CHAPTER FOUR

TRADITIONS OF CHINESE EDUCATION AND THEIR FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. EVOLUTION AND FORMATION OF CHINESE EDUCATION TRADITIONS

Education is a component of a culture. Chinese education is an important component of Chinese culture. On the one hand, Chinese education serves as a tool for the selection, dissemination, and processes of change in the culture; on the other hand, Chinese education has developed its own traditions on the foundation of Chinese culture. Chinese education traditions have undergone a development process in their formation because historical periods involve certain cultural and educational traditions. Theoretically speaking, educational traditions and cultural traditions develop concurrently. In reality, however, that is not always the case because the development of education is relatively independent from that of the culture. Sometimes education lags behind the development of the overall culture, such as the period between the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) when scientific knowledge was spread among scholar officials but was not reflected in school education. At other times education might surpass the development of the overall culture, such as the period of the late Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China (1912–1949) when Western school systems were introduced into education yet the overall culture was semi-feudal and semi-colonial. Education traditions are formed within the political, economical, and cultural influences of its historical context and, at the same time, they reflect the inheritance and advancement of previous educational traditions. For example, after the introduction of modern school systems into China, many changes took place in the school systems, structures, and teaching content and methodologies, yet the educational values, the perspectives on educated personnel and many teaching methods retained the deep influences of traditional Chinese education.

One conceptual issue must be noted here regarding education traditions and traditional education. Education traditions refer to the system of education with its distinctive qualities that has evolved in a country, region, or ethnic group over a long period of time. These traditions include
educational thoughts, systems, and models of education. Traditional education refers to the educational systems with particular characteristics that have developed in the past. Traditional education systems are the systems of the past that have been inherited by the present. Expressed in language tenses, education traditions are in the present tense, and traditional education is in the past tense. Education traditions are developed on the foundation of traditional education, and they advance traditional education. Therefore, there is no conflict between traditional education and education traditions. Some people regard traditional education as conservative and outdated but this generalization is incorrect. Traditional education does reflect a conservative feature because of its long evolution; however, it is not static and it develops and changes. The excellent and valuable content of traditional education can be passed on and built upon while the content that is outdated and inappropriate will be discarded. Therefore, today's education tradition can only be developed by both inheriting and criticizing traditional education. Critique is not necessarily negation and rejection; rather, it facilitates selection and reformation. In other words, education is not only facing the challenges of selection and reformation of cultural element, but it is also facing the challenges of self-selection and self-reformation. The development of education traditions in China is a process of constant self-selection and self-reformation.

Based on the above rationale, education traditions in China have experienced a process of formation and development, and the process includes the following major stages:

**Primitive Education in Remote Antiquity**

Primitive society is the first human society in human evolution. In primitive society, productivity was low, tools were limited to stone artifacts and wood bows and arrows, food and drink only included raw animal meat, nuts and berries and water. It was not until later that humans learned to make pottery, use fire, and to consume cooked food, and even later that they learned to plant crops and to pasture animals. According to *The Ancient Society* by Morgan, human society went through uncivilized, savage, and civilized stages. Primitive society covered the uncivilized and savage stages, and it lasted for about one million years. During that time, human beings needed to pass on experiences and knowledge to younger generations for the sake of survival. Education therefore emerged. Primitive educational activities were conducted and completed in collective activities such as working in groups and offering sacrifices to the gods and ancestors.