Chapter Five

Influence of Traditional Chinese Culture on Chinese Education

1. Traditional Chinese Culture Shapes Chinese Education

Traditional Chinese education is aligned with traditional Chinese culture because both evolved at the same time and because education is itself a component of culture. Traditional Chinese education was fired and molded in the furnace of traditional Chinese culture. Since traditional Chinese culture holds Confucian culture at its core, Confucianism influences every aspect of traditional Chinese education, from educational philosophies and values to educational content and methodologies of education. It is safe to say that traditional Chinese education functions to pass on Confucian culture. In this section we will discuss the impacts of traditional Chinese culture on traditional Chinese education.

Emphasis on Education and Education as Primary Element in Building the Nation and Developing a People

Historically, education has been highly valued and regarded as critical to the existence, stability and survival of the nation. This is why the early Chinese state oversaw and developed a state education system—it was believed that the development of education should be the first priority for building the country. Education was valued at the times of Huangi, Yao, and Shun. During Shun's reign, specialized educational institutions appeared. According to Shangshu, Emperor Shun once said: “Kui, I give you the order to teach classical music to official's sons.”¹ This also shows that specialized government employees were educating children from noble families. In the chapter “Original Records of the Five Emperors” in Historical Record,² there are documentations of similar activities, and one paragraph even mentions the education of ordinary people: “Qi, the

¹ Kui, a person's name, and in legend he was an official in charge of music during the time of Emperors Yao and Shun.
² Historical Records, by Sima Qian (145 or 135 BC) of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–25 AD).
ordinary people do not get along with each other and their conduct is not appropriate. You are the Situ, and if you teach them the Five Teachings, the tension would be loosened.” The Five Teachings here refer to the ethics of the family with consanguinity, including righteousness of the father, kindness of the mother, friendliness of the older brother to younger brothers, respect of the younger brothers to the older brother, and filial respect of sons toward the parents. These are the ethics of the consanguineous family, and they were required in the education of the ordinary people. During this time, China was still in its primitive communal society stage, and the relationship between the emperor and his subordinates was not mentioned because China had not yet transitioned into a monarchy.

As society continued to change and productivity continued to develop, education became increasingly more important. According to Chinese classics, schools were in existence in the Yu (the last dynasty of the Five Legendary dynasties between 2600 BC to 2070 BC), Xia (2070 BC–1600 BC), Shang (1600 BC–1046 BC) and Zhou (1046 BC–771 BC) Dynasties. Up until the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC–771 BC), the slave society had become quite extensive and complex, and various levels of schools appeared and were divided into imperial and local schools. The imperial schools were created for the children of higher class and noble families, while local schools for children of the ordinary people. The Historical Records On Learning indicate that “in ancient times, there were Shu at the family level; Yang at the Dang level, a community of 500 households; Xu at the Shu level, a region of 12,500 households; and Xue at the national level.” Therefore in the Western Zhou period, a comprehensive educational system was in place.

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC–476 BC), Confucius founded private schools. Representatives of various schools of thoughts also opened schools and recruited students. A culture of learning took shape in society. The Confucian culture paid close attention to the roles of education in building a country. In its opening lines, On Learning acknowledges that in order “to build a country and to govern a people, instruction and learning are first priorities,” and it regards education as the

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3 Qi, a person’s name. Situ, Minister of Land and People.
5 See section V of this chapter for detailed descriptions of On Learning.