

Contemporary Value and Practical Exploration of Yuan Mu's Educational Thought

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Abstract

As the quality of education in China continues to improve, Professor Yuan Mu's educational thought remains of great significance in contemporary educational fields due to its unique perspective and profound insights. This article explores the core elements of his educational thought, such as keeping pace with the times, seeking truth from facts, and emphasizing innovation, starting with Yuan Mu's advice to young teachers and his teaching reform practices. The research aims to deepen the understanding of Yuan Mu's educational philosophy and promote contemporary educational reform and development.

Keywords

Yuan Mu's educational thought; basic education; teaching; applying.

1. Forward

Yuan Mu was once a professor in the Chinese Department at Jiangxi Institute of Education (now Nanchang Normal University). He was a pioneer in the research and reform of Chinese language teaching in Jiangxi Province, often referred to as the "pioneer of middle school Chinese teaching." Professor Yuan devoted much of his career to innovating Chinese language teaching theory and practice. His research has profoundly influenced secondary education in Jiangxi Province and across China. Yuan Mu is regarded as a "great teacher" with outstanding achievements, and his educational philosophy and practical experience remain valuable guides for educators today. This article aims to explore his concern for young teachers, investigate his teaching reforms and methods, and contribute to the inheritance and development of his educational thought, facilitating the integration of educational theory with current realities and advancing the development of education.

2. Teaching Reform Requires Young Teachers to Be Grounded and Firm in Their Beliefs

Education is built step by step by generations of teachers, and the educational cause is carried forward through their efforts. The care shown by predecessors forms the foundation for the growth of young teachers. In the field of education, past educators have accumulated vast experience and wisdom through years of practical exploration. Their love for education, care for students, and innovative teaching methods have provided role models for young teachers. Young teachers, during their development, can draw strength from the care and guidance of their predecessors, solidifying their educational convictions and constantly improving their professional abilities. Yuan Mu offered valuable advice on the professional development of young teachers in his essay, "The Small Lotus Just Exposes Its Tip," which outlines the following principles:

2.1. Young Teachers Should Strengthen Their Political Education

Political education is inseparable from Chinese language teaching. Ideology acts as the guiding light in teaching. To impart correct values and life perspectives to students, teachers themselves must possess solid political literacy. For example, a teacher at Beijing University of Architecture, Xu Chuanqing, once propagated discriminatory views, such as claiming that "the Chinese nation is inferior." Such statements violate national laws and party policies, causing significant social repercussions and negatively impacting students' ideological development. Teachers, as part of the united front, should have a heightened political sensitivity, bearing the responsibility of nurturing the successors of the communist cause, rather than undermining it. The political direction must take precedence, guiding students to form correct ideological concepts, subtly integrating political education into the curriculum.

2.2. Young Teachers Should Cultivate Professional Competence, Keep Pace with the Times, and Engage in Lifelong Learning

Professional competence is the foundation of a teacher's career. For Chinese teachers, this competence includes both linguistic expertise and educational theoretical knowledge. During the "Jinggang Cup" competition, Yuan Mu observed that many young teachers made frequent professional mistakes when teaching new texts, such as misspellings, incorrect word explanations, and a shaky grasp of the textbook's central themes. These issues reflect the insufficient professional foundation of some young teachers. They need to impose strict standards on themselves, continuously improving their teaching literacy and being always prepared. Furthermore, education is an evolving field, with new teaching concepts, methods, and technologies constantly emerging. Young teachers must maintain an open and proactive attitude, continually acquiring new knowledge and skills to adapt to changes in the educational landscape.

2.3. Young Teachers Should Systematically Enhance Their Core Teaching Competence

Teaching skills are the bedrock of a teacher's career, determining whether they can effectively transmit knowledge, stimulate student interest, and manage the classroom. "Three minutes on stage, ten years off stage". Basic teaching skills require years of practice and accumulation. Many young teachers, with limited teaching experience, lack solid fundamental skills. In the "Jinggang Cup" competition, Yuan Mu proposed the "three characters and one word" approach, highlighting essential skills like brush calligraphy, penmanship, and chalkboard writing, as well as fluency in Mandarin. Teachers are the bridge between knowledge and students, so improving these fundamental skills systematically is essential to providing students with meaningful learning experiences.

