



CHINA STUDIES

# A HISTORY OF CHINESE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

Guo Qijia



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# **A History of Chinese Educational Thought**

*by* Guo Qijia



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## PREFACE

In the course of thousands of years of history, China has created a splendid ancient culture, which eventually became the spiritual mainstay for the continuous growth and development of the Chinese nation. Education, whether formal, domestic or social, underpinned the progress of ancient Chinese culture, both material and spiritual.

Whereas in Western countries, religion was the vehicle of culture and learning in ancient times, in China this role was played by education. Realizing the importance of education, the ancestors of the Chinese began to conduct organized education as early as four or five thousand years ago. According to the historical record in *Shang Shu*, in the time of King Yun, a special government office was established to be in charge of educational affairs. For instance, an official named Qi was assigned to the post of "Situ" to take care of inculcating the five moral qualities among the people, i.e., teaching fathers to be fair and just, mothers to be kind, elder brothers to be considerate, younger brothers to be respectful and sons to be filial; and another person named Kui was assigned to the post of "Dianyu" (manager of music), responsible for teaching music and poetry to the people. Owing to the fine tradition of giving emphasis to education, the splendid ancient culture of China has been able to survive four or five thousand years and remains vigorous up until now. Moreover, its contents are richer and more unique compared with those of other ancient cultures in the world.

In the times of the Shan (also called Yin or Yinshang, ca. 16th-11th century BC) and Zhou (ca. 11th century-256 BC) dynasties, Chinese culture already developed to a considerable degree, with the amount of knowledge being large enough to prepare for the development of school education. During the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century-771 B.C.), there were not only state-run schools, but also those run by the people; not only colleges, but also primary schools. Attention was paid not only to palace education but also to pre-school education. An education system with the so-called "six arts," namely, rites, music, archery, chariot-driving, calligraphy and mathematics, as the main subjects gradually came into being. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 BC), the fruit of civilization matured and the Chinese culture entered the so-called "classical period". With the emergence and development of "private schooling" as a new form of education, there appeared a number of great masters of private education full of wisdom, among them Confucius, Mo Zi, Mencius, Xun Zi, Lao Zi, Zhuang Zi, Shang Yang and Han Fei. They all made great achievements in educational thoughts, resulting from the fact that they had the freedom to conduct private teaching. In addition to a large amount of texts related to education contained in such great works as *The Analects*, *Mo Zi*, *Mencius*, *Xun Zi*, *Guan Xi* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* by *Lu Buwei*, there were also some specialized works on education like the *Great Learning*, *Records of Learning*, *Urging People to Learn*, *Obligations of a Disciple*, etc. In fact, *Great Learning* and the *Records of Learning* were a summary of the rich educational thought and experience of the time. The earliest systematic works on education in the world, they laid the foundations of educational theory in ancient China.

During the Western Han Dynasty (206-25 BC), some comprehensive universities of considerable magnitude were established, which specialized in imparting knowledge and in professional



research. For example, one of the universities was founded in 124 BC (fifth year in the Yuansuo reign period of Emperor Wu) and located in the western suburbs of the capital city Chang'an (today's Xi'an). It was the top institution of learning in China at the time and comparable with the universities of Athens and Alexandria, its contemporary counterparts in Europe. These ancient Chinese universities employed learned veteran scholars with sound morality as professors, or "*boshi*" (meaning "doctor") as they were called, and students were enrolled to follow their tutors as "disciples of the doctors". The curriculum was mainly aimed at enabling students to grasp knowledge and put it to practical use. Taught and trained in different specialties, these students were provided with excellent living conditions. They were to be employed as officials after passing their examinations. In 4 AD (fourth year of the Yuanshi reign period of Emperor Ping of the Western Han Dynasty), a large scale of construction of school buildings was carried out to accommodate as many as ten thousand university students. This marked the beginning of large-scale construction of university buildings in Chinese history. During the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD), the number of university students enrolled each year mounted to 30,000, helping to form a special district of institutions of higher learning in the capital city of Luoyang (in present-day Henan Province). The universities then had both inside and outside lecture-rooms, each measuring about 30 meters long and 10 meters wide, where lectures for large audiences were given. The attendees often numbered several thousand. No wonder Ban Gu, a famous historian of the time, highly admired the Han-dynasty education, describing it as "numerous schools all thronged with students", which gives a glimpse of the prosperity of education then.

