

Traditional Culture Education in the Higher Education of China: A Historical Review

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Abstract

Carrying out traditional culture education in higher education is not only an important initiative to promote cultural heritage and innovation but also an important means of nurturing young college students. Retracing the development of traditional culture education in higher education in China from a historical perspective will help us to understand its value and significance in the cultivation of young talents in the new era. This paper attempts to review the policy background and history of traditional culture education development in China. Traditional culture education in higher education had undergone a period of confusion and exploration prior to the founding of New China and went through a period of withering and even stagnation up until the 1980s. It was only in the 1990s that it was established and formalised as a subject of study in higher education to meet the increasing demand for spiritual and cultural construction in China's rapid development. It is now being developed in an orderly manner in higher education in the form of classroom teaching, campus culture construction, and student club activities to promote its comprehensive development. It is now recognised that traditional culture education will play an important role in higher education in China in keeping with the context of the rise of China and the rejuvenation of the nation and to infuse a stronger sense of confidence in students to engage in global exchanges and competitions.

Introduction

Culture is both the soul of an ethnic group and the spiritual support of a nation. The culture of the ethnic group one belongs to shapes one's perception of the world, feelings about one's life, and the pursuit of meaning in life. Chinese traditional culture is the wisdom of the Chinese people, which has accumulated through their civilisation. Its outstanding characteristics of continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, and peace are not only the spiritual core of the Chinese nation's continuous development but also a powerful ideological support for China's current rise (Lan, 2023). Young people are the pillars of national construction, and their knowledge, ability, thought, and culture are crucial to the future of national development. Therefore, it is particularly important for Chinese youth, especially college students, to build up their ideology and spirituality, and the inheritance of traditional culture has been a necessary aspect of the education of Chinese college students to become successful in life. The influence of globalisation has increased communication between people around the world, and cultural exchanges are more common than before. The long history and rich culture of the Chinese are the source of their confidence when interacting with other cultures. Culture education among the young is a means to enhance their self-confidence in communication with and competition in the global community and to contribute to the transmission of culture as a heritage and the wisdom associated with it.

The development of traditional culture education in China has undergone ups and downs during the 20th century. The introduction of the policy of reform and opening has subjected the Chinese, especially the young, to Western influence, with the inevitable consequence of undermining the influence of Chinese traditional culture. Certain "ideologies" and "cultural practices" from western countries have significantly weakened the young Chinese's cultural identity and sense of belonging. China, a country that once exerted significant cultural influence worldwide, is now realising the need to revive its influence in this new era. Higher education in China has been overly concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills at the expense of maintaining and strengthening the humanistic values of the young generations. The fundamental task of a university is to nurture the talents of students who are both knowledgeable and possess traditional moral values. It is also the basic purpose of university education to cultivate talents with a strong moral attitude to contribute to the building of a socialist society with Chinese characteristics. Education in traditional culture involves imparting comprehensive and accurate knowledge of the history, traditions, cultural wealth, and fundamental realities of the Chinese nation to infuse a strong sense of national identity and cultural pride, and hence a moral duty to take up responsibilities for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Chinese campuses are increasingly adopting traditional cultural education in their teaching programmes. Besides teaching classical poetry, traditional Han dress and musical instruments such as Guqin are making regular appearances on campus and on the syllabus. Students now generally accept traditional culture education, acknowledging its essential role in national development.

This study will examine the developmental process of traditional culture education in higher education in China under different historical circumstances in the past 100 years to better understand the value and importance of traditional culture education in the context of contemporary China and enhance its role in the peaceful development of the world.

Recent Trends in the Study of Traditional Culture

Studies on traditional culture education in higher education mainly focus on the current state and theoretical aspects (Li, 2016). The studies on the former are mostly master's degree theses (Shi 2017). These studies basically relied on questionnaire surveys to compile data and examine the status and role of traditional culture education in normal teaching. The general conclusion was that traditional culture education was overlooked in higher education, as were its problems and weaknesses (Sun, 2016). Most of the master's theses investigated the time allocated to teaching, course content, teaching methods, and various problems such as insufficient contact hours, weaknesses in the course content, poor learning atmosphere, and the lack of interest in traditional culture. These studies also included attempts to identify the source of the problems arising from teaching, the qualifications of teachers, course specifications, the learning environment, and related factors (Fu, 2018). Proposals commonly suggested for improvement included increasing teaching hours, enriching the curricular content, more effective integration of traditional culture into ideological and political education, providing a more stimulating learning environment, together with comments on the influence of society and family education (Wang, 2012; Li, 2017).

