

The Educator Standing on Chinese Cultural Ground: A Case Study of Chinese Basic Education Pedagogical Research

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Abstract

Purpose: Chinese Educators, referred to as *Jiaoyujia* (教育家) in Chinese, are esteemed individuals dedicated to education with extensive expertise in theory and practice. Despite their influential pedagogical research, they have received limited scholarly attention. This study aimed to fill the gap by focusing on Jilin Li's (李吉林) contextualized teaching research informed by Chinese educational traditions.

Design/Approach/Methods: A case study format was adopted, and data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12. In light of Kuan-Hsing Chen's "Asia as method" idea, the analysis drew particular attention to the Asian resources employed in the pedagogical studies of interest.

Findings: Focusing on how Educators utilize diverse educational traditions, this paper presents three functions of Chinese educational traditions applicable to Li's case. The chosen case study demonstrates that elements of Chinese educational traditions still actively inform Educators working in a modern Western-style education system. This paper analyzes how Li combined Chinese and foreign traditions and reveals an element of subjectivity with its own strengths and deficiencies.

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Originality/Value: This study is the first to present and analyze the phenomenon of Chinese educational traditions informing pedagogical studies conducted by Chinese Educators, an influential group that scholars usually overlook in modern China.

Keywords

Asia as method, Chinese educational traditions, Chinese Educator, knowledge production, pedagogical research

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Introduction

China's remarkable achievements in education in recent decades have drawn much attention from the international community. Some aspects have long been the subject of scholarly research and discussion, such as the establishment of a large school system to train human resources (Yang, 2020), Shanghai students' outstanding performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Tan, 2017), China's top universities' rapid rise in several international rankings (Mia et al., 2021; Yang, 2012), and many notable others. Although such achievements are well acknowledged worldwide, relatively little concern has been spared for China's pedagogical research and its fruits. Without the knowledge of how Chinese Educators make efforts to promote the quality of teaching in a context of interactions between local traditions and Western influence, it will not be easy to understand the rise of China's education in a globalization era. Thus, close observation of relevant pedagogical studies is paramount to gaining a fuller understanding of the current development of education in China.

Educational research in present-day China is carried out not just by scholars in higher education, but also at the grassroots level. Specifically, primary and secondary school teachers have been engaged in educational research focusing on how to carry out educational reforms since 1978 (Yang, 2019b). Some representative practitioners, for example, Xuehua Qiu (邱兴华) and Jilin Li (李吉林), initiated pedagogical reforms after the "Cultural Revolution"; Qiu and Li also improved their respective teaching models in the 1990s and established instructional paradigms in the early 21st century (Su, 2018). These frontline teachers devoted themselves to instructional method experimentation in a particular subject for decades. Their academic activities have undoubtedly enriched indigenous knowledge and contributed significantly to the development of educational science in China.

Additionally, some educators' pedagogical research in basic education has greatly impacted China's policymaking and/or pedagogical discourse. For instance, some Shanghai primary education teachers' studies have earned international repute for their innovativeness and influence (Yang,

2013). Furthermore, the central government has bestowed some deserving teachers with the honorary title of “People’s Educator” (人民教育家) in recognition of their extraordinary achievements in this respect (Liu & Xiong, 2019). These grass-roots level pedagogical studies are well-known in China and have received praise for helping to improve educational quality on a national scale. Nonetheless, these academic activities have received little scholarly attention, at least in the English-language literature.

In particular, little effort has been invested in understanding the phenomenon by which Chinese educational traditions inform these pedagogical studies amidst strong Western influence. Although the Chinese government has, as of the year 2000, initiated projects presenting some basic education educators’ practice, thought, and theory, the emphasis has been on advocating the virtues and abilities embodied in their life stories and career trajectories. Furthermore, researchers who have drawn attention to these experts’ thoughts and practices (e.g., Fan, 2020; Wang & Duan, 2020) have tended to focus on each teacher’s personality and morality. However, scholars have neglected to analyze such teachers’ efforts in their cultural context. Hence, few can explain how these educators have been able to develop pedagogical theories and make extraordinary contributions within a Western-style education system established on Chinese soil, given that the incompatibility of Chinese and Western traditions greatly reduces efficiency (Yang, 2022).

