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Chinese Culture and Adult Learning: between tradition and experiment.

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Learning has occupied a prominent place in Chinese culture since ancient times with the philosophy and practice of *K'ung Ch'iu*, (c551-c479, BCE), known to the Occident as Confucius, a pervasive influence (Liu Wu-Chi, 1955). The promotion of learning was the duty of Imperial officials, and this also achieved high levels of civic participation by local patrons and scholars in one of the earliest known models of public-private partnership in schooling. In pre-modern China, the defining features of learning as a cultural tradition were: the ubiquity of ideas about learning in everyday life; visible institutions of learning in the community; and knowledge dissemination among the populace.

Learning as a Cultural Tradition

The Chinese character for learning is “*Xue*” which is found in many Chinese idioms. For example, “*Xue Wu Zhi Jing*” or “There is no limit to learning;” “*Huo Dao Lao, Xue Dao Lao*” or “To live and learn;” “*Xue Er Shi Xi Zhi*” or “To learn with perseverance and application.” These sayings show a Confucian attitude to life, preferred behaviour and conduct, and qualities such as diligence and curiosity. The leap from idea to application in the language of the common people shows the embodiment of learning within Chinese culture that persists throughout the life course.

Other evidence of learning as a cultural tradition is the institution of schooling in pre-modern China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 BCE). The “*Zhou Xue*” or “provincial school” was a form of “*Guan Xue*” or “official school” at the ancient city (*Zhou*) level. This formed a trio with a Confucian temple, “*Zhou Xue*,” and an examination hall or “*Gong Yuan*” to constitute the cultural patrimony of ancient cities which are visible to this day. There were also private academies “*Shu Yuan*” from the *Tang* Dynasty (618-907 BCE) that were vibrant educational centres promoting Confucianism. An example was the Yuelu Academy, Changsha, at which the Song Dynasty neo-Confucian scholar *Zhu Xi* taught. This Academy was incorporated later into Hunan University. There was also Chinese homeschooling “*Si Shu*” from the age of four called “*Meng Xue*” which laid a foundation for learners to progress to other forms of schooling continuing into adulthood in preparation for the different levels of the Imperial Civil Service examination. It was similar to the modern kindergarten and early primary years during which reading, writing and moral behaviour are taught.

The development of commercial publishing enabled learning and knowledge to spread beyond the scholar caste to the increasingly literate masses. *The Four Great Classical Novels* were published during the *Ming* (1358-1644 BCE) and *Qing* (1644-1912 BCE) dynasties, getting a wide readership that extended from China to Japan. This literature included a new form of storytelling, written in a vernacular or mixed style accessible to the masses. At the same time, the

élites were enthusiastic book collectors and publishers who enhanced the stock of classical works of literature (Xie 1996). Renowned private libraries such as the *Tian Yi* Pavilion in Ningbo were founded at this time. It is estimated that around 20% of the Chinese population was literate (Rawski 1979). It may be claimed justifiably that adult learning was a significant element in the cultural history of pre-modern China.

Understanding Chinese Learning

In the modern era, Chinese education changed in many ways, from the late *Qing* dynasty reform such as the abolition of “*Ke Ju*” or Imperial Civil Service examinations in 1905; to the influence of American educational philosophy in the 1920s, notably that of John Dewey on progressive Chinese educators and the “Mass Education Movement” (Yen, 1925) during the Nationalist Republic (1911-1949); and the Communist illiteracy eradication campaigns and Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic (Morgan, 2017); the opening up and economic reforms of the 1980s which saw changes to adult, vocational and continuing education (Zhang and Zhu 2021; Jing et al 2022); and the adoption of lifelong learning to create learning societies; to realizing the “China Dream” through the Belt and Road Initiative (Sun and Kang 2019).