Research on traditional culture education involves understanding the role of the university as an important base for inheriting and innovating culture as well as a centre for the study of traditional culture. Transforming and innovating traditional culture is possible only with a full understanding of the spiritual value of traditional culture through education. Some institutions of higher education are forming teams to study traditional culture by setting up traditional culture research centres (Zhang, 2019). Peking University established an Institute of Chinese Studies for this purpose. It is doing so by gathering scholars to study traditional culture in literature, history, philosophy, archaeology, and other disciplines, combining research with the popularisation of culture, and publishing a series on *Research in Chinese Studies* to enrich and promote traditional culture (Sun, 2014; J. Xu, 2021; Gu, 2004). Wuhan University followed with an interdisciplinary research centre on traditional culture, incorporating the traditional arts, history, and philosophy, as well as foreign languages and related disciplines. The research centre and its three research institutes are responsible for research on China's social change and cultural transformation, the study of Chu culture and Chu literature, and the study of Chinese ideology and culture. This move has helped Wuhan University claim a place in research on traditional Chinese philosophy, Ming, and Qing cultures, and Ch'u culture (Sun, 2016). Renmin University has also set up the School of Chinese Classics to undertake teaching and

research on the Chinese classics. Courses on the *Analects* of Confucius and *Zuo Zhuan* are offered at the undergraduate level to nurture talents in cultural studies. Capital Normal University has also created a Communication Centre for Chinese Studies to encourage applied research (Shi, 2017).

At the local level, Liaocheng University set up a school of Chinese culture in 2018 using the platform provided by the Shandong Province Collaborative Innovation Centre of Characteristic Literature and Traditional Culture to study the Confucian classics and related literary works. This university is also engaged in attempts to disseminate traditional culture in conjunction with the cultural departments of the local government. Its research efforts in research on traditional culture were conducted together with promoting traditional culture education, including activities in the recitation of Chinese classics, training in traditional culture for township cadres, promoting the popularity of literary couplets and Confucianist teachings in the countryside, and other activities (Sui, 2012). The school of Chinese culture at Liaocheng University is also involved in the publication of the *Journal of Chinese Bamboo and Silk Manuscripts* to provide a venue for research findings on bamboo and silk literature, in the collation of bamboo and silk manuscripts, and in the comparative studies of bamboo and silk manuscripts and ancient classics to promote intellectual exchanges connected with research on bamboo and silk both in China and overseas (Li, 2016; Sui, 2012).

Despite the efforts of these universities and their research centres, actual research on traditional culture education itself is scarce, whether on the direction of traditional culture education or discussions on the curricular content and structure. There is barely any research on the implementation of traditional cultural education teaching. In view of the lack of research on the practical and theoretical aspects of traditional culture education, this study will attempt to explore the development and changes in traditional culture education in higher education from a historical perspective.

The Policy on Traditional Culture Education in Higher Education

Policy changes concerning China's traditional culture education policy have a crucial role in the development of traditional culture education in higher education in China. The policy itself has evolved and culture education has undergone a process of withering, marginalisation, and revival. Colleges and universities are important bases for talent cultivation and important positions for the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture. This paper demonstrates the development process of traditional culture education in higher education in China by analysing the evolution of China's policies on traditional culture education before and after the founding of New China.

Cultural and educational policies are formulated to serve the dissemination and development of social culture. In modern China, with the rise of the New Culture Movement, the policies on traditional culture education have gone through a process of confusion, exploration, reflection, and emergence in the cultural tide of society's quest for change and innovation.

Uncertainty and Experimentation

China after the Opium War was poor and weak. This was a period of national humiliation. The traditional Chinese culture experienced a shattered sense of pride and confidence. Western learning further undermined the positive aspects of Chinese traditional culture with the advent of a new cultural movement. In the early years of the founding of New China, the original educational and cultural system was cautiously reformed, and the traditional culture that had been preserved through the development of feudal and capitalist societies was basically criticised. Major socialist transformations led to the development of socialist culture, which relied on the selective utilisation of outstanding traditional cultural heritage.