Yuan Mu's concern for young teachers is not just theoretical; it is also grounded in practical reforms, forming a closed loop that complements his educational philosophy.

3. Exploration and Practice of "Diversity" in Chinese Teaching Reform

Yuan Mu is hailed as the "pioneer" of the reform of Chinese language teaching in secondary schools. He effectively transformed the unexplored terrain of middle school Chinese education into a vibrant area through diverse practices and innovative teaching reform ideas. Yuan Mu's work spans a wide range of topics, from theoretical exploration to practical application, fully integrating theory with practice. His contributions to Chinese teaching reform provide valuable lessons and insights for contemporary educators. His approach to reform can be seen in the following dimensions:

3.1. Multi-faceted Theoretical Research

In his *Essays on Educational Reform*, Yuan Mu blends historical analysis with contemporary realities. He emphasizes the importance of summarizing historical experiences and drawing on the wisdom of past educators while continuously innovating teaching materials and methods to keep pace with the times. Educational reform should not stagnate or focus solely on revisiting old problems. Instead, it should align with contemporary students' needs and adapt to the changing world. Reform is built upon the achievements of previous generations and should serve as a foundation to continually break new ground in education.

3.2. Multi-channel Teaching Practices

Yuan Mu's teaching philosophy has a certain philosophical basis, which is the inheritance and development of Wang Yangming's "unity of knowledge and action." Wang Yangming mentioned in the 'Chuan Xi Lu': "knowing but not doing is for not knowing; do not know, you can know." [4] Expressed the importance of practice. Yuan Mu inherited this philosophical thought and attached importance to the combination of theory and practice. He not only deeply explores the essence of the theory, but also pays attention to the application of the theory in practice. In the book "Thoughts on Chinese Teaching Reform," Yuan Mu innovated the teaching concept and put forward the teaching concept of learning from practice and "learning" by students rather than "teaching" by teachers. It has a certain degree of influence on today's teaching philosophy. In the exploration of Chinese teaching reform, Yuan Mu wrote articles such as "diligent study, thinking and practicing" and "reading, thinking and doing," which all reflected his great attention to practice. Education reform is not a castle in the air, not just by thinking out, but through the evidence of experiments again and again, and constantly improve and prove the conclusion. In the book "Research on Chinese Teaching and Educational Development," he has collected many articles on his educational development and Chinese teaching insights, reflecting his profound thinking on the development of education and Chinese teaching in the basic education stage.

3.3. Multi-level curriculum reform

In the curriculum reform, Yuan Mu's work has shown a multi-level breadth. His educational vision not only stays in the students' learning situation, bold reform and innovation of teaching materials, but also extends his vision to the unity of law and teachers' thoughts in education and teaching, and promotes education reform in an all-round way. These efforts of Yuan Mu not only promoted the development of educational concepts, but also made these theories turn into a solid and powerful pace in the process of practice.

In the article "Governing education by law should implement quality education", Yuan Mu proposed to actively respond to the education laws and regulations proposed by the party and the state, and called for local implementation. He responded to national policies, put education first, followed the pace of national policies, and ensured the implementation of educational measures. This view shows the importance of national policy to education reform, and also reflects Yuan Mu's response to national policy, his firm support and unremitting pursuit of governing education according to law.

In the "Thoughts on Chinese Teaching Reform," Yuan Mu emphasized the word "unity," aiming to enable teachers to achieve the consistency of teaching ideas and carry out education and teaching work around a core guiding ideology. He believes that education reform should be carried out under the guidance of a unified thought and work in one direction, so as to ensure the correctness and effectiveness of the direction of education reform and realize the long-term development of education in the future.

In the first line of education, teachers undertake the important mission of teaching and cultivating talents. If there is no unified ideological guidance, the quality and direction of

education will be difficult to guarantee. On the journey of education and teaching, the unified guiding ideology is like a beacon in the dark, guiding the orderly progress of education and teaching, and cultivating the pillars of the country's needs.

