

The Enlightenment of the Ideas of China Modern Language Education in a Century

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Abstract

In 1903, Chinese language was officially established as an independent educational subject in China. In 2012, “The Chinese Language and Other Curriculum Standards of the Compulsory Education (2011 Edition)” was formally implemented. From 1903 to 2012, the modern language education had already had about a hundred years. In the history of a century, the educational ideas of Chinese language have had great progress in twists and turns, become prosperous through learning from others, and achieve leaps in debates. Understanding the development of the hundred years will allow us to take the history as a reference and achieve greater success in the future development of the modern language education.

Key words: Chinese language of one hundred years; Language education; Educational ideas

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INTRODUCTION

In the 29th year of the Emperor Guangxu’s ruling of Qing Dynasty (1903, the Guimao year of Chinese calendar), the Qing government promulgated the Regulations of the Schools Approved by the Imperial Court, which was written by Zhang Zhidong, Zhang Baixi and Rongqing.

The so-called Guimao educational system marked that Chinese language was officially established as an independent educational subject and was the birth of modern language education. At the time, the language education was “reading Chinese classics and preaching Chinese classics”. Then Cai Yuanpei advocated the “Chinese Literature” in the period of the revolution of 1911. After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the language education became the “national language” education. Finally, there is the “language” education after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The modern language education has gone through ups and downs over the past more than hundred years.

In the course of the hundred years, there were experience and lessons, also progress and hesitation. To understand the current situation of the language education and know the future direction of the language education, we should look back, inspire our thoughts from studying the history, and look for the answers from studying the history. Of course, many scholars have different views on how to call the language education, but as an educational subject, we still call it as Chinese “language” according to the convention.

1. GOING FORWARD IN TWISTS AND TURNS - THE POLITICAL TENDENCIES

Looking back to the hundred years, in general, the ideas of the language education have been going forward, but the development trajectory has been also showing repeated twists and turns. This kind of winding is mainly reflected in political tendencies of the language educational ideas. The language education was closely linked to the politics, resulting in the ideas of the language education being impacted by the changes in the political situations. It was continuing to swing, sometimes forward and then back.

Before the founding of the new China in 1949, the most typical complicated event was “reading Chinese

classics and preaching Chinese classics”. In the beginning of Guimao educational system, although Chinese language was officially established as an independent educational subject that was groundbreaking, in fact, it still inherited the traditional ideas of the language education philosophy and advocated reading Chinese classics and preaching Chinese classics. In the revolution of 1911, the education chief Cai Yuanpei of the National Government abolished the subject of reading Chinese classics and preaching Chinese classics, and emphasized that the language was the tool for the free expression of thoughts, which was not a little progress in the development of modern language education ideas. Unfortunately, Yuan Shikai quickly stole the fruits of the revolution, and announced that “the base of national education is classics of Confucius” for his political ambition of becoming an emperor. Once again the education stressed reading Chinese classics and preaching Chinese classics, and ideas of the language education were back to old ones.

In 1919, the May Fourth Movement brought the vernacular movement. In 1922, the Beiyang Government officially let the Chinese vernacular, namely the “Mandarin” as a teaching language so it made the Chinese language be closer to the people’s life. The written language and the spoken language began to be a fusion. Listening, speaking, reading and writing began to be emphasized at the same time. However, in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang government implemented the “education of the party” for its own interests, again pushed for reading Chinese classics and preaching Chinese classics, resumed the classical Chinese language, and got rid of the vernacular. In the political turmoil, the ideas of modern language education were back and forth.

Before the founding of the new China, the language education was unable to settle down in the precarious political backgrounds, ideas of the education also constantly changed with the changes of the political situations, and the language education was not a systematic education. After the founding of the new China, the language education had been a tool of the class struggle, and had experienced the lack of human nature for a relatively long time. During the Cultural Revolution, it was completely backwards. After the riot of 1989, it had to play a more important role in the ideological and political aspects. In each edition of the curriculum standards, it is not difficult to find the political background at the time; in each of the major discussions on the language education, it is not difficult to know the political trend at the time. Even now, some scholars believe that the language education should become a part of the ideological and political education, and some teachers take the language classes at the classes of ideological and moral education.

Looking back on the course of the hundred years, every step of the development of the language education

was closely related to politics. It is true that politics, culture and education should not be separated completely, and the development of the modern language education was influenced by the idea of developing education for saving the nation. However, in the history of the language education, the twists and turns are telling us: education should maintain to be relative independence. The language education is a basis of the education, and its ideas should follow objective and scientific laws, and should not follow a certain kind of will or a certain kind of mission of national politics. Let the language education unload some political baggage, pay more attention to the subject itself, pay more attention to the individual development, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of history.

2. BECAME PROSPEROUS THROUGH LEARNING FROM OTHERS BUT NOT ENOUGH IN THE RESEARCH OF THE LOCAL EDUCATION

In the past hundred years, the development of the ideas of the language education mainly relied on to learn or draw lessons from various foreign education theories, not only studying the western countries such as Britain, America and Germany, but also Japan and the Soviet Union. These foreign education theories had different degree impacts on the ideas of Chinese modern language education in different historical stages.