With the May Fourth Movement of 1919, there were two major discussions on traditional culture, in which Cai Yuanpei, Hu Shi, and others began to rethink the role of traditional culture. Chinese intellectuals began to realise the importance of national culture. The national government formulated a more eclectic policy of traditional culture education that emphasised both Chinese and Western cultural values. In 1929, the national government issued the “Educational Vision of the Republic of China and Guidelines for its Implementation,” which called for general education to teach young people and children the moral values of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, love, faith, justice, and peace. In 1940–1945, Mao Zedong analysed the essence and weakness of traditional culture and argued that “China should absorb a large number of foreign progressive cultures as the raw material for its own cultural food” and that “Chinese ancient culture should neither be rejected nor blindly adopted, but should be accepted critically, so as to help promote the new culture of China” (Zhu et al., 2015).

After the founding of New China, the government was at a loss as to how to adapt traditional culture, which was a product of agrarian culture, to the communist society that the Chinese government was trying to build. Although Mao Zedong set an attitude of critical acceptance of traditional culture, how to critically inherit traditional culture was not practiced in the early years of New China, especially in the phase of cultural misappropriation from 1966 to 1976. Traditional culture was treated as feudal and backward and was directly discarded in education. Some scholars also began to pay attention to the study of traditional culture. It was not until 1980, after Deng Xiaoping proposed to draw a clear line between the democratic essence and feudal dregs of cultural heritage, that the Chinese government’s attitude towards traditional culture underwent a major shift and began to reflect on the policy issues regarding traditional culture education (Zhang, 2019). The fact that representative Chinese scholars at the time, such as Feng Youlan and Tang Yijie, began to launch the Chinese Culture Academy in 1984 is a concrete reflection of the change of attitude. The Chinese Culture Academy is mainly dedicated to the research and teaching of traditional Chinese culture and carries out international academic exchanges and other activities to inherit and promote the excellent Chinese traditional culture. In 1985, Professor Du Weiming, a third-generation Neo-

Confucianist, gave a lecture on the philosophy of Confucianism at Peking University, focusing on the values and prospects of Confucianism in modern society. In the document “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Guidelines for the Construction of Socialist Civilization,” which was adopted by the Chinese government in September 1986, the task and requirement of educating young people in traditional culture were clearly stated. What kicked off the research on “education and culture” was Gu Guanhua’s article “Overcoming the Negative Factors of Traditional Culture and Education,” published in 1987 in the *Journal of Educational Research*. The ground-breaking germination of traditional culture education in the 1980s laid an important foundation for the revitalisation and exploration phase of traditional culture education in the 1990s (Zhang, 2019).

Increased Attention to Traditional Culture Education

Since the 1980s, through reform and opening, China’s comprehensive strength has been increasing, and the Chinese nation has entered the track of great rejuvenation, becoming the second largest economy in the world. With the constant in-depth development of Chinese society, the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture have received increasing attention from the Chinese government and academia, which have positioned the excellent traditional culture as the spiritual lifeline of the Chinese nation and the fertile cultural ground for the rooting of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In the 1990s, the effects of China’s policy of reform and opening began to take hold, especially the rapid economic and social development, which led to the increasing secularisation and commodification of Chinese society. Popular culture began to proliferate across the country. Unhealthy cultures such as hedonism, money worship, extreme individualism, and historical nihilism are prevailing. The international political environment was constantly changing; the disorder of internet public opinion also started to take shape; and the conflict of multiple ideological values has profoundly affected the cultural psychology of Chinese society. At this time, people began to re-examine the value and charm of traditional culture, in which many moral beliefs have been the spiritual pillars of the Chinese nation for thousands of years and the source of the Chinese nation’s self-confidence. During this period, the “national studies craze” started to emerge. Traditional cultural education also received more attention and emphasis. China’s relevant policies strongly reflected the increased attention to traditional Chinese culture education during this period. The Chinese government issued a series of policies or documents emphasising the need for schools to strengthen education in traditional culture. The Chinese Government drew up the *Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China* in 1993, a representative document that explicitly stipulates that education should inherit and carry forward the excellent cultural traditions of the Chinese nation, thereby establishing the indispensable position of traditional culture in education