The present study aimed to fill the aforementioned gap by investigating the phenomenon in which Chinese educational traditions informed the pedagogical research of pioneering and influential primary school teachers (i.e., the group of Educators defined in the next paragraph) after China’s 1978 reform and opening-up. When China’s closed-door policy ended, China did not revert to its previous policy of “leaning to one side” (Mao, 1991, pp. 472–473) but rather opened to the international community. In response to the Chinese central government’s push for “studiously learning advanced foreign science and technology” (as cited in Yang, 2002, p. 37), China’s educational exchanges with other countries have increased rapidly. In the time since the launch of China’s opening-up policy, a plethora of foreign educational theories and concepts have been introduced to the Chinese mainland, and ordinary teachers have had more opportunities to directly learn foreign educational ideas and accumulate foreign experiences. In the past 40-plus years, Educators have had access to indigenous traditions on the one hand and been able to conveniently visit schools and educational institutions outside China on the other. Thus, Chinese educational traditions’ impacts on relevant pedagogical studies should be analyzed within a context against which the researchers have various points of reference. Inspired by Chen’s (2010) “Asia as method” idea, this paper draws particular attention to the Asian resources employed in such pedagogical studies rather than the simplistic analysis brought by the Chinese–Western dichotomy.

Literature review

Chinese Educators and their pedagogical research

In the Chinese tradition, *Jiaoyujia* (教育家), translated as “Educator,” is an honorable title that distinguishes it from the commonly-used term “teacher” (老师). *Jiaoyujia* specifically refers to individuals with exceptional teaching skills and remarkable contributions to the field of education. These distinguished individuals are dedicated to education and possess extensive experience and expertise in both theoretical and practical aspects. In this paper, the capitalized term “Educator” is used to differentiate this esteemed group from the more general notion of “educator.” This distinction emphasizes the significant impact and specialized qualities associated with *Jiaoyujia* in the Chinese context.” Wu (2019) has pointed out that aspirations to become an Educator are essential to motivate frontline teachers to learn and work diligently. He adds that remarkable educational research achievements are necessary for teachers to earn the title of Educator. Moreover, Yuan (2007) argued that one intrinsic feature of an Educator is conceptualizing unique educational thoughts and theories from one’s own practice for application to wider contexts. Similarly, He (2019) concluded, based on her teacher education experiences, that original theories and innovative educational thoughts are prerequisites for a teacher to become an Educator. Additionally, Si (2012) reported, based on survey results, that some primary schools have stipulated pedagogical research as a requirement to become an Educator. Therefore, in contemporary China, Educators are expected to conduct pedagogical studies and formulate unique theories.

Myriad pedagogical studies have emerged since 1978, forming a web of “educational experiments with vast participants, diverse types and fruitful production” (Liu & Liao, 2021, p. 67). Some were designed and conducted by higher education scholars such as Pei (2000) and Ye (1998), among others. Primary and secondary school teachers have also made great contributions to this field. Indeed, Su (1992) reported, based on a statistical survey, that in the 1980s, at least 120 pedagogical research programs were conducted in primary and secondary schools, with the majority being launched and led by frontline teachers. Among these projects, the duration of some exceeded 10 years and saw the invention of peculiar teaching skills and the development of influential theories documented in higher education textbooks (Su, 2018). Although some teachers have used their practical experiences as a starting point, they have also striven to overcome their limitations by developing rigorous designs and incorporating relevant theories (Yang & Hu, 2018). As a result of such efforts, some Educators, for example, Qiu and Li, effectively bridged the gap between pedagogical theory and practice, formulated educational thought with Chinese characteristics, and established influential schools of pedagogy (Miao, 2018; Su, 2018).

Following former Premier Wen Jiabao’s advocacy in 2003 of learning from outstanding Educators, the method by which Chinese Educators conduct their pedagogical research has

become a heated topic. Some Educators have recalled their pedagogical research journey and engaged in self-reflection (e.g., Li, 2005; Qiu, 2018). Such papers provide copious first-hand materials for historical research; however, many of these writings are purely experiential, trivial, and far from theoretical. Some researchers have also examined Educators' thoughts and practices. For instance, Fan (2020) analyzed Li's case and constructed a Chinese Educator growth model. Wang and Liu (2021) thoroughly covered Li's career and extracted lessons for young teachers. Song (2016) conducted a case study of Qiu and identified the factors affecting an Educator's growth and success. Given that the above-mentioned studies focused on individual growth, the phenomenon of Educators' pedagogical studies lacks adequate analysis and is often overlooked. Specifically, revelatory work regarding the mechanism by which Chinese and Western educational traditions inform Educators' pedagogical studies is still outstanding, necessitating a study directly investigating Educators' pedagogical research from the cultural perspective.