The Tang Dynasty (618-901) was the prime time of Chinese feudal society, witnessing the peak of politics, economics and culture. The traditions of Han Dynasty education was revived, and the

educational system that had been developed since the Wei and Jin dynasties were brought into full play. As a result, school education was able to reach a new peak. An examination system for selecting capable personnel was also set up and developed in the Tang Dynasty, and school education was made to tally with the examination system to ensure students met the criteria and demands for educated personnel. And this, in turn, produced further incentive to the development of school education. From the central imperial courts to the local governments, a comprehensive school system had been established, with the central government establishing a special department of education (called *guozijian*, meaning "directoriate of imperial academy") to supervise all the schools in the country. This department had double functions: it was both a university and a governmental organ of educational administration. It consisted of a number of colleges, such as the Imperial College, the Four-Specialties College, the History College, the Mathematics College, the College of Laws, in addition to the two research institutes called Hongwen and Chongwen. Local government-run schools, i.e., those run by local authorities at the level of prefectures and counties, including some special training schools, were also flourishing: law schools, calligraphy schools, mathematics schools, medical schools, schools of veterinary science, colleges of astronomy, music schools, etc., covering a great variety of specialties and professions. A medical college was composed of three specialties: medicine, acupuncture and massage, with the department of medicine being divided into five sections: internal medicine (seven years), surgery (five years), pediatrics (five years), otolaryngology (two years), and moxibustion (two years). The acupuncture department taught the students to understand meridians and points and to get familiar with various syndromes. The massage department taught the students to grasp the method of guiding and regulating *qi* through the meridians, to treat eight kinds of diseases, i.e.,

diseases resulting from the following eight pathogenic factors: wind, cold, heat, hunger, overeating, overwork and idleness, and to acquire the skill of bone-fitting. Such a medical college usually had a medicinal herb garden attached to it, where the students might learn about various kinds of medicinal herbs and gain the skills of planting, collecting, processing and preserving them, thus combining field work with learning for better results. In medical education, great attention was paid to extensive study of medical classics, and teaching and learning were combined with practice to cultivate the students' practical ability, and the assignment of jobs depended on their competence in medical treatment as well as on the evaluation of their study and medical practice. This was a fine tradition of education, which indicates that, as early as in the seventh and eighth centuries, China had already established an education system for specialized schools. In Europe, such schools were not founded until the 17th and 18th centuries when capitalism was already well advanced there, i.e., they appeared nearly a thousand years later than in China.

In the Tang Dynasty, all China's neighboring countries, such as Japan, Shinla, Baekje and Koguryo (all the last three were in the present-day Korean Peninsula) sent students to China to study the classics, history, law, rites, literature and science. For instance, thirteen groups of Japanese students, each group numbering from 10 to 30, followed Japanese special envoys to China to study at the national academy. Some Japanese students studied in China for several years, and some even for 20 or 30 years. They played an important role in transplanting the Chinese Tang culture to Japan. Shinla also sent a large number of students to China during the Tang Dynasty. In 840 (the fifth year in the Kaicheng reign of Emperor Wenzhong), as many as 105 students from Shinla went back to their homeland after finishing their studies in China. The capital city Chang'an was then not only the center of the nation's

center of politics, economics, transportation, culture and education, but also the hub of cultural and educational exchanges with various other countries, both eastern and western. Students from friendly countries were provided with favorable conditions by the Tang court in terms of food and clothing as well as facilities for study. As a result, Chinese culture was spread far and wide. Indeed, foreign students formed a bridge in furthering friendly relations between China and other countries and in cultural and educational exchanges.