(General Office of the State Council, 1993). This was the first time since the founding of New China that school education was given the historical task of inheriting and promoting outstanding traditional culture. The Education Law of the People's Republic of China, adopted at the Third Session of the Eighth National People's Congress in 1995, further emphasised the importance of traditional culture education (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2009a). In 1998, President Jiang Zemin, in celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of Peking University, also pointed out that he hoped that university students would insist on the unification of the study of science and culture with the strengthening of ideological cultivation and that the combination of knowledge-seeking and cultivation was an excellent cultural tradition of the Chinese nation. The Provisions of the State Council of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Deepening Educational Reform and Comprehensively Pushing Forward Quality Education, issued in 1999, state that education in the excellent cultural traditions of the Chinese nation and revolutionary traditions should be carried out in a targeted manner (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2009b). After entering the 21st century, the Chinese government issued several successive documents on the development of traditional culture education, accompanied by a series of policies and measures on traditional culture education, which not only guaranteed the rational development of traditional culture education in China but also gave the development of traditional culture education in China a legitimate status.

In 2001, the Chinese government issued the "Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform (for Trial Implementation)," which called for the preservation and development of the outstanding traditions of the Chinese nation and revolutionary traditions (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2009b). 2006 saw the introduction of the "Outline of the National Cultural Development Plan" for the Eleventh Five-Year Plan period, which put forward proposals for the implementation of traditional culture in school education. In 2007, President Hu Jintao pointed out that Chinese culture was the inexhaustible driving force of the Chinese nation's unceasing growth and unity. He called for a comprehensive understanding of the traditional culture of the motherland and to accept positive values that were compatible with contemporary society and the modern age and that could reflect the national character of the country (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2009a). To strengthen traditional culture education, it was necessary to employ modern scientific and technological means to develop and utilise the rich resources of national culture. The "Circular on the Activities of Primary and Secondary Schools in Creating Schools for the Inheritance of Excellent Chinese Culture and Arts" issued in 2010 stressed the principles to be observed in attempts to transmit traditional culture and the arts, as well as the methods and management style to be used (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2007). The above documents have given further clarity to the value, significance, and importance of traditional culture education. On this

basis, in 2012, the report of the 18th National Congress put forward the knowledge to promote the construction of a strong socialist cultural country, and the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee explicitly sought to improve the education of Chinese excellent traditional culture as an important task in the reform of the field of education (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2009b). In February 2014, President Xi Jinping remarked that to have a place among the various cultures of the world, it was important to pass on the traditional culture of the country. Since then, traditional culture has been regarded as the spiritual lifeblood of the Chinese nation, thereby raising the understanding of traditional culture education to a new level (General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2013).

Prior to 2012, although government documents had mentioned and established the legal status of traditional cultural education on several occasions and had led to an increased awareness of the role of traditional culture in consolidating the roots of the Chinese nation's sense of community and national identity, local officials did not specifically implement traditional culture education. However, it was some principals and teachers at local schools who, together with the parents of their students, relied on limited relevant resources to initiate attempts to carry out traditional cultural activities or related education and training in accordance with state policy. Shandong Province, for example, incorporated traditional culture education into the classroom relatively early. As the home province of Confucius and Mencius, Shandong's traditional cultural atmosphere and resources are relatively rich. Under the guidance of a series of government policies, Shandong took the lead in incorporating traditional cultural content into the mandatory curriculum for primary and secondary schools. In 2008, Shandong's Department of Education issued the "Circular on the Issuance of Guidelines for the Implementation of Local Curricula for Compulsory Education in Shandong Province on Safety Education, Environmental Education, Traditional Culture, and Life Planning Courses (for Trial Implementation)." The circular mapped out a plan to formulate the curriculum concepts, teaching objectives, subject matters, and implementation of traditional culture education. This circular was instrumental in encouraging the teaching of traditional culture in various cities (Zhang, 2019). In 2012, China's new leaders positioned Chinese excellent traditional culture as the root of socialist cultural construction with Chinese characteristics and as the fundamental purpose and important way for the Chinese nation to achieve great rejuvenation. Thus far, the status of Chinese traditional culture education has been upgraded to an unprecedented height (Xi, 2014).