What effects have these changes had on adult learning in China? While learners chose to follow personal development and gains, policymaking continued to be informed by a nationalist political agenda (Wang and Parker 2014). Sun and Kang (2019) introduced the notion of systematic approaches for creating learning societies in East Asia generally. They suggest that cultures with a Confucian heritage and historical imprint of learning can more easily transition into lifelong education. Notable within the lifelong education models created is the emphasis given to the collective rather than to individuals in achieving national development. It is not difficult to understand this, as the purpose of the Confucian concept of self-cultivation is the greater goal of serving the good of humanity. In *The Book of Great Learning*, one of the four classics of Confucianism, is found the apophthegm: “Cultivate your body, rectify your mind, harmonize your home, rule the country, and all under heaven will be in peace” (*Xiushen Zhengxin Qijia Zhiguo Pingtianxia*). The other three Confucian classics are *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *The Analects*, and *Mencius*.

The non-cognitive learning experience of diaspora Chinese who are trying to recover the culture of their forebears should also be noted (Chen 2019). Learning about culture and people will affect views and attitudes and open up new learning opportunities. One salient example of emotional learning is that of feelings for the place of family origin “*Jiaxiang Qinghuai*” shown by the Chinese. This leads them to favour it in decision-making about business partnerships, investment, agency appointments and philanthropy. The emotional strength of such feelings among the Chinese surpasses many other cultures. They may be attributed to an attachment towards relatives, place of origin, and country but do not necessarily equate with patriotism. In rural China, it is exemplified by what the renowned anthropologist Fei Xiao Tong termed an “earthbound society” or ‘from the soil’ (Fei, 1992), a concept akin to “*hiraeth*” (longing) in Welsh and “*campanilismo*” or parochialism in Italian. This is an aspect of Chinese business education that calls for holistic adult teaching and learning.

The Occidental way based on objectified knowledge, rational epistemology, a dichotomy between mind and body and independent learning by autonomous and self-directed learners is the dominant discourse internationally (Knowles, 1984). Confucianism offers an alternative in which the individual engages in both introspection and peer learning that self-improves and elevates to the status of a virtuous person in the community. Thus, the elements of inner experience, self-knowledge, learning from role models, and development of self-conscious reflection are all present in learning: to heed the admonition in the *Analects* of Confucius: “*Xue Er Bu Si Ze Wang, Si Er Bu Xue Ze Dai*” or “Learning without thinking leads to confusion, thinking without learning is perilous.”

Tradition, Progressivism, and Vocationalism in Chinese Adult Learning

Has this cultural approach to adult learning been put into practice in China? To answer in detail would require a comparison of the philosophical perspectives of Chinese adult educators *vis-à-vis* their foreign peers. For example, a survey of the philosophical orientations of Chinese and American vocational educators found that the two groups had the same preferences and were considered to have a similar liberal education outlook, in preference to analytical and radical philosophies (Wang and Torrisi-Steele 2016). However, it was a limited survey that does not have wider applicability to the philosophy of education of Chinese adult educators. Again, teaching inspired by Confucianism has elements of both liberal and humanistic philosophies and this should also be considered when interpreting the findings of the survey.

As we have noted, China’s modernization from the late Qing Dynasty to the early years of the Nationalist Republic (the 1920s), was a period of experimentation with Occidental cultural models, particularly American Protestant Christianity. The cultural élite, many of whom were educated overseas, were eager to bring about change. The attempted accommodation between new and old cultures was a tension in China’s modernization, with contested decisions about China’s traditional practices, actual needs, social realities, and the foreign concepts that were introduced. (Huters 2022). In adult learning, this represented a process of indigenization of Occidental educational philosophy and practices such as progressivism and vocationalism.