4. Teaching Methods and Reflections in the Wave of Educational Reform

4.1. Highly Praised: Pan Fengxiang's "Chinese Teaching Reading Method"

Yuan Mu deeply studied and highly praised Pan Fengxiang's "Chinese Teaching Reading Method." The core objective of this method is to teach students how to read effectively, which is a crucial skill for personal development. Mastering the art of reading is more beneficial than simply being able to read a single text. Pan Fengxiang recognized the importance of independent learning and proposed that the right to read should be returned to the students, allowing them to choose and read books on their own, thereby improving their reading skills. This approach applies not only to textbooks but also to extracurricular books and even societal "books"—non-textual knowledge that students must interpret independently.

The method addresses the current need to transition from an exam-focused educational system. As Yuan Mu pointed out, the persistent focus on increasing enrollment rates often neglects the need to foster students' creativity and independent thinking. Pan Fengxiang's approach encourages students to read actively, analyze the text using logical reasoning, and summarize key points, which develops both their intellectual and critical thinking abilities.

4.2. Wang Yunsui's "Read-Write-Revise" Holistic Model

Wang Yunsui's "Read-Write-Revise Holistic Teaching Model" is hailed as an innovative school of thought in secondary Chinese language education nationwide. His photo once graced the cover of 《Chinese Language Teaching Reference for Secondary Schools》, a magazine distributed both domestically and internationally. The holistic model integrates three core class types—"Reading Class," "Writing Class," and "Revision Class"—supplemented by activity-based and elective courses. This structure organically combines reading, writing, and revising into a streamlined pedagogical framework, aiming to cultivate students' abilities to "read independently, write independently, and revise independently." Implementing this model aligns with both pedagogical principles and student learning patterns. The updated Chinese curriculum standards emphasize the integration of reading and writing, enhancing students' comprehension and practical application skills through guided in-depth analysis of texts. In April 1984, provincial and municipal education authorities convened an evaluation meeting at Nanchang No. 19 Middle School, conducting comprehensive assessments of students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities. The model was recognized as "directionally sound, feasibly designed, and demonstrably effective."

Beyond these teaching methods, Yuan Mu analyzed numerous pedagogical approaches derived from educational reform experiments. These methods introduced significant updates and reforms to the teaching system, offering invaluable practical insights. Through Yuan Mu's systematic research, these approaches were preserved, with their strengths and limitations clearly articulated. His analysis enables educators to adapt and apply these methods according to real-world contexts.

These educational philosophies not only provide theoretical guidance for educators but also chart actionable directions for practice, with their profound influence vividly reflected in subsequent applications.

5. Applications of Yuan Mu's Educational Philosophy

Yuan Mu's educational philosophy is profound and expansive, grounded in a deep understanding of the Party's educational principles. This foundation has allowed his philosophy to remain relevant and adaptable over time.

5.1. Promoting and Implementing the Party's Educational Philosophy

Yuan Mu identified one of the key flaws in the educational system: its disconnection from productive labor. The Party has repeatedly emphasized the importance of integrating education with labor to facilitate the development of socialist construction and transition toward communism. Yuan Mu's educational thought plays a crucial role in addressing this issue by advocating for the integration of mental and physical labor, breaking with centuries-old traditions that kept them separate. This integration has enabled the education sector to achieve significant growth in both quantity and quality. Yuan Mu asserted that the purpose of education is to serve the political needs of the proletariat, emphasizing the need for education to be tied to productive labor. This focus on practical, productive education helps develop well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

5.2. Driving Chinese Language Teaching Reform

After observing Chinese teaching reforms at three schools in Nanchang, Yuan Mu identified a new trend in secondary education: "Diversity in Unity."

"Diversity" refers to the proactive exploration of educational principles from multiple perspectives, utilizing various channels and methods. By combining different teaching schools, we can create a unified, vibrant educational experience. Traditional methods, while useful, often lack cohesion and fail to meet modern demands.

"Unity" emphasizes the importance of a unified guiding philosophy in educational reform. Every reform must be grounded in a coherent ideological foundation, not merely in a series of methodical changes. Yuan Mu's educational thought advocates for a practical approach, focusing on developing students' ability to think critically and learn independently. By applying his ideas to Chinese language teaching reform, educators can ensure that students develop both their intellectual capacity and their practical skills.