Implementation of Traditional Culture Education

To further emphasise the task of education to establish morality and nurture talents, the "National System for Measuring the Ideological and Moral Construction of Minors" was enacted in 2013. The aim was to set clear evaluation standards for conducting activities, including the recitation of the Chinese classics. This would increase awareness of the contents of traditional culture and guide

the development of traditional culture education (Xi, 2020a). Immediately following this, China's Ministry of Education published the "Guidelines for Improving Education in Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture" (hereafter referred to as the Outline) in 2014, marking the first time when the Ministry of Education systematically planned the development of traditional culture education (Ministry of Education, 2014). The Outline calls for teaching units at all levels to achieve "full coverage" of traditional culture education in the three areas of subject curricula, teaching sessions, and target population, and to incorporate excellent traditional culture education into the evaluation of teaching at all levels of schooling. It also puts forward clear requirements for the objectives and educational tasks in Chinese excellent traditional culture at all stages, from kindergarten to primary school, from junior high school to senior high school to university level and sets out the corresponding requirements for the level of primary and middle-school teaching staff. The outline also provides guidance on what to teach, how to teach, what teaching results to achieve, and other specifics at primary and secondary levels, with particular emphasis on the ease of operation and effectiveness of the methods and approaches. The Outline basically sets out a direction for the tone, teaching objectives, and evaluation standards of traditional Chinese culture education.

The General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China published a document in January 2017 on the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese culture, proposing the integration of excellent traditional culture content into all fields and sections of education, guided by the principles of "integration, segmentation, and orderly progression". This is a national guiding document on traditional culture education and specifies requirements for the goals, tasks, direction, and content of traditional culture education at all levels of government and in all types of educational systems (General Office of the State Council 2021). In 2021, at the centenary of the Communist Party, traditional Chinese culture was regarded as an outstanding asset of the Chinese nation and the foundation for China to stand firm in the world's cultural turbulence (Editorial Department of *Quishi Magazine*, 2021b). Traditional culture education is being integrated into teaching at all levels of education in the country. Higher education in China is responding by devising appropriate measures and adjustments to traditional culture education along with policy changes.

Conclusion

The status of traditional culture education in higher education has reflected China's fluctuating destiny, from total rejection during times of economic backwardness to a gradual return to being integrated into the educational system in keeping with China's rise. It is realised that carrying out traditional culture education is an important strategic task to build a strong and modern nation where the people are proud and confident of their cultural heritage. It is of great significance that the people continue their rich cultural lineage, improve their cultural literacy to safeguard

national cultural security, and enhance national soft power. Traditional Chinese culture is indeed the crystallisation of the wisdom and essence of Chinese civilisation. As the root and the soul of the Chinese nation, it is the scope and depth of this traditional culture that provide the foundation to help China stand firm amidst the world's cultural upheavals. Having reinforced itself through a long and extensive civilisation, traditional culture is the unique identity of the Chinese nation, the root of contemporary Chinese culture, and the spiritual bond that holds together Chinese communities (see Sui, 2012).

With the solid official backing of local and higher authorities and the endorsement of institutions of learning, the future of Chinese traditional culture may look forward to a period of flourishing development. Increased interest in the learning, teaching, and study of traditional culture will deepen understanding through practical and theoretical interpretation of this important subject and contribute to the nation-building of the Chinese state.

In the development of world culture under the concept of globalisation, exchange and mutual understanding are inevitable. Admittedly, to build cultural self-confidence or a culturally strong nation in the true sense of the word, it is also important to focus on the cultural perspectives and educational concepts of other nations. Establishing an open concept for traditional culture education and establishing a global culture vision will enhance the impact of Chinese traditional culture in other regions of the world. China's 5,000 years of traditional culture offer wisdom and insights into solving problems in real life and motivations for the future. Students and the young should engage in cultural exchanges with appropriate knowledge of their own culture.

The Chinese culture has always been the source of the people's spirit, strength, and power, and it is indispensable for the nation's great rejuvenation. In the process of national rejuvenation, traditional culture education will occupy an important position in the cultivation of talents and good citizenship. Traditional culture will inspire college and university students to appreciate the essence of Chinese culture and human values that form the foundation that sustains the prolonged civilisation and national spirit of China. This will, in turn, increase the Chinese's self-confidence in their interactions as well as their competition with all the world's nations.

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