

# Pedagogy of “Life and Practice” and a Reflection on Contemporary Education

Chunjing Yang\*

Yunnan Normal University, Kunming 650500, Yunnan Province, China

\*Corresponding author: Chunjing Yang, 947124226@qq.com

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**Abstract:** Professor Lan Ye’s meta-research on pedagogy and education in *Return to Breakthrough – An Outline of Life and Practice Pedagogy* puts forward the problems of what pedagogy is and what education is, reflects on the problems of contemporary education, and proposes that education should return to its root, which lies in the traditional Chinese problems of education and adults as well as education and life. This paper attempts to clarify the problems raised by Professor Lan Ye and reflect about the problems of contemporary education under meta-education as well as the role and significance of the traditional Chinese educational spirit for contemporary education.

**Keywords:** Contemporary education; Pedagogy; Meta-pedagogy; Life and practice

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## 1. Introduction

One can intuitively feel that the development of science and technology, the progress of the society, and all aspects of human civilization are the achievements of modern education. People use these achievements to support the development of education. At the same time, with the rapid development of education along with science and technology, education is trapped in the torrent of science and technology, which has gradually become the impetus for science and technology and social operation. Education has become a tool of science and technology and the society; it is far away from human itself and human life noumenon. Facing the problem of people’s instrumentalization brought by educational instrumentalization, contemporary educational scholars have been reflecting from all levels and angles, and they have put forward various views as well as solutions. Through the meta-study of pedagogy and education as well as considering what pedagogy is and what education is, Lan Ye, a professor from the Faculty of Education at East China Normal University, combs the origin and development of contemporary education and has proposed that contemporary education should return to the growth of people; that is, people should become people, pay attention to life and to the course of life, return to the debate of “heaven and earth personnel” in traditional education, as well as continue the spirit of traditional education and humanistic spirit. This paper examines Professor Lan Ye’s new outlook on education from three aspects: contemporary education problems, returning to the foundation of traditional education and respecting life, as well as seeking breakthroughs.

## 2. Contemporary education problems

The research on contemporary Chinese pedagogy has been integrated into the tide of world pedagogy research. The reflection on contemporary Chinese education is in fact a reflection on contemporary world education. Professor Lan Ye is exploring the occurrence and development of Chinese education and its historical soil as well as pursuing the basis of contemporary Chinese pedagogy research.

The social upheaval in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China sees the transformation and loss of the classical view of nature. At that time, the radical changes in the nature and structure of society as a whole constituted the political factors and economic foundation that the classical view of nature was gradually obscured. The Westernization Movement and the Reform Movement successively set up various new schools, introduced natural science courses from the west, imported western economic and cultural thoughts on a large scale, as well as opened up the atmosphere in education, forming a group of intellectuals different from traditional scholars. However, it also gradually alienated learners from nature and ancient knowledge, and secondary schools became practical political struggle tools, resulting in the gradual disappearance of the roots of classical natural outlook and traditional culture<sup>[1]</sup>. This is not only a traditional fracture, but also the decomposition of old and new education. With the proliferation of contemporary disciplines and the vigorous development of science and technology, education has consciously or unconsciously become a tool of contemporary science and technology as well as disciplines. The phenomena of people's instrumentalization and education instrumentalization have become increasingly prominent, giving rise to moral problems, psychological problems, and related social problems one after another.

At the beginning of the new education, many innovative educators and thinkers have put forward the educational concept at that time. Yan Fu, a renowned thinker, translated and introduced western learning as well as put forward the concept of natural law where "only the fittest can survive from natural selection." On the premise of affirming the "natural" change of heaven, he proposed a modern view of nature that is unified in physical use and integrated with Chinese as well as western ancient and modern times. He strived to reach a balance between nature and man-made, heaven and the rule of man, as well as advocated the national education of the integration of "people's wisdom," "people's strength," and "people's morality." He disregarded the imperial examination and set up a new system of independent schools with far-reaching social influence on the ideological level. His ideas were the starting points of Professor Lan Ye's reflection on the problems of contemporary pedagogy research and contemporary education. On this basis, Professor Lan Ye puts forward the idea of meta pedagogy and meta education, which is the conscious return of education to people and the spiritual return of education to traditional culture.