After the Tang and Song dynasties, there appeared a new type of co-educational institute called "*shuyuan*" (institute of classical learning), which used to be a place for storing and checking out books, or a private place for study, and later became a kind of educational institute. In the Song Dynasty, a great advance of such institutes was made; among the famous ones were the White Deer Cave Institute on Lushan Mountain in Jiangxi Province, the Stone Drum Institute in Hengyang, Hunan Province, the Ying-tianfu Institute in Shangqiu, Henan Province, the Yuelu Institute in Changsa, Hunan Province, the Songyang Institute in Dengfeng, Henan Province and the Maoshan Institute in Jiangning, Jiangsu Province. These institutes were usually sited in places dominated by scenic mountains and forests, and the persons in charge were mostly renowned scholars of a certain area and were referred to as "cave masters" or "mountain masters". These institutes varied in the way they were run: local people ran some of them, the government others; some were managed by local people but subsidized by the government. These institutes had many laudable characteristics, such as: serving both as institutes of education and as institutes of academic research, laying emphasis on the importance of practice as well as on a clear explanation of meaning; having a "lecturing system," an important form of academic exchange that allowed scholars of different schools to lecture in each other's in-

stitutes; employing the combined teaching methods of independent study, collective discussion and consultation, with a particular emphasis on the teacher's guidance in studies; a harmonious and friendly teacher-student relationship based on moral principles; teachers of profound learning and sound morality who were devoted to teaching and education; respectful and modest students determined to seek knowledge and a good overall education.

In the course of her ancient historical development, China produced a great number of educators, ranging from Confucius to Zhu Xi and Wang Fuzhi. They embodied the spiritual outlook of their respective times, and marked the various stages of education in China and the development of educational thought, thus making great contributions to the development of promulgation of the Chinese ancient culture.

In ancient China, great importance was attached, in education, to the cultivation of a person's morality and the sense of integrity, laying great emphasis on nurturing a lofty aspiration in one's life and the self-sacrificing spirit of "integrity first, life second" centering on the sense of moral obligation and historical duty. Education in ancient China advocated perseverance in one's pursuits, the nurturing of a noble mind to treat one's own interests and those of the nation as the same, defending the latter at a risk to personal safety, and viewing the fulfillment of one's social obligations as a personal moral accomplishment. All this helped to form a powerful uniting force throughout the society, and gradually developed into an ever-lasting and deep-rooted educational tradition. Ancient Chinese educators, from Confucius, Mencius, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi to early Buddhist masters and to the neo-Confucian philosophers in the Song and Ming dynasties, all gave great emphasis to moral education and self-cultivation and advocated moral perfection, thus creating a series of unique measures of moral education and cultivation. These moral qualities these great ancient

Chinese educators campaigned for had eventually turned into the fine traditions of the Chinese nation and they had given inspiration to a great number of people who turned out to be outstanding figures of noble ideals and integrity; the fine traditions they helped formulate has often played a positive role in the spiritual civilization of the Chinese nation.

Is there a bright, noble side in human nature in addition to its selfishness? And how to give a full play to the bright side and suppress the effects of the dark side? With regard to these questions, ancient Chinese educators held that, although the solution to the questions did not solely depend on knowledge and logic, they did contribute to self-discovery and self-perfection. These ancient educators developed systematic and profound theories on learning, teaching, self-teaching and self-improvement, as well as a series of unique methods and principles of teaching and learning, such as learning through reasoning, seeking knowledge from books, learning something new by reviewing the old, treating learning and meditation as equally important in one's study, making progress step by step in natural order, summarizing and simplifying what one learnt, teaching through elicitation, teaching different students with different methods, overcoming one's weaknesses by self-cultivation, improving oneself through both teaching and learning, educating people through word and deed, being respectful as students and warm-hearted as teachers, etc. In addition, there had also been accumulated rich experience and theories in such fields as social education, family education, children's education, pre-school education, art education, science and technology education, etc. All of these were typical of Chinese fashion, with Chinese characteristics and Chinese style of learning; many formed an excellent educational legacy with ever-lasting influence.

