Research on Chinese Lifelong Learning and Improving Ways

Jing-yan DUAN\textsuperscript{a} and Dan LU\textsuperscript{b}

No. 237 Longquan Road, YUFE, Kunming, Yunnan Province, China
\textsuperscript{a}20025859@qq.com, \textsuperscript{b}2664288107@qq.com

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Abstract. The naissance of lifelong learning thoughts was early in Spring and Autumn Period in China, but it was formed as completed system after western countries’ relevant theories spread into China in 1980s. With economy developing dramatically and global environment changing rapidly, people need to spend less time to learn more knowledge than before. However, Chinese lifelong learning theory and practices developed slower than west countries until now. Therefore, this article will introduce Chinese ancient lifelong learning thoughts, and analysis current situation of lifelong learning. Finally, this article will conclude ways to improve lifelong learning.

The Roots and Background of Lifelong Learning Theory

The first world conference of lifelong learning was held in Rome, Italy in November 1994. The conference defined lifelong learning as "the survival concepts in the 21st century ...it is a process of giving play to the personal potential abilities, which motivate and make people have the rights to gain all knowledge, values, skills and understanding for their whole lives. These knowledge, values, skills and understanding should be able to help people to complete all kinds of tasks under different conditions with confidantes and creatives at anytime."

The concept of "lifelong learning" was promoted by the advocate, Edgard Faure of lifelong learning theory in the early 1970s. He points out that people are changed from "have to learn" to "want to learn" during learning process with the contemporary society dramatic change. In other words, "the new education spirit makes people become the master and the creator of their own cultural progress". [1]

The lifelong learning theory research was into the boom in 1970s, because more and more governments and people around the world focused on and were interested in lifelong learning theory. Besides, the form laws and regulations became the supreme principle and foundations of promoting lifelong learning activities.

The generation of lifelong learning theory is mainly due to following five reasons: the social transformation, the science and technology rapid development, knowledge growth and competition increasing, demographic and cultural life changes.

With high technology developing dramatically, the contemporary society has