Yan Fu put forward the educational thought of "people's strength," "people's wisdom," and "people's morality." "People's strength" was based on the fact that most Chinese human bodies were weak at that time. In order to be powerful, one must first strengthen his or her body. In reflection on the current educational situation at that time, Yan Fu proposed the return of education to strengthen people's physical quality. The body is not only people's material foundation, but also their natural attributes. Only with good health can a person have the basic ability to study and work. A healthy body is not only the basis of social labor, but also the meta-power of hard work. Without a healthy body, it is impossible to gain knowledge, achieve intelligence, and fulfil the development of science and technology. Therefore, the emphasis on "people's strength" is of great significance. Reinforcing "people's strength" is an important step in the restoration of education. It is this step that makes people reflect on education and its essence. The essence of education is to encourage people to participate in social practice activities, which influence people's development. The human body is the basis of human beings, the natural attribute of human beings, and the symbol of human beings in the process of evolution. Therefore, the human body is not only natural and physical, but also social and intellectual. In this sense, physical education in contemporary education is

essentially an important experience of the advanced nature of contemporary education. It seems to be a return to tradition, but in fact, it is progress. In view that this regression is the resistance against the instrumentalization of education upon understanding the human body through contemporary science and technology, it is a form of deconstruction – the deviation from people in real education, especially from the natural part of people. Clearly, it also includes a part of modern sports that excessively emphasizes on competition and deviates from human nature.

From “people’s strength” to “people’s wisdom,” the study of scientific knowledge is a part of “people’s wisdom.” The prosperity of a country is based on the development of science and technology. Having highly developed science and technology and advanced humanistic thought and spirit is the basic representation of contemporary social civilization. In fact, social civilization refers to system civilization, advanced culture, and advanced science and technology, which reflects the development direction of advanced productive forces. It shows the degree of “people’s wisdom” and the civilization of “people’s morality.” The traditional morality of Confucianism contains specific elements, such as cultivation, education, governance, and peace. It is not only the guiding principle of practice, but also establishes a specific way of practice. This moral spirit based on benevolence and aiming at loyalty to the king is linked to the morality of modern civilization, so as to emphasize on love as the most important connotation of moral education. Through the reflection on Yan Fu’s concept of education and based on traditional Chinese cognition, Professor Lan Ye puts forward the proposition of “life and practice,” brings sports, intellectual education, moral education, and even aesthetic education back to the beginning of life, seeks to find the educational essence consistent with the “Tao” spirit, as well as explores the educational spirit of “life and practice.”

### **3. Returning to the foundation of traditional education and respecting life**

After clarifying the direction of educational regression, Professor Lan Ye clarifies the subject of educational research, the nature of educational discipline, and the interpretation of educational research methods by reviewing the history of educational research. Through this meta-educational method of educational research, Professor Ye pursues the essence of education, returns to the origin of education, answers the question of “what education is,” and thus puts forward the original educational intention of “life and practice,” so as to return to the spirit of traditional Chinese education as well as the reflection on “nature.” Through multi-level process combing and content elaboration, Professor Lan Ye came to five conclusions on the root of traditional Chinese culture - the concept of nature and its composition.

- (1) The chaotic symbiosis between man and universe as well as the harmony and interlinkage of “Tao” of heaven and man are the starting points of the natural view of the Chinese nation, which contain full vitality and represent the most basic internal relationship between man and nature.
- (2) Based on the ancient Chinese civilization of agricultural production, the degree and uniqueness of the understanding of the overall mutual infiltration, process interaction, correlation, and endless growth of nature have been refined into a way of thinking for people to understand the world, showing the distinct uniqueness of national culture.
- (3) On the whole, ancient Chinese civilization exudes a strong flavor rooted in nature. The deep entanglement between humanity and nature is reflected in ancient classics and secular life. “Nature” contains a dual meaning: the general term of creation and the natural law that all things must follow.
- (4) The classical view of nature in ancient China is not only circulated through formal culture and the education system, but also through lifestyle and secular culture. It has become an indispensable

component in everyone's life. Despite the ups and downs of generations, the basic composition of this view of nature has been handed down for thousands of years.

- (5) Up to now, ancient China has experienced more than a century and a half of dramatic changes in modern times. The traditional view of nature has gradually faded out and has been replaced or obscured by a series of new concepts and problems. In order to revitalize the traditional view of nature in the new era, it is necessary to “get rid of” and recognize it again <sup>[2]</sup>.

