusiasts in the freshman class every year. Typical participants will attend the seminar for three years.

**Table 1. Summary of Chinese traditional culture seminar (Sep. 2016-Jun. 2018) held by the Literary Association of Tongren University**

Topics	2016	2017	2018
Novels	4 <sup>a</sup>	6	3(2) <sup>b</sup>
Philosophy	2	5	1
Prose	3	4	3(1)
History	2	4	2
Calligraphy and Painting	2	6	2
Poetry	3	6	4(3)
Drama	2	3	4(1)

<sup>a</sup> Number of lectures with different topics.

<sup>b</sup> Numbers in brackets are online lectures.

## 2.2 Ethical Aspects

Participation in the seminar was voluntary, and the participants and control group gave informed consent to join the study before the beginning of the seminar. They voluntarily provided unpublished and published works for analysis and evaluation in the study period. This study did not restrict participants from quitting the class midway, nor did it restrict the controls from participating in the class midway.

## 2.3 Participants and Controls

The original plan included 181 participants who were expected to attend the seminar from September 2016 to June 2018, as well as a control group composed of 181 students (n=362 in total). The participants and controls were all literature lovers who were in the freshman class at the beginning of the seminar; they were followed up with until the end of 2021. All participants attended all courses of the seminar, ignoring a few absences due to personal reasons. In addition, based on the principle of complete voluntariness, some participants and controls were excluded if their willingness to participate in the seminar changed midway. This included 19 participants who terminated the seminar before June 2018, and their corresponding control group members (n=38 in total), as well as 32 original control group participants who began participating in the seminar midway and their corresponding participants (n=64 in total). Therefore, a total of 130 participants and their controls (n=260 in total) were studied in this research.

At the beginning of the seminar, participants provided their demographic information (age, gender, major, and college) by filling out a questionnaire [9]. Each participant was asked to list the names of three students in his or her major who had not participated in the seminar who could be used as control candidates. Subsequently, the first person included in the list was included in the comparison group as a control for the participants in the seminar. While all participants were not duplicated in the control group, the age, academic performance, and interest in literary writing of the participants and the controls were similar. Some characteristics of the seminar participants and their control groups are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Characteristics of seminar participants and their control groups**

Characteristic	Participants (n = 130)	Controls (n = 130)	p
Age (Mean, SD) <sup>a</sup>	(20.18, 1.332)	(20.05, 1.329)	0.5075 <sup>b</sup>
Gender/Male (n)	59	53	0.4524 <sup>c</sup>
Gender/Female (n)	71	77	
Had previous works <sup>a</sup> (n)	36	31	0.4783 <sup>c</sup>
Did not have previous works <sup>a</sup> (n)	94	99	

<sup>a</sup> Until the beginning of the seminar

<sup>b</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test

<sup>c</sup> Chi-square test

## 2.4 Measurement of the Quantity and Quality of Creative Writing Output

To evaluate the medium- and long-term results of the seminar, we collected and analyzed the writing output of participants and control groups in various genres, including prose, novels, poetry, drama scripts, etc. The scope included unpublished works that have been completed, works published in internal journals of the Literary Association, and works published in public literary journals. The necessary prerequisite for whether an unpublished work is taken into account is that it is recognized by at least 3 out of the 15 judges as “having some literary value.”

To evaluate the quantity of writing output, the method created by the Chinese Writers Association was adopted [10]. This method takes the total number of words (TNW) as the basic measurement, and for poetry, each line is counted as 100 words.