Yuan Mu's ideas emphasize the importance of aligning education with real-world needs, fostering creativity and innovation. By integrating these principles into classroom teaching, students can engage more meaningfully with their learning and develop the skills necessary for success in a rapidly changing world.

5.3. Cultivating Teaching Talent

As a key figure in the development of secondary Chinese education, Yuan Mu's contributions have left a lasting legacy. Despite facing personal health challenges, he continued to dedicate himself to education, upholding the motto "If others accomplish something with one effort, I will exert tenfold; if others need ten, I will strive a hundredfold." This relentless dedication, combined with his innovative educational ideas, has profoundly influenced the development of education in China.

By applying Yuan Mu's philosophy to the cultivation of teaching talent, we can inspire a new generation of educators. His thought serves as a guiding light for aspiring teachers, helping them develop the professional skills necessary to excel in their careers and contribute to the advancement of education.

6. Yuan Mu's Lasting Impact on Modern Education Systems

6.1. Enriching Personalized Education

As technology advances, artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly embedded in all aspects of life, including education. The limitations of one-size-fits-all and rote-learning models have become more apparent, and the call for personalized education has grown louder. AI offers hope for overcoming these limitations, providing technological support to implement personalized learning. However, this requires a theoretical foundation that can support and guide these technological innovations.

Yuan Mu's educational philosophy of "teaching students according to their aptitude" and "keeping pace with the times" provides a theoretical basis for modern personalized education. This approach emphasizes respecting each student's uniqueness and meeting their individualized learning needs. In today's educational landscape, AI and big data technologies can analyze students' learning progress and customize learning pathways to suit their abilities. Yuan Mu's principles of adapting education to evolving needs have seamlessly integrated with contemporary educational practices, enhancing personalized education and fostering student-centered learning environments.

6.2. Promoting Innovative Educational Concepts

As society increasingly demands interdisciplinary talent, the fusion of different fields of study has become a key trend in innovative education. Yuan Mu's emphasis on independent thinking and innovation aligns perfectly with modern educational goals, which focus on fostering creativity and practical abilities. By incorporating Yuan Mu's philosophy into curricula, we can establish courses that encourage innovative thinking, provide opportunities for scientific research, and support entrepreneurial ventures.

Additionally, Yuan Mu's focus on the practical applicability of knowledge supports the idea of interdisciplinary learning, where subjects such as literature, history, and philosophy are integrated to develop critical thinking and creativity. This approach encourages students to apply their knowledge across fields and to develop solutions that address real-world challenges.

6.3. Integration of Holistic Competency Development

Yuan Mu's educational philosophy prioritizes the overall development of students. In future Chinese language instruction, there will be a deeper integration of language learning with the cultivation of holistic competencies. Teachers will incorporate knowledge from history, culture, and the arts to offer students a well-rounded education that fosters cultural literacy and personal growth.

For instance, in studying classical poetry, students will not only analyze the meaning and artistic features of the poems but also explore their historical and cultural contexts. This comprehensive approach broadens students' cultural perspectives and enhances their humanistic literacy.

Through practical activities such as Chinese drama performances, students will also develop essential soft skills, including teamwork, communication, and collaboration, alongside their academic abilities. Yuan Mu's emphasis on holistic development continues to shape educational practices, ensuring that students are prepared to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

7. Conclusion

Professor Yuan Mu, as a leading thinker and practitioner in contemporary Chinese education, developed an educational philosophy centered around "people-orientedness" and the "integration of knowledge and action." This philosophy holds profound implications for

educational reforms and societal development. By exploring the theoretical and practical dimensions of his ideas, this paper demonstrates Yuan Mu's lasting relevance, particularly in terms of fostering innovation and improving educational practices.

However, there are still areas for further exploration. For instance, the applicability of Yuan Mu's ideas in vocational and higher education remains under-explored. Additionally, the interaction between emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and educational theory has not been thoroughly addressed, which could limit the forward-looking potential of Yuan Mu's educational framework. These challenges present opportunities for further refinement, ensuring that his educational philosophy evolves with the changing demands of the times.

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