The concept of “nature” in traditional Chinese culture is not only a philosophical concept, but also a thinking method and methodology, which provides ideas for the problems faced by contemporary education. Education is essentially to encourage people to be involved in human social activities, and the consciousness of life is the ultimate and most important practice of education. Here, Professor Lan Ye proposed that the core of traditional education is to govern the country and assist people to grow based on self-improvement. The life and practice of today's education should be “teaching heaven and earth human affairs and cultivating life consciously.”

When facing the spirit and connotation of the traditional view of “nature,” there will be reflections consciously and unconsciously. First, whether the traditional view of “nature” still has guiding significance for the people, especially whether the educational spirit and educational concept brought by the view of “nature” have practical value. Secondly, the problems faced by contemporary education based on scientism and modern discipline system. How to achieve a ‘return’ in reflection on meta-education, return to the essence of education, and return to the essence of ‘life and practice’? In view of these two problems, the five generalizations of the traditional Chinese “view of nature,” put forward by Professor Lan Ye, are analyzed.

The chaotic symbiosis between man and universe as well as the harmony and interlinkage of “Tao” of heaven and man are the starting points of the natural view of the Chinese nation, which contain full vitality and the most basic internal relationship between man and nature <sup>[3]</sup>. Man, heaven, and earth coexist. Man is the man in nature, nature is the nature of man; man is life, and nature is also life, which is closely related to human life and inseparable. Under the care of this view of nature, the essence of education is to emphasize the natural attribute of man and inspire people to set the principle of education in the spirit of symbiosis with nature. Meta-education carries reflection on the purpose of education. Human development does not violate the laws of nature and should not destroy the natural environment. It is important for contemporary education to pursue the symbiosis and growth of man and nature as well as establish the educational will of harmonious civilization between man and nature.

Based on the ancient Chinese civilization of agricultural production, the degree and uniqueness of the understanding of the overall mutual infiltration, process interaction, correlation, and endless growth of nature have been refined into a way of thinking for people to understand the world, showing the distinct uniqueness of national culture <sup>[4]</sup>. Human growth and education form the way of thinking and improve cognitive ability. Contemporary education takes scientism as the core, emphasizes competition and natural selection, disregards the mutual infiltration between man and nature as a whole and the relationship between all things, as well as returns to the essence of education. In fact, it is also a return to this mode of thinking. Through this return, it also further realizes the educational purpose of “life and practice.”

On the whole, the ancient Chinese civilization exudes a strong flavor rooted in nature. The deep entanglement between humanity and nature is reflected in ancient classics and secular life. “Nature” has dual meaning: the general term of creation and the natural law that all things must follow. Education is the active social practice of human beings, and the purpose of education should accord with the law of human development in essence. As a part of nature, human development should also follow the natural law, which is both natural and humanistic. The growth of ancient Chinese civilization is based on nature. The Taoist

spirit, Buddhist spirit, and Confucian spirit of “unity of heaven and man” all imply the harmonious unity of man and nature. The development of human beings does not violate the laws of nature; It does not destroy the natural ecology and environment, but instead, it coexists with nature. The vitality of nature is the vitality of human beings, and the diversified symbiosis of nature is the diversified symbiosis of human beings. All things are born to conquer each other, restrict one another, and achieve together, forming a complete and harmonious ecological environment. The development is sustainable, long-term, and continuous. Secondly, man is a complete ecological environment, and human civilization is an endless ecological chain. The development and occurrence of human society should follow the law of interdependence and mutual restriction. Finally, education is carried out on this basis. Education should comply with the law of the overall occurrence and development of nature, the law of the overall development of human society, and the law of the occurrence and development of man himself. Contemporary education presents an education mode based on social division of labor and vocational needs. In essence, people become tools, which is the manifestation of the alienation of contemporary education. Through the return of the traditional humanistic spirit and the thinking of meta-education, the return of education points to the essence of “life and practice,” which is the return and breakthrough of traditional nature-oriented spirit.