The quality of yield (QY) for an author is based on the quality score weighted by the word number as demonstrated in Equation (1):

$$QY = \frac{\sum W_i Q_i}{\sum W_i} \quad (1)$$

where  $W_i$  and  $Q_i$  are the word number and quality score of work  $i$ , respectively, and the sum symbol  $\sum$  refers to the sum of all works of an author. For work  $i$ ,  $Q_i$  is obtained based on the scores of a panel of 15 judges and taking into account the publication level of the work as demonstrated in Equation (2):

$$Q_i = \bar{q}_i + p_i \quad (2)$$

where  $\bar{q}_i$  is the trimmed mean value of work  $i$ 's scores given by the panel, excluding the 3 highest and the 3 lowest scores. The work quality was scored from low to high; therefore, the score of each judge ranged between 1 and 10. Since the publication of works can be regarded as an additional manifestation of output and quality [11, 12], the publication score  $p_i$  corresponds to different publishing channels of work  $i$ , including unpublished (0 point), internal journals (1 point), county-level journals (2 points), municipal journals (3 points), provincial journals (4 points) and national journals (5 points).

## 2.5 Text Analysis

The aim of text analysis is to identify the traditional cultural elements and analyze their frequency in the works. Traditional cultural elements were identified and marked by the judges during their review, including allusions, maxims, historical materials, traditional culture, and artistic knowledge points.

## 2.6 Statistical Analysis

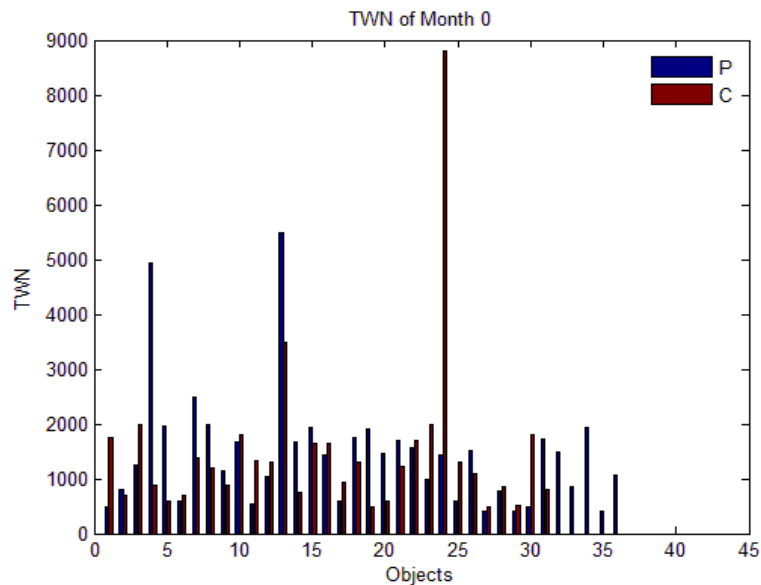
For all participants in the seminar, the time before they started to attend the seminar was considered month 0. The difference between the quantity and quality of works was tested by the Wilcoxon rank sum test. The frequency of traditional cultural elements in works was tested by chi-square distribution. SPSS version 22.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) was used for statistical analysis. The statistical significance level was set as  $p=0.05$ .

### 3. Results

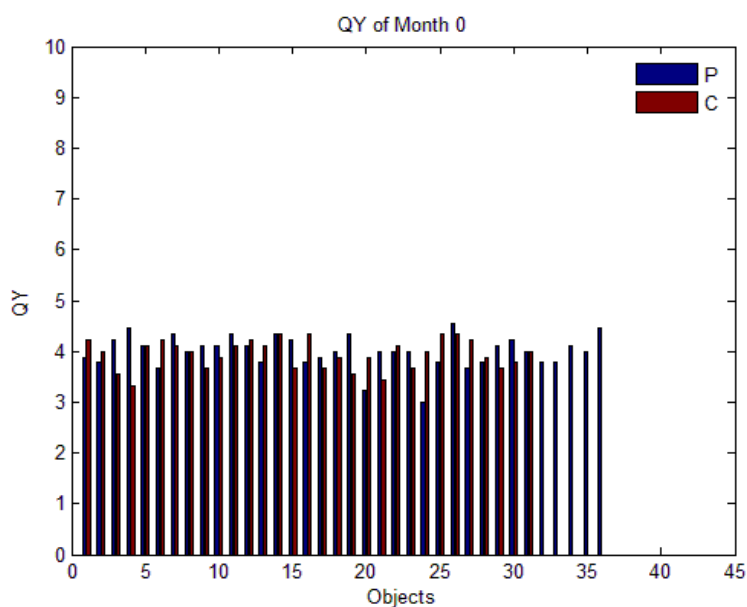
For the 260 qualified participants and controls, the data and statistical test results are shown in Table 2. In general, the age and gender distribution of participants in the seminar and their control groups were similar. We also adjusted the matching between participants and controls; that is, a participant and a control should have similar experience in publishing works as much as possible (both have or do not have works before attending the seminar). This did not influence the final results of the statistical analysis between the two groups but did enable a more intuitive comparison of the outputs after the seminar.