The sign of Chinese language officially established as an independent educational subject was the Regulations of the Schools Approved by the Imperial Court promulgated in 1903 and it was deeply influenced by the Japanese educational ideas. The “Guimao educational system” was highly similar to the Japanese educational system by the end of the nineteenth century in the division of education stages and course settings. Especially, the setting of “preparatory courses for universities” was completely like the Japanese way which the western countries did not have. Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan’s education development had been fruitful. Some intelligent people went to Japan and studied in Japan. The Qing government also sent a large number of students in Japan. Zhang Zhidong and others learned from the successful experience of Japan, abolished the imperial examination system, set up the independent educational subject, and laid a cornerstone for the modern language education. It had a great significance. However, we also find that the academic purpose of the Guimao education system was: “No matter what school it is, it should base on loyalty and filial piety and take Chinese classics as the base. It should let students have the pure ideology, then study the western knowledge, practice their skills, become intelligent

people in the future, and have working ability. It should cultivate generalists through cooperating with our government and prevent mistakes.” (Zhu, 2006) The academic purpose of the Guimao educational system followed the Japanese nationalism educational idea, whose purpose was to achieve the will of the national ruling class. The Guimao educational system did not get off to a good start in the independence of education.

Before and after the May fourth Movement, it was increasingly popular to go to Europe and the United States to study. Educators and their educational ideas of European countries and America were beginning to impact China’s language education. American John Dewey (1859-1952) and his ideas of pragmatic education had the most extensive influence on China’s education. In 1919, Dewey, who was invited by Hu Shi, Tao Xingzhi and others, came to China and lectured more than 200 times in 14 provinces, and let the theory of pragmatism spread widely in the educational field. In September of 1922, The School System Reform Program (i.e. the Renxu school system), clearly pointed out that the “education purposes” had seven aspects: Adapt to the needs of social evolution, carry forward the spirit of civilian education, seek the development of personality, pay attention to the force of the national economy, pay attention to the life education, let education easily be popularized and have the flexibility (Ibid.). It was a direct reflection of the idea that paying attention to the practical education at the time. During this period, Zhu Ziqing, Ye Shengtao, Li Jinxi and other famous educators also had in-depth study of the purposes, methods and other issues of the language education and formed many ideas of the language education. The textbook editing and examining mechanisms and the curriculum standards also began to become important parts of the language education. However, there was obvious deviation in the use of western educational theories. Some people almost totally denied the traditional language education, ignored the inherent law of Chinese language, and they did not pay attention to differences between Chinese and Indo-European languages.

After the founding of the new China, the Soviet Union became China’s “big brother”, and China started to learn from the political, economic and cultural patterns of the Soviet Union. The language education had a climax of learning from the Soviet Union. At the time, the representative of Soviet education, N. A. Kaiipob (1893-1978) book, *Education*, became the Bible of Chinese education. Kaiipob believed that the purpose of education was to cultivate “people of the comprehensive development”, and it had a great influence on ideas of the language education in China. In 1953, another Soviet educator Pushkin attended a Chinese language class, which discussed the “red scarf”, in a middle school and he pointed out that “language and literature factors are few”. His suggestion prompted that the language

education was formally divided into the language and literature departments in 1956. Although the practice of language and literature departments failed in three semesters because of political factors, it was a very meaningful innovation in the modern language education and provided reference ideas for us to solve the dispute of the Chinese language subject nature, namely whether the subject nature of the language education was to make it as a tool or have the humanity character. In China, the study of the Soviet education theory had accelerated the establishment and improvement of the new education system, and had a profound influence. Even some people have the impression of the Soviet education theory today. However, at the same time, the complete formalism copy was also obvious that directly resulted in the today’s situation of the language education: emphasizing the grammar and looking down on the language sense.

After the reform and opening up of China, a large number of western educational theories were introduced to China. B. A. Cyxomjnhcknn (1918-1970) proposed “the living education” and “the full development of personality”. Benjamin S. Bloom (1913-1999) had the theory of mastery-learning, which brought the classification of educational objectives and the concept of educational evaluation into the language education. Standardized tests of the United States have been also implemented in our country since 1986. However, the standardization of the examinations has been criticized in recent years, because the problem solving skills are far more useful than the appreciation of beautiful literature works, the quality education becomes an empty talk in following the standardized test method.

Looking back on the course of the hundred years, every step of the development of the language education was learning from others’ experience. Although the advanced educational ideas of Japan, the United States and other western countries, and the Soviet Union promoted the development of the language education, at the same time, the history also is telling us that we should not copy it all. We need to research foreign advanced educational ideas and also research how to use the ideas in our language education. We should be based on characteristics of Chinese language itself, consider the national conditions, have the selective absorption of foreign advanced educational ideas, in order to avoid the rote copy.