In general, ancient Chinese educational thoughts had three striking characteristics:

First, comprehensiveness, i.e., educational thoughts based on overall considerations. Ancient Chinese educators realized that the educational system was a sub-system of the overall social system, and many educational problems were, in effect, social problems to be examined and tackled on the basis of an overall consideration of the entire social system, and that the settlement of educational problems would, in its turn, accelerate social development and progress. For instance, Confucius, who had always laid stress on education, considered population, social wealth, and education to be the three main elements for the function of a nation. He believed that, when the development of production made the people well off, the only important thing left was "to educate them." Believing that "families are the basis of a nation," he underlined family ethics and social morality, namely, "filial piety, fraternal duty, faithfulness and trustworthiness"; and he realized the great importance of education in governing a country and in stabilizing the society. His idea of placing education in the foremost position stemmed from regarding the cultivation of individual morality and raising the level of social morality as the basic condition of efficient government of a nation. This idea was indeed quite insightful. In the *Records of Learning*, the role of education was synthesized into the following: "To build a country and govern the people, education must come first"; "It is only through education that fine customs can be established among the people." In this it can be seen clearly that the role of education consisted of two related aspects: producing qualified people to meet the demands of the state and forming sound social morality and customs. This might be said to be a synthesis and summary of ideas about the role of education in ancient China, which still contains a value of reference even today.

Second, its dialectical quality, or unity of opposites: Although ancient Chinese educators emphasized the necessity of placing moral education in the most prominent position, they did not ne-

glect the role of education in various kinds of knowledge. For instance, Confucius said, "An gentleman should have sound moral integrity"; "A gentleman should be good at learning professional knowledge, with which he may find correct ways"; and "To be powerful in one's action, one must have knowledge." He also said, "One who stresses only morality without paying attention to learning knowledge will remain ignorant and foolish"; "A person merely stressing morality cannot really gain sound morality, a wise person with knowledge is more likely to be a moral person"; and, "Without knowledge, how can sound morality be obtained?" Similarly, Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BC) had this to say, "A moral person without knowledge will show his love indiscriminately; and a knowledgeable person without sound morality will not achieve much." These quotations reflect the principle of "unity of morality and knowledge" in ancient Chinese education: Moral education was put first, and knowledge education second; moral education should be conducted through knowledge education, the latter being of service to the former. There existed between moral education and knowledge education a relationship of mutual reliance, mutual penetration, mutual influence and unity. Such a principle of unity of opposites was also stressed in moral education itself, in which the two opposites refers to understanding moral concepts and establishing moral belief. To this effect, Confucius said, "Knowing a moral concept without trying to practice it, one will lose it as a result; if one merely stays at the stage of knowing morality without turning it into a belief, then morality will lose its governing function. Besides, a similar relationship of contradiction and unity existed between a person's knowledge and his ability." Liu Zhiji (661-721), a scholar in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), said that a knowledgeable man without capability was just like a man with a great property yet with no ability to manage it, and that a man with talent yet without knowledge was like a skilled carpenter having no



ax and timber with which to build a house. Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), a Ming Dynasty 1368-1644) scholar, said, "Some ancients used to say, 'Don't give your golden needle to others, but just embroider a beautiful mandarin duck for them to admire.' Now, I would like to reverse it like this, 'Give your golden needle to others and don't just embroider a mandarin duck for them'." Xu Guangqi stressed the importance of ability-cultivation, believing that teaching was not just a matter of explaining some set knowledge, but also a matter of training the students' ability to think, reason and use scientific methods. Such a relationship of contradiction and unity was also believed to exist between teaching and learning, and between the teacher and the pupil as well. The *Records of Learning* says, "It is in learning that one becomes aware of one's own ignorance, and it is in teaching that one comes to realize difficulties. Being aware of one's ignorance will make one change a conceited attitude and realizing one's difficulties will motivate one to strive even harder. This is what is meant by the saying that teaching and learning benefit each other." Here, the relationship between teaching and learning, which is one of mutual reliance and mutual enhancement, is lucidly explained. Teaching and learning were seen as two factors of a continuously deepening and advancing process. Learning will improve teaching and teaching will add to learning. This saying does not just refer to the concept of unity of opposites between teaching and learning. It also refers to the relationship of mutual benefit between the teacher and student. To this effect, Han Yu (763-824) said, "The student does not have to be inferior to the teacher and the teacher does not have to be superior to the student. The difference between the teacher and student lies only in the fact that they gained knowledge at different times or they have been trained in different fields or professions." With this point of view, he had not only rejected the cliché that "the student should be inferior to the teacher and the teacher should be superior to the student",