#### 3.1 Work Output before Attending the Seminar

The Wilcoxon rank sum test was used to compare the participation group and control group before attending the seminar. According to the data in Table 2, there was no significant difference ( $p=0.4783$ ) in the number of participants and their control group who had previously produced works before attending the seminar in month 0. In addition, we also calculated the output (TNW) and quality (QY) of the writing output according to the method mentioned above. As shown in Figure 1, before the seminar, only a few participants (36/130) and those in the control group (31/130) had produced works. TNW ( $p=0.4585$ ) and QY ( $p=0.4038$ ) showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the quantity and quality of work between the participating group and the control group.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 1. Quantity (TNW) and Quality (QY) of works in Month 0 (P=participants, C=controls)**

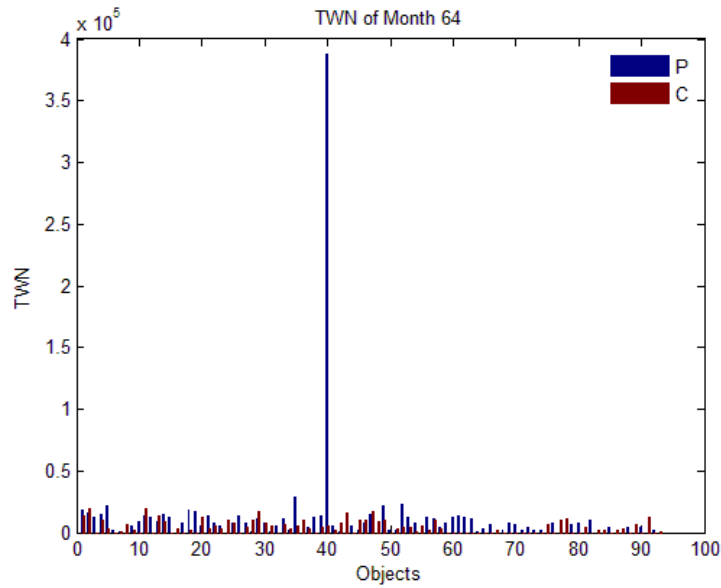
### 3.2 Writing Output after Attending the Seminar

The analysis of writing achievements by the end of December 2021 shows that 74 out of 130 (56.92%) seminar participants and 58 out of 130 (44.62%) controls finished at least one work. The distribution of completed works in the two groups follows Lotka's Law [13]; that is, most of the research subjects had no works, while a small number of persons in the two groups contributed most of the completed works. In terms of the number of persons who produced at least one work, the number of participants was significantly higher than that of the control group ( $\chi^2=3.9394$ ,  $p=0.0472$ ). In addition, Figure 2 shows the accumulated output (TNW) and quality (QY) of the participants and control groups until the end of December 2021 (the 64th month). The median TNW and interquartile range (IQR) of the participating group were 1432 and 8107, respectively; the median TNW of the control group was 0, and the IQR was 5204. The results of the Wilcoxon rank sum test showed that the participating group had a higher TNW ( $p=0.0155$ ). In the participating group, the student with the highest output completed a novel with approximately 380,000 words. Regarding the quality of output, the median QY of the participating group was 4.452, and the IQR was 4.889; the median TNW and IQR of the control group were 0 and 4.576, respectively. The results of the Wilcoxon rank sum test showed that the participating group had a higher QY ( $p=0.0070$ ). We also studied the evolution of TNW and QY over time. From month 51 onward, TNW in the participating group was found to be significantly higher than that in the control group ( $p=0.0463$ ), and then the difference stabilized. From month 46 onward, the QY of the participating group became significantly higher than that of the control group ( $p=0.0488$ ); then, the difference stabilized.