3. LEAPS IN THE CONTROVERSIES - AND THE LACK OF PRACTICE

Looking back on the course of the hundred years, we should mention several important discussions. It was the arguments that many educators and scholars participated in promoted the leaps of ideas of the language education.

The first argument was in 1959. In Shanghai, “Wen Hui Daily” launched the “discussion on the aim and task of Chinese language teaching” around the theme that was whether the language education had a tool character or ideology character. Some people thought that the “ideological education is the soul of the language education”, and other people thought that we should pay more attention to the language knowledge. The debate was ended by a “Wen Hui Daily” editorial on December 3, 1961, and it gave the conclusion: by the final analysis, the language was a kind of tool, was a tool for class struggle, was a tool of the struggle for production, was a tool for the exchange of ideas, and was a tool for communications. This famous argument had also let the Outline of Chinese Language Teaching of 1963 to make it clear that the language was the basic tool for learning knowledge and engaging in a variety of work. From then, the “tool theory” occupied a prominent position in the language education.

In 1980s, the discussion of ideas of the language education was heating up again. It was an argument of scientism and humanism in the ideas of the language education. The contention of scientism and humanism was also booming in the world at the time. With the reform and opening up, the special lost phenomenon of humanistic spirit began to trouble people in the social transformation period, so the humanities could quickly rise in China. In 1987, Chen Zhongliang published the article “The Humanism or Scientism” in the “Chinese Language Learning” and it started a big discussion. The rise of humanities let the “culture” heat sweep across the country, and a large number of scholars began to explore the cultural connotation of language. In 1995, Yu Yi published the article “Carry forward Humanity and Reform Drawbacks -- A View of the Nature of the Language Education” and clearly put forward the humanistic nature of the language education. In 1996, the Outline of Chinese Language Teaching made sure that “The language is the most important communication tool, but also the most important cultural carrier”. It broke through the idea that Chinese language only was a tool, and also was an important leap in the language education idea.

The more important discussions were coming. In 1997, the “Beijing Literature” published three articles which had a title, “Worry about the Language Education” and launched a barrage of criticism on the language education. Soon it was followed by “China Education Daily” and many newspapers, which let the discussion be more extensive and in-depth. Professor Zheng Guomin of Beijing Normal University called the discussion as “the embarrassment of the end of the century” (Xu, 2001) because many people were involved in the discussion and the criticism were violent and comprehensive. The crystallization of this discussion was three books, “Reflection on the National Qualities”, “Reflection on

Chinese Language Education” and “Look at the Secondary Language Education”, in which, many insights still have the profound significance. In the condemning, the idea of quality education rose at the historic moment. In 1999, “the comprehensive promotion of quality education” was put forward at the first time in the National Education Work Conference. In 2001, the Ministry of Education promulgated “The Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial)”. In 2002, “The Chinese Language Curriculum Standards of the Full Time Compulsory Education (Trial)” revised the subject nature of Chinese language and proposed: “The basic characteristic of Chinese language courses is the unity of the tool character and humanity character.” (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2002) From the “cultural carrier” to “humanity character”, humanity was more obvious, and it was the further development of humanism. The ideas of the language education began to become mature and complete.

In 2004, famous language educators Wang Cesan and Zhong Qiquan also had a big discussion. In 2004, the “Peking University Education Review” published Mr. Wang Cesan’s “Seriously Treat the ‘Despising Knowledge’ Trend in Education – Again Look at the Discussion on the Wording of the Examination Oriented Education Transiting to the Quality Education”. As a response, Professor Zhong Qiquan also published “The Moldy Cheese – Reviewing Seriously Treat the ‘Despising Knowledge’ Trend in Education” in the *Global Education*. Then a number of scholars joined in the discussion, and they proposed new views for the core problems such as examination oriented education, quality oriented education, knowledge, learning, the current education and teaching reform, the reference and inheritance of the language education system, the language education reform of the new century and others.

CONCLUSION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

When we review the history, we find that the collective wisdom come from the contention of hundred schools of thoughts and the infinite enthusiasm for the language education promote the ideas of the language education to become more and more mature. However, we also find that there are the bigger gaps between the language education theories and teaching practice at the same time. Some people like to have discussions and arguments. Others do not care about the discussions and arguments, and focus on teaching. The theory research is heated up and the teaching practice research still is cold, so the contrast is clear. Therefore, to achieve the unity of the tool character and humanity character, we need more education researchers and teachers to work together.

When we research the history, we learn a lot from the history of the development of Chinese language

education in a century. The history tells us: Today's language education not only needs to inherit but also learn, inheriting the wisdom of the ancestors and learning from foreign experience. However, no matter it is the inheritance or learning, we all need to be based on the Chinese language itself, and do things according to our national conditions. Let the language education be more independent and let the ideas of language education be more scientific. In the new period, the ideas of language education should go to the essential attribute of the language education, namely the mother tongue education; the ultimate direction of the language education should be the full development of human, If so, perhaps the ideas of China modern language

education will not be lost in the wide world and the long history.

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