Chinese educational traditions and their encounters with the West

Despite the change of times with external influences from a variety of sources, Chinese culture and values have long remained consistent (Huang, 2015). Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism constitute the essence of traditional Chinese culture, while Confucianism was regarded as the orthodoxy in ancient China. Education has formed an important component of Chinese culture (Gu, 2013), and the three teachings have contributed various elements to Chinese educational tradition. Thus, Chinese education has stressed traditional values such as humanity (仁), righteousness (义), propriety (礼), wisdom (智), honesty (信), loyalty (忠), and filial piety (孝; Guo, 2009). In contrast with Western culture, the Chinese civilization emphasizes collectivism and responsibility above individual rights and prefers harmony to conflict (Chen, 2017). Political, economic, and cultural conditions have influenced the formation of Chinese educational tradition and continue to shape its development (Gu, 2001, p. 169). In this process, a strong alliance between education and politics has become a distinctive feature of schooling in China (Yang, 2020). Consequently, cultivating talent to serve the country has taken deep root in Chinese teachers' minds, and fulfillment of this promise has long been associated with a merit-based examination system.

Ancient Educators' practice and thought have led to the establishment of relevant models for Chinese teachers and have greatly inspired them. Many prominent thinkers, particularly Confucian scholars, were also influential Educators, including Confucius, Han Yu (韩愈, 768–824 AD), Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200 AD), and Wang Yangming (王阳明, 1472–1529 AD), among others. In particular, the story of Confucius illustrates the integration of the lifelong pursuit of the Way (道) and a solid promise to practice "teaching without considering the status" (Li, 2000, p. 180). For Confucius, the Way is fundamental with its concerns over "the question

of the ultimate meaning of human existence” (Yao, 2000, p. 139). Despite the diverse explanations in the *Analects*, Confucian scholars have perpetuated the idea of the Way (Hayhoe, 2006, pp. 16–23). Inspired by Confucius’ success, Confucian scholars have aimed to attain sage-hood (Yao, 2000). Han Yu proposed the teachers’ Way and reinterpreted teachers’ role, thus reshaping teachers’ identity (Li, 2000). As the leader of the Old Prose movement, Han Yu proselytized under the slogan “cultivating the Way through writing” (文以载道), aiming to transmit Confucian values and ethics (De Bary, 1999, pp. 568–569). Since Han Yu’s times, Chinese teachers have been expected to fulfill the duty of “transmitting the Way and teaching the knowledge.” According to Zhu Xi, investigating substance and attaining knowledge form the basis for grasping the Principle (天理) and achieving sage-hood. In other words, investigating things is tightly connected with self-cultivation and Confucian ethics as opposed to the study of natural laws in Western philosophy. Wang Yangming severely criticized Zhu Xi’s emphasis on external studies of the Principle, insisting that all the knowledge one needs to attain sage-hood can be found in one’s innate goodness (良知) (Yao, 2000). According to Wang’s teachings, unity of knowing and acting is a salient feature. Compared with other Confucian scholars, Wang Yangming stressed the value of practical personal knowledge and opened up a new stream of creativity (Hayhoe, 2013). Wang’s study program stressed four ideas: *lizhi* (立志) or establishing aspiration, *qinxue* (勤学) or striving for knowledge, *gaiguo* (改过) or rectifying faults, and *zeshan* (责善) or fulfilling moral obligations. *Lizhi* is the initial but crucial stage of individual development. All the aforementioned values and ideas have underpinned Chinese teachers’ views on their identity and profession.

Hence, Confucian heritage culture is a crucial context for contemporary Chinese Educators’ activities and endeavors. Such a cultural context is characterized as “involving overbearing dependence on the teacher, a hierarchical structure in which students are to regard the teacher as the supreme authority figure, and learning that relies on memorization and recitation” (Ozoliņš, 2018, p. 136). In China, Confucian heritage affects not only the mode of thinking but also the development of modern pedagogy (Hayhoe, 2006), as well as classroom discipline (Hue, 2007) and the teacher–student relationship (Ho & Ho, 2008), among many other aspects. As Yang et al. (2019) point out, these traditions are ubiquitous and omnipresent in the contemporary China. However, no previous studies have elucidated how Confucian heritage culture has informed primary school Educators’ pedagogical research.

Despite the prevalence of Confucian values, other educational traditions, such as Daoist and Buddhist elements, have affected education in China (e.g., Hue, 2007). Among these are Western elements, a newly-arrived component that entered China with enormous prestige after the mid-19th century. For the Chinese people, accepting Western educational traditions was a painful and tortuous process. A Western-style education system was gradually established in the early 20th century to supplant ancient educational institutions (Gu, 2013, pp. 151–165). Many

Western educational thoughts were introduced to China, including Deweyan philosophy (Billings, 1981; Su, 1995), European rationalist patterns (Gu, 2013; Hayhoe, 2014), and Soviet curricular patterns (Hayhoe, 1988). Furthermore, Western notions, such as the value of democracy and science, have been accepted and indigenized (Yu, 2005). Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out that some Western values, such as academic freedom and autonomy in higher education, face many difficulties regarding taking root in Chinese society (Hayhoe, 1999; Yang, 2019a). In spite of this, Western educational traditions significantly influence contemporary Chinese Educators' thought and practice.