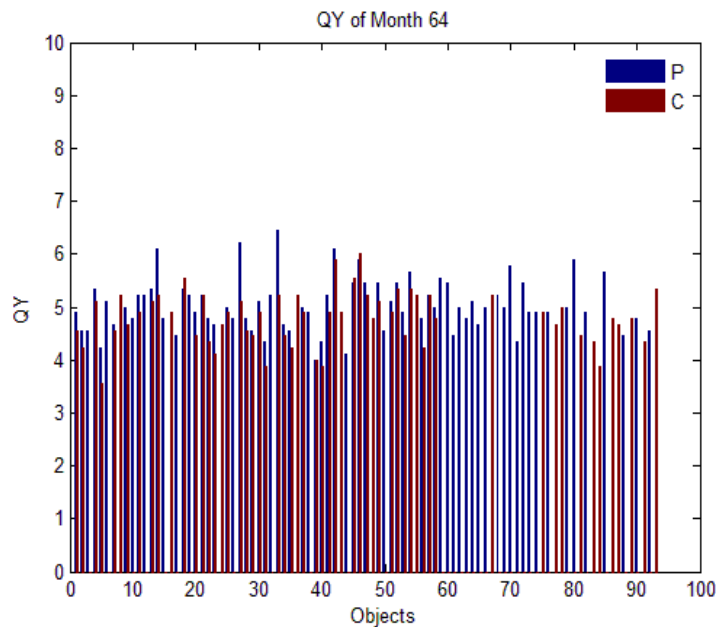
For the publication of works, by month 64, the participants had published 36 works with a TNW of 188,954 as shown in Table 3. The journals included 30 internal publications, 4 county-level publications, and 2 municipal publications. Within the same period, the control group published 21 works with a TNW of 115,853, including 18 internal publications and 3 county-level publications. It can be seen that both the number and the level of publications of the participating group are higher than those of the control group.

In addition, we also analyzed the frequency of traditional cultural elements in the works. By month 64,

the total frequency of traditional cultural elements in the works of the participating groups (TNW=1,016,271) was 1,253 (one occurrence per 811 words). In the works of the control group (TNW=401,805), the total frequency of traditional cultural elements was 378 (one occurrence per 1,063 words). The results of the statistical test show that the frequency of traditional cultural elements in the works of the participating group was significantly higher than that in the works of the control group ( $\chi^2=11.3133$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).



(a)



(b)

**Figure 2. Distribution of TNW and QY of works completed by seminar participants (n=130) and their control groups (n=130) by month 64 (P=participants; C=controls)**

**Table 3. Creative writing output of participants in the traditional culture seminar by month 64**

	Participants (n = 130)	Controls (n = 130)	p
TNW(Median, IQR)	1432(8107)	0(5204)	0.0155 <sup>b</sup>
QY(Median, IQR)	4.452(4.889)	0(4.576)	0.0070 <sup>b</sup>
Published TNW	188954	115853	-
Published levels <sup>a</sup>	0-0-2-4-30	0-0-0-3-18	-
Had previous works (n)	74	58	
Did not have previous works (n)	56	72	0.0472 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Country-province-city-county-internal level

<sup>b</sup> Wilcoxon rank-sum test

<sup>c</sup> Chi-square test

#### 4. Discussion

Comparative research methods are often used in empirical analysis[14-15]. The research results show that, compared with the students denoted as the comparison group who did not attend the seminar, increased traditional culture learning by participating in the seminar is related to the improvement of writing output and quality. Compared with the control group, the students who participated in the seminar had higher output (TNW) and quality scores (QY), and the level of publications of their works was higher than that of the control group.

