Connecting Language and Culture

Dr Si Chung-mou with young students

Hong Kong students learn to read and write the Chinese language, but how much do they understand of Chinese traditions, philosophies and culture? Not enough, reckons Dr Si Chung-mou, Associate Professor in the School of Chinese, who has been overseeing a project to make more than 3,000 years of Chinese culture accessible to young people.

The Chinese Culture Research Project began in 2003 and has resulted in two volumes that were originally aimed at Hong Kong secondary schools but have been picked up on the Mainland and printed in both traditional and simplified characters. These are now being translated into English to meet demand from overseas.

A website has also been set up where younger students can learn passages from 100 traditional texts written in classical Chinese, which are accompanied by explanations in modern Chinese and recitations in Cantonese and Putonghua.

"The students of course know the Chinese language, but they are not familiar with traditional Chinese culture. We think they should know more about the meaning behind the words they learn," Dr Si said.

One volume offers a general overview of 24 aspects of Chinese culture, from ethics and religion to history and literature. The other looks more in-depth at eight topical issues, such as politics, economic development and moral teachings, and asks students to analyse the contributions of Chinese culture. The material is presented in essays and stories written by researchers in consultation with experts from Hong Kong, Macau, Mainland China, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and the United States.

The texts meet a need for more cultural teaching under the new liberal studies curriculum for secondary schools, but Dr Si said their contribution goes deeper than that. "It is the mother-tongue language and we think students should know more about Chinese culture. It can help them to judge the significance of the culture and at the same time to know more about themselves."