Research methodology

A case study format was adopted to fulfill the research objective. A case study allows the researcher "to illustrate a more general principle through a specific instance" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 181). Compared to other social science research methodologies (Yin, 2009, p. 1), the chosen approach allowed the researcher to delve into the values, norms, behavioral patterns, and intellectual legacy working in an Educators' pedagogical research process. Additionally, it was possible to demonstrate the manner in which traditional elements tend to inform Educators' pedagogical research activity through "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of the selected example "of [a] real pe[rson] in [a] real situation" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 182). Hence, the chosen approach was conducive to accurately elucidating Chinese educational traditions' influence on Educators in a context characterized by a mix of Chinese and Western traditions.

The case study with which this paper is concerned is Jilin Li's research on contextualized teaching. As a primary school teacher and educational theorist, Li has garnered an extraordinary reputation in China's educational circle for her teaching skills and academic innovations, which earned her many awards from the Chinese government as well as high praise from both pedagogical scholars and frontline teachers. Her theories on contextualized teaching for children are recognized nationwide as a representative achievement of Chinese educational research achievement and an important branch of modern Chinese pedagogy. Few pedagogical studies conducted in contemporary China rival Li's research in terms of fame. Importantly, based on the criteria for representativeness, Li's story is typical of pedagogical studies in contemporary China. Additionally, Li left many materials, including writings and interview recordings, pertaining to her experiences, thoughts, and feelings about her research journey. Given that the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic restricted the researcher's access to other eminent Educators and prevented in-person interviews, Li's abundant accounts enabled the author of this paper to examine Chinese and Western educational traditions' influence using an alternative approach. Although the validity of this research could potentially be challenged on the grounds of over-reliance on the extant materials,

the researcher deemed their perusal legitimate given the degree to which Li's story can offer insights toward fulfilling the research objective.

The collected data originated from three sources: (1) Li's autobiography, *The Poetic Mission of Contextualized Education* (《情境教育的诗篇》), (2) Li's published essays on her experiences of and thoughts about her contextualized teaching research, (3) a video-recorded interview the Jiangsu Institute of Contextualized Education shared pertaining to how Li developed her pedagogical theories.¹ The above-mentioned information is freely available on the Internet and in books.

In light of the research purpose and the collected materials' classification as secondary data, thematic analysis was applied. Using the structural coding method (Belotto, 2018, p. 2624), the researcher immersed himself in the data to familiarize himself with the content relevant to Li's pedagogical studies and coded related passages, sentences, and terms using NVivo 12. During this process, with reference to Chen's (2010) "Asia as method" idea, particularly his advocacy of "multiply[ing] frames of reference" (p. 223), the analysis focused on how the research subject learned from diverse cultural traditions, especially those originating in other East Asian states. In so doing, this study sought to avoid the reductionism the Chinese–Western dichotomy brings about in favor of presenting the case in a context closer to reality.

Research findings

Role of Chinese traditional values in motivating the Educator's pedagogical study

Li's writings do not summarize the values and beliefs underlying her endeavors. However, Li has referenced traditional elements on many occasions. In her autobiography, Li begins describing her pedagogical research journey by recalling her family education, particularly some of her mother's sayings (2004, pp. 3–5). Among them is "A man can be poor but should have great aspirations" (人穷志不穷; Li, 2004, p. 4), which is well-known in Chinese folklore. *Zhi* (志), or having aspirations, reflects the spirit through which "gentlemen strengthen themselves ceaselessly" (君子以自强不息). Inspired by this Chinese proverb, Li wrote that the mindset of pursuing excellence was cultivated within her beginning in childhood. She also indicated that such a belief resulted in her refusal to be satisfied with mediocrity or give up on her dreams. Furthermore, Li reported that this mindset was instrumental in driving her to launch her educational experiments. This fact is well expressed in the following excerpt:

Over the ten years [of the "Cultural Revolution"], I did not bow my head to the pressure nor abandon the self. I always stayed vigilant about my weakness and shortcomings ... [after 1976] there is in my brain a poetic sentence: "The tide riders surf the currents." The tide of Chinese educational reforms is coming. I will be a tide-rider and devote myself to the ceaseless tides. (Li, 2004, pp. 6–8)

Showing similarity to the mentality the above quote reveals, Li also notes harboring a lofty aspiration in the individual mind (心存高远之志): “I have a lofty aspiration in my mind though I am just a primary school teacher” (2012, p. 52). That is, she believed she could earn a position in academia through her theoretical contributions rather than just her outstanding teaching practices. This belief motivated her to read educational papers and design pedagogical experiments.