From the beginning of the seminar, the monthly analysis of the output showed that the occurrence of the above results was an evolutionary process with positive effects. From month 51, the TNW of the participating group was significantly higher than that of the control group, and then the difference between the two groups stabilized; from month 46, the QY of the participating group was significantly higher than that of the control group, and then the difference between the two groups stabilized. It should be pointed out that when comparing the QY of the participating group and the control group, we recorded the quality of the work of all individuals who had no work as 0, which was then included in the statistical analysis. There are several considerations in doing so. As the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the writing performance of all participants and control group members and their participation in the seminar, there is no doubt that students with works perform better in writing than those without works. Moreover, in general, TNW and QY should not be separated or discussed without considering the other because the measurement and evaluation of QY and TNW are mutually affected and interrelated, i.e., the quality evaluation of unpublished works determines whether the work is counted into the output. The output of some research objects is zero, which can be attributed to the fact that the quality of their works is too low to be counted. In this sense, the above treatment of the output quality of students who have no work is reasonable.

Therefore, the above monthly analysis of TNW and QY does not mean that participating in the seminar has a greater influence on QY or TNW than on the other; that is, after participating in the seminar, is the output or quality of the work improved faster? With regard to the above problems, we believe that participating in seminars and promoting traditional culture has a positive effect on the material, motivation, inspiration, ideology, output quality, and other aspects of writing; thus, students in the participating groups have higher TNW and QY. Based on the text analysis of identifying traditional cultural elements, the results



also show that participation in seminars and the promotion of interest in traditional culture and enhanced learning can be reflected in the works. In a sense, the seminar can reshape or significantly change a writer's writing habits and styles. It is interesting to note that there is also a considerable frequency of traditional cultural elements in the works of the control group, which shows that traditional culture has a considerable impact on the general creative writers of Chinese.

To the best of our knowledge, these results are the first to prove the medium- and long-term positive results of traditional cultural learning. Each individual who likes writing is a unique existence due to their sense, cultural background, life experience, educational performance, living habits, and writing motivation; people cannot be completely the same. Thus, this study approach does not argue for a strict control group and can only set up a comparison group similar to the participating group by controlling some external characteristics [16-18]. Our research is also the first to study literary creation activities with training and learning interventions using a comparison group over a relatively long time span. Therefore, the results of this paper reliably confirm the positive role of the strengthening of traditional culture for Chinese writers.

## 5. Conclusion

To quantitatively study the impact of Chinese traditional cultural learning on the output and quality of modern Chinese college students' creative writing, we studied the medium- and long-term impact of a Chinese traditional culture seminar attended by college students. Based on the establishment of the comparison group and the quantitative evaluation of the quality and output of the works, our overall conclusion is that compared with the control group, the strengthening of traditional culture learning has a positive impact on the participants' Chinese creative writing and significantly benefits their works in terms of output and quality. We also used text analysis to compare the frequency of traditional cultural elements in the works of the two groups; a higher frequency of traditional cultural elements was observed in the works of seminar attendees compared to their counterparts. Interestingly, the traditional cultural elements in the works of the control group also have a considerable frequency, indicating the importance of traditional culture in the Chinese creative writing of ordinary writers. The cohort analysis showed that the above effects were evolutionary. Significant differences in yield and quality appeared in the 51st and 46th months, respectively, after which the differences stabilized. Because of the high correlation between the evolution of quantity and quality, we believe that it is not appropriate to compare the evolution speed of quantity and quality. We conclude that participation in seminars and the promotion of traditional culture play a positive role in writing materials, motivation, inspiration, ideology, output quality, etc., so that students in the participating group have greater TNW and QY outcomes.

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