Table 1 lists the homegrown adaptations of Occidental educational thinking popular during that period. All four strands share the commonality of using education, and more specifically educating adults outside of formal educational institutions, to modernize the country. It is seen that the individual’s betterment as the direct outcome of learning is always connected with benefits for society and the nation. Examples are industrialization and employment opportunities (Huang Yan Pei); literacy and civic awareness for character building and creating economically productive citizens (James Yan and Yu Qing Tang); and using local wisdom and practical experience to enable problem-solving while absorbing new knowledge (Tao Xing Zhi). Both social education and life education were heavily influenced by the American John Dewey’s progressivist thinking but they also had distinctive Chinese characteristics. In Tao’s concept of life education can be found elements of the grand cultural tradition of learning in Confucianism as explained in the ‘Instructions for Practical Living’: “*Zhi Zhe Xing Zhi Shi, Xing Zhe Zhi Zhi Cheng*” or “Knowledge is the beginning of practice, and doing is the completion of knowing,” by the 16th-century neo-Confucian scholar Wang Yang Ming:

These four advocates of adult learning are good examples of accommodation between old and new cultures in which the grand tradition of Confucian teaching and learning continues to be relevant despite the incorporation of Occidental thought into Chinese educational modernization. However, Wu (2003) considers they have achieved only limited success despite their lofty aims because of war, internal strife, the underdeveloped economy and the backward society in China of those days. There was some continuity with the next phase of the modernization drive as Yu and Huang served in the government of the People's Republic. James Yan Yang Chu went on to make an international contribution, for example through the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines.

Current Trends

In formal learning, the higher education system is now confident enough to re-consider the civilizational roots of modern China. The revival of classical studies in major Chinese universities is a manifestation of the aim to place ancient Chinese thought alongside the study of Greek and Latin classics. Ideally, it treats both as comparably valid aspects of a common human heritage. This “cultural turn” in Chinese modernization also has a traditionalist and conservative perspective that rejects postmodern discourse and the culture wars that are affecting Occidental societies (Che 2022).

In non-formal learning, adult learning is encouraged as China becomes an ageing society with 13% of the population over 65 years in 2021. Learning opportunities for the elderly aim to serve healthy ageing and to support active citizenship. Opportunities are now a mixed economy of provision including government institutions serving retired civil servants, universities that open their facilities as part of social outreach, and community-based institutions relying on local initiative and funding, and commercial provision. Irrespective of the type of institution, participants take up learning to keep themselves healthy and independent and be less of a burden to their children. They also contribute what they have learned (e.g., Chinese medicine wellness and diet therapy) to help others through volunteering. The cultural basis for such learning by the elderly is found in well-known Confucian maxims, and in the state's policies of strengthening community participation (Guo and Shan 2019).

An interesting development in mass creative literary activity is web fiction or “*Wang Wen*.” It is quickly becoming a propagator of popular culture in China and diaspora communities as selected titles have found their way to the international market. In China, the writing, commissioning, curating and dissemination of the web novel is estimated to be worth USD4.4 billion with 26 million published titles. The industry has enlisted more than 20 million fiction writers to reach a readership of half of the country's online population. This presents itself as a new literary genre but is criticized by the cultural mainstream as trivial and fragmentary. However, web fiction does bring the readers' preferences into story and character development. These serialized web novels are economic products as much as cultural ones. They may controversially be compared with the novels produced for the literate masses during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Such web novels are contemporary examples of informal learning (Zhao 2022).

To conclude, the path taken by adult learning in China is a continuous process of modernist realization in which individuals look for meaning in their existence, but are aligned to the collective in a common purpose of a better self that contributes to an harmonious society, and nation (Wang and Morgan, 2012). The latter is of course traditional in Chinese culture and society.

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Table 1. Indigenous Thinking in Chinese Adult Education

	Chinese Vocationalism	Mass Education (<i>Ping Min Jiao Yu</i>)	Social Education	Life Education
Purpose	Using vocational education to revitalize Chinese industry and promote employment	Eradication of ignorance, poverty, debility and self-interest among rural people and transform them into Chinese citizens	Improvement of Chinese people's lives and quality of society to create economically productive citizens with high civic awareness	Creation of democratic, experiential learning-based, community education in rural China
Approach	Socialization of Vocational Education	Rural Reconstruction	Education throughout society; Various sectors of society supply educational opportunities	Life is education; Society as school; Unity of teaching, learning and reflective acting
Main Proponent	Huang Yanpei	James Yan Yangchu	Yu Qingtang	Tao Xingzhi