In relation to *Zhi*, Li has repeatedly mentioned the Chinese tradition *lizhi* (establishing aspiration). Wang Yangming advocated *lizhi*, or resolving to find the Way, as an essential study program stage (Hayhoe, 2013, p. 94). Informed by this tradition, Li, at the inception of her pedagogical experiment, believed that “who[ever] resolves to carry out educational reform should boldly overcome all difficulties and problems” (2004, p. 8). This statement reveals how Li created the conditions to begin conducting her contextualized teaching study, as described in the following excerpt:

In the summer of 1978, I asked the school principal to adjust my work arrangement as I wanted to teach the subject of Chinese language in Grade 1 ... [When asked why,] I frankly said that I wanted to make some reforms in teaching the subject of the Chinese language as it had a great significance for the growth of the younger generations. Yet, I found many problems in its teaching methods at that time, and I could no longer resist the impulse to initiate reform. Moved by my appeal, the principal allowed my application. Indeed, who[ever] resolves to carry out the educational reform should be enthusiastic, active and with an impulse. (2004, p. 7)

In connection with her resolution to engage in educational reform, Li also stressed the importance of having the sense of being on a mission (使命感) regarding her pedagogical experiments and theoretical inquiries. The above excerpt shows that her sense of responsibility drove her to take up and reform primary school Chinese language teaching. Indeed, another quote from her autobiography reinforces her strong sense of responsibility as a motivational factor: “[A] strong responsibility stirs my heart, and I yearn for something new to break the constraint of traditional teaching practices and free my students” (Li, 2004, p. 16). This also compelled her to strive to theorize her research, as the following statement demonstrates:

I felt an unbearable pressure to write academic articles. Yet, I realized that Chinese scholarship had been damaged seriously over the years of the “Cultural Revolution.” Today, toward the development of China’s education[,] [we] must first Resume ... educational research and advance ... scholarship. Educational research is the cornerstone for the prosperity of Chinese scholarship and culture. Hence, I had the responsibility to theorize my studies well and publish high-quality papers. (Li, 2004, p. 9)

Li’s sense of being on a mission led to her continuous active engagement in pedagogical research, in keeping with her vow to “effectively [devote myself] to my educational business

every day and never let the time pass away [unproductively]" (1985, p. 39). As is evident in the video-recorded interview, Li continued working at the Jiangsu Institute of Contextualized Education even as an elderly person.

Gripped by the spirit of responsibility, Li pointed out the need to reform traditional pedagogy with the specific goal of improving the quality of Chinese language teaching. The mantra "breaking the constraints of traditional ways" (打破传统的陈规老套) appears in her writings repeatedly and is credited as a source of her motivation (e.g., Li, 2004, p. 8; 2007b, p. 4). These lines affirm anti-traditionalism's influence on Li's thought and practice. According to Shils (1981), anti-traditionalism is a quasi-tradition that Chinese history attributes to heretics in schools seeking the "liberation of thought and belief from the old shackles of tradition and authority" (Hu, 1953, p. 13). In Li's writing, she criticizes educational traditions rooted in the civil service examination system as follows:

The civil service examination system left many traditions which still have profound, negative effects on Chinese education, though they have recently been waning. The values of "learning [as preparation] for [an] examination" and "teaching [as preparation] for examination[s]" have become obstacles to the Chinese educational reforms of our times and have caused many troubles and problems in teaching the Chinese language in primary education. (2007b, pp. 3–4)

In her writing, Li also analyzes the effects of traditional domestic pedagogy, which she describes as incensing her so that she "could not bear the reform impulse" (2004, p. 7), a sensation she elaborates on as follows:

Traditional instruction, by cramming much knowledge into a child, makes learning a continuous process of knowledge accumulation and memory training. Its productivity is limited in that it can only develop a few of the brain's abilities. Affected by such a teaching method, the classroom activities performed when teaching the Chinese language are merely text analysis, repetitive transcription, textual exercise, and memorization. Therefore, Chinese language teaching in primary education suffers the illnesses of stubbornness, complexity, boredom, and inefficiency. (2004, p. 4)

Aside from the weakness of traditional Chinese pedagogy, Li also censured the negative effects of I. A. Kairov's pedagogy, which was viewed as a part of Chinese educational tradition on some occasions (Gu, 2013). The following excerpt serves as an example:

For nearly a century, Chinese education has been deeply influenced by Kairov's pedagogy, which draws much attention to cognition but ignores students' emotions. Thus, schools have become places for instructional knowledge only. Adopting Kairov's pedagogy isolates school education from society. In addition, it damages students' development, especially their creativity and mental health. After more

than ten years' research, [the] contextualized teaching method provides an effective way to teach the Chinese language by combining students' cognitive activities and emotional development. ... (Li, 1994, p. 51)

Consequently, Li decided to teach the Chinese language and begin conducting her pedagogical experiments. In her autobiography, she writes that the year 1978 was the right time for her to commence educational research (Li, 2004, p. 9).