While recognizing the existing problems in contemporary education, the decline of the traditional spirit and education in the fusion of modern society should not be disregarded. Those views of nature congealed in the culture, system, and education are still continuing, but they have become marginal with the fusion of modern society and are rarely reflected in educational content. However, the natural view of traditional Chinese culture is internalized into the Chinese cultural genes, thus affecting the way people think. Consciously or unconsciously, this internalized cultural intuition is used to make decisions and judgments in the face of life’s dilemmas and major events. Therefore, restoring the consciousness and confidence of culture is inseparable from the return of this cultural gene. Only by recognizing and returning the significance and function of the cultural gene can one establish the living water source of cultural life as well as the educational spirit and educational concept in line with the cultural gene. The educational spirit contained in the unity of heaven and man can be appreciated from the interlink of the three meanings of heaven and man: man acting according to the law of heaven’s way, man’s unique position among all things in heaven and earth, and the relationship between heaven and man. Taking life as the subject of practice, practice is an important way to solve the core problems in becoming adults, establishing themselves, and becoming successful. Therefore, the Chinese expression of the word “education” is to teach the world and human affairs as well as cultivate the consciousness of life <sup>[5]</sup>. This expression in the face of contemporary academic and discipline has a strict division of status quo and reality. Human beings exist as self-tools and social tools, and human’s heaven, earth, personnel, things, and life are naturally realized in the tools of self and society.

Therefore, the regression and reconstruction of education need to face the objective reality of contemporary academic and disciplinary classification. In fact, as tools for self-generation and production in the social structure, human beings have existed since the beginning. However, when regarded as tools, the purpose of human beings is to teach the world and human affairs as well as cultivate the consciousness of life. Human beings are not only the starting point, but also the process and the purpose. In this sense, the reflection of contemporary education and the return of traditional education spirit can be realized.

#### **4. Seeking breakthroughs**

The development of contemporary education is inseparable from schools and classrooms. Classrooms and schools are the platforms where educational practice and progress take place. At present, disciplines are assumed as units, which would inevitably lead to the division between subject teaching and the cultivation of students’ morality, personality, and spirit. It is imperative to “teach” through the curriculum of politics

and ideology, which is ostensibly the content of another discipline. The cultivation of spirit and personality, as the basis of educating people, cannot be reflected at all, thus resulting in problems.

At present, the curriculum thought and politics advocated should aim at the separation of “teaching” and “education” and seek to achieve the purpose of “educating” people while “teaching” knowledge and skills, so as to dispel the educational reality of the separation caused by discipline classification. Reflecting on the problems and current situation of contemporary education, one should return to the thinking and research of meta-education and rethink the research of education with pedagogical methods, such as knowledge learning and pedagogical knowledge, cultural acquisition and pedagogy, normative education and pedagogy, aesthetic education and pedagogy, personality development, as well as ideological education and pedagogy. It is important to reflect and study education with pedagogical methods as well as put forward the concept and reconstruction of pedagogical concepts and methods beyond discipline boundaries and barriers, which would help contemporary education return to the essence of education, return to the thinking of meta-education, and return to people who are not only the starting point of education, but also the goal of education. Man is not only the object of education, but also the subject of education. In education, the object of education is not only a tool for people, but also the realization of self-worth as well as a free and independent implementation subject. For educators, they are not only the implementers of education, but also the educated in education, realizing their self-worth and life goals in education, while facing the contradiction between educational disciplines and “educating” people. They are also facing the reflection and research of meta-pedagogy and meta-education. Therefore, the overall education view under the traditional holistic view of nature as well as the value and significance of meta-education and meta-pedagogy are presented <sup>[6]</sup>.

Professor Lan Ye pointed out that the educational value of subject teaching is not equal to the moral value. The value development of discipline teaching and education is not only limited to in-depth research and development of discipline content, but also the practical process around discipline teaching. In this sense, it can be said that classroom teaching itself is life, which contains rich educational value <sup>[7]</sup>. The significance of this concept is not to put forward the idea of strengthening moral education in the process of subject education, nor to emphasize the significant roles of moral education and aesthetic education in education; rather, its significance is to put forward that life is not only the subject of education, but also the purpose of education and to regard education and educational activities as an important part of life or even life itself. With that in mind, one would then reflect on the life essence of education; that is, the meta-educational thinking of education, so as to break through the barriers between education and life as well as truly return to the educational essence of “teaching heaven, earth, people, affairs, and life consciousness” <sup>[8]</sup>.

From Professor Lan Ye’s reflection on the meta-education of pedagogy, she puts forward the problems of contemporary education, returns to the excellent traditional Chinese education, assumes the educational spirit and concept of modern thinkers as the starting point, puts forward the humanistic view in the view of “nature” of Chinese culture, pays attention to people, nature, and life, as well as regards the link of teaching as the link of life and practice, along with the students, teachers, managers, and system as the ecological chain of life and practice. In this sense, “life and practice” is not only for the educated, but also for teachers and managers, and even for the system.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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