The above analysis shows how Chinese values such as *lizhi* (establishing aspiration) and responsibility informed Li and led to her devotion to pedagogical research. Moreover, anti-traditionalism made her aware of the problems caused by both traditional Chinese pedagogy and Kairov's pedagogy. Motivated by such traditions, Li embarked on her pedagogical research journey.

Role of the Chinese cultural legacy in developing the Educator's pedagogical study

During her first communication with educational researchers from East China Normal University, Li explained that her experiment began with simple, rough operations rooted in Chinese folk experiences and that she was generally guided by her intuition (2004, p. 37). In her writing, she emphasizes traditional practices: “[L]inguistic training should be repetitive, collective and intensive” (Li, 2004, p. 12). She, therefore, toiled at length seeking theories to, in her own words, “support and organize my experiences” (Li, 2004, p. 10). According to her accounts, three theoretical sources were significant for developing her contextualized teaching study.

The first source was the situational teaching method, which she called “the inspiration for her invention” (Li, 2004, p. 16). Li joined a municipal conversation in 1979 where she met her former English teacher, who suggested that she read a journal article introducing the situational teaching method and apply it in her classroom. Li followed this recommendation and found the situational teaching method to be applicable to and efficient in Chinese language teaching. This success paved the way for her subsequent pedagogical studies conducted over 20 years.

The second source was the artistic conception theory (意境说), which is used in traditional Chinese literacy. Having achieved practical success, Li began to ponder further development. In many of her writings, she describes her discovery process regarding artistic conception theory in detail, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

After a success in reforming how to teach the writing skills of Chinese essays, the term *qingjing* (situation, 情景) from the situational teaching method made me think of *yijing* (artistic conception, 意境), a terminology frequently mentioned in Chinese classical poetry writing. ... (Li, 2018, p. 23)

It is natural for me to associate *qingjing* with artistic conception theory. I like poetry and have read and recited Chinese and foreign poems, classical and modern, every morning since I became a teacher.

I learned about artistic conception theory from Wang Guowei's (王国维) book *Poetic Remarks in the Human World* (《人间词话》). I then further learned relevant accounts from Liu Xie's (刘勰) *Carving a Dragon at the Core of Literature* (《文心雕龙》) ... After reading Liu's work, I found that artistic conception theory, with its broader vision compared to the situational teaching method, could better guide my pedagogical experiment. (Li, 2004, p. 19)

I repeatedly studied artistic conception theory and summarized four elements of "truth, beauty, emotion and thinking" from it. I believe these four elements are needed in contemporary primary education ... Hence, I creatively introduced artistic conception theory into pedagogy and constructed a Chinese-style contextualized teaching paradigm. ... (Li, 2017)

The above paragraphs describe Li's discovery and exploitation of a domestic intellectual resource. In another essay, excerpted below, she provides a more detailed explanation of her creative utilization of artistic conception theory:

Educational research seeks truth and something new. To pursue something new does not mean simply introducing modern Western educational theories. We should insist on the principle of "making foreign learnings serve China and the past serve the present" (洋为中用, 古为今用). Following this principle, I repeatedly read Liu Xie's book to deepen my understandings and integrate the essences into my experiments. (Li, 2014)

Apart from the four aforementioned elements, Li also derived, from artistic conception theory, six approaches to context creation, a specific procedure to optimize contextualized instruction, special methods for promoting children's psychological development, and other skills (2004, pp. 62–106; 2007a, pp. 32–42; 2007b). Consequently, she praised artistic conception theory highly for its functionality in developing her pedagogical theory. In her autobiography, she writes that "Such a traditional legacy directed me to take a vital step by providing theoretical nutrition and eventually led me to a broader way than the situational teaching method" (Li, 2004, p. 31). Li (2007, 2009a, 2013, 2017) also published at least four journal articles focusing on the relationship between the contextualized teaching paradigm and artistic conception theory.

The third source was field theory, which Li (2004, p. 43) initially learned from an educationalist affiliated with East China Normal University. Several years later, she read the American textbook *The Psychology of Classroom Teaching* and grasped the essence of the theory, which helped her construct the rationale for the contextualized teaching paradigm.

According to Li's accounts, the three above-mentioned intellectual sources contributed significantly to the development of her pedagogical research. Among them, the traditional Chinese legacy played a vital role in her pedagogical research, and in her writing, she calls it "a crucial step" (关键的一步) (Li, 2004, p. 19). Hence, artistic conception theory occupies a prominent position in Li's

writings about her research experiences. However, she never denies other traditions' implications for her research. Indeed, she has mentioned other intellectual sources, such as the theories of the former Soviet educationalists L. S. Vygotsky and Sukhomlinskii, among others. Though Li (2018) rarely mentions the theories of East Asian scholars (excluding those from the Chinese mainland), she states in her writing that Kyuichi Kimura's (木村久一) book *Early Education and Talents* (早教育と天才) inspired her to ponder the development of children's thinking in pedagogy. However, these theories' significance cannot rival the weight and prominence of the aforementioned three in Li's writings.

Role of Chinese educational traditions in theorizing the Educator's pedagogical study

In Li's autobiography, she stresses the implications of modern social science theories in terms of constructing her pedagogical system. She also mentions the Chinese educational traditions that helped her theorize her reform practice.

Self-reflection is among the traditional approaches Li adopted. Li (2004, p. 62) utilized this neo-Confucian method of practice for cultivating morality (Chen, 2017, p. 35) to interrogate her inner world, including her resolution regarding education and her pedagogical research. She also used the method to examine her reform practice, as evidenced by the following excerpt:

On the way to school or on the playground in the morning or [while] with my students, I keep thinking and examining my practice ... there comes rational consideration. Through self-reflection, I found that the first stage of my experiment was characterized by linguistic training ... and that all of these stages are correlative. Then, I suddenly realized that it is a whole picture. (Li, 2004, p. 62)

Evidently, Li (2004) viewed self-reflection as the foundation for generalizing her experimental practices given that "Each attainment of the contextualized teaching method comes as a result of a self-reflection session" (p. 62). She concluded that an Educator should continually enrich themselves by combining practice and theory to engage in self-reflection and summarization, which are conducive to innovation. Hence, self-reflection became the methodology for her theorization in the context of her pedagogical research.

Regarding engaging in self-reflection, Li's practice has shown the influence of correlative cosmology, a traditional Chinese outlook that deeply affects individual thinking (Chen, 2017, pp. 3–7). As the above excerpt has revealed, Li viewed all her experiments as interdependent components that could be organized as a whole. Furthermore, Li (2004) emphasized the interdependence of language learning, life experiences, and children's growth, premised on her belief that "Language is tightly connected with the social context and one's thinking and emotions" (p. 105). Influenced by Chinese cosmology's emphasis on holism and connectivity, Li's (2004, pp. 90–96) research

forged a link between contexts, emotions, and education, the interactions of which formed the rationale for her teaching skills. It can be said that Li's analysis of her thoughts on education resulted in her pedagogical studies focusing more on the connections between and the interaction of the factors involved in her teaching activities than on individual factors' quality and implications.

Li has also made frequent mention of the role of "sudden enlightenment" (顿悟) in the theorization of her exploratory practices. Her autobiography describes the integration of sudden enlightenment, a Buddhist method credited to the monk Huineng (慧能, 638–713 AD) (Hu, 1953), into Li's research practice and its application to the generalization of findings. She explains the role of sudden enlightenment in her experiences as follows:

Practitioners need sudden enlightenment in the process of theorizing individual practices to reach generality. In my experience, sudden enlightenment came from my self-reflection. If there is no self-reflection, then there will be no sudden enlightenment. Without sudden enlightenment, it will be very hard for us to theorize our pedagogical practices. (Li, 2004, p. 63)

In other words, a basic education Educator should seek sudden enlightenment based on individual teaching practices and self-reflection.

Regarding theorizing her studies, Li also mentioned the implications of the Way for the contextualized teaching paradigm. In fact, she has described herself as a longtime adherent to the tradition of "cultivating the Way through writing." Hence, every essay of Li (2004, p. 88) purports that the Way is beneficial for talent cultivation, and she has stressed the importance of the ideological standpoint in her pedagogy.

Based on the above, the pathways through which elements of Chinese educational traditions impacted Li's establishment of the contextualized teaching paradigm are evident. These elements include certain values and patterns. Informed by such traditions, Li kept an open mind and successfully integrated modern theories into her pedagogical research. Consequently, she constructed a contextualized education discourse system bearing "a distinctive national style and [capable of] revealing strong local essences" (Wang, 2016, p. 96).

Discussion

The findings show that Chinese educational traditions have informed one Chinese primary school Educator's pedagogical studies. These traditions include values, behavioral patterns, ways of thinking, and intellectual sources. Such elements were not merely derived from Confucianism but rather were selected from diverse traditional resources and integrated harmoniously into the Educator's thought and practice. Through our case study of Li, we have confirmed that Chinese educational

traditions are an active influence impacting eminent modern Chinese Educators' pedagogical studies.

However, overestimating the influence of Chinese educational traditions would be dangerous. Although certain traditional values repeatedly emerge in Li's autobiography, typical symbols of Chinese educational traditions, such as the *Four Books and the Five Classics* (四书五经) and the *Five Constant Virtues* (五常), do not figure in her writings. This fact echoes Yang's (2022) observation that contemporary Chinese people do not strictly adhere to Confucian values and norms. After over a century of modernization, many traditions have been lost, and Chinese society has become largely Westernized. Hence, the stereotype that Chinese teachers are naturally informed by ancient Chinese educational traditions is outdated. Understanding this is crucial to creating the appropriate context for exploring how Chinese educational traditions influence modern Educators.

Li's attitude toward Chinese traditional culture is particularly important. Although Li occasionally assumed an anti-traditionalist position, she valued domestic traditions and believed that the Chinese cultural legacy could benefit her experiments. She has always regarded Chinese classics as a point of reference and has consistently learned from ancient Chinese scholars' experiences and theories. Even in the context of strong Western influence, Li has demonstrated her ability to move beyond "the West as method" and adopt "traditional China as method," to some extent echoing Chen's (2010) call for "Asia as method." Indeed, many modern Chinese Educators view traditional Chinese culture as an important source of useful knowledge, and their acceptance of it is a fundamental condition for understanding how Chinese educational traditions can contribute to pedagogical research.

Li, working in a Western-style education system, creatively utilized intellectual resources to develop her theories. Given that, in contemporary China, Chinese and Western traditions remain part of "a mix that is yet to be set right" (Yang, 2022, p. 4), analyzing how Li made such achievements is worthwhile. In her writings, she cites the principle of "making foreign learnings serve China and the past serve the present," and in this, there seems to be some subjectivity driving her to select and actively transform Western and Chinese resources. In her own words, she has explained believing in "learning from others for my use with an open mind" (Li, 2013, p. 5). Specifically, Li maintained her autonomy and self-determination in her teaching practices and pedagogical studies by aligning herself with the goals of China's education reforms. In her pedagogical experiments, she maintained her independence and neutrality instead of succumbing to external pressures and following trends. By keeping an open mind, she recognized distinctive intellectual resources as equal and available and used her judgment to make appropriate selections and construct her paradigm. Hence, her agency played a crucial role in her pedagogical research, allowing her to exploit various educational resources and avoid being dominated and manipulated by

limiting conventions. This subjectivity led to her awareness of local students' problems and needs, facilitating her creative transformation of Chinese and Western traditions through her experiments. Educators who lack such subjectivity will find it difficult to combine Chinese and Western traditions within China's Western-style education system.

However, subjectivity has some limitations in light of Chen's (2010) "Asia as method" idea. For Li, a binary Chinese–Western system is evident. Li focused on indigenous knowledge and Western theories. By contrast, she paid little attention to the rest of the world, including other East Asian states. For instance, Li's visit to Japan in the 1980s left her with the impression of Japanese teachers as overworked and thus having no time for pedagogical research, a situation that made her more grateful for the Chinese government's support (2004, p. 430; 2009b). Hence, Educators who lack knowledge of how pedagogical studies are conducted in other East Asian states and the manner in which such education systems renew Confucian educational traditions could miss a golden opportunity to improve their projects.

Concluding remarks

This paper has presented a case study of Jilin Li's educational research journey based on an inquiry regarding the way in which Chinese educational traditions inform pedagogical studies in contemporary China in the context of strong Western influence. In light of Chen's (2010) "Asia as method" idea, the author drew particular attention to the Asian resources employed in the selected case. Furthermore, through thematic analysis, this study identified the following three functions of Chinese educational traditions in Li's pedagogical research. First, certain traditional values motivated Li, driving her to begin conducting pedagogical experiments. Moreover, the Chinese cultural legacy inspired her to improve her experiments, and certain Chinese traditions impacted her theory formulation. Hence, Li's case demonstrates that some elements of Chinese educational traditions still actively inform Educators working in a modern Western-style education system. By analyzing how Li combined Chinese and foreign traditions in her pedagogical research journey, this paper has also revealed a subjectivity that has strengths and deficiencies with respect to Chinese Educators' endeavors.

This study has drawn attention to a prominent Educator who constructed a nationally renowned contextualized teaching paradigm for primary schools. Her experiences have shown how Educators can engage in knowledge production based on indigenous knowledge and Western theories. Distinct from those working in higher education, their pedagogical studies and theories are influential in China but have gained little attention in the international academic community. This study was the first to analyze such Educators' pedagogical studies from a cultural perspective. The research has revealed influential elements of Chinese educational traditions and indicated

their role in informing Chinese Educators' pedagogical studies. However, the present study has some limitations. Among these, the data were over-reliant on textual materials because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented the researcher from accessing and interviewing Educators. Future studies should utilize alternative research methods and interview other Educators.


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Note

1. The Institute is strongly associated with Jilin Li and her contextualized teaching research projects. The interview video is available on the Institute's official website: <http://www.qjjy.cn/NewsDetail.aspx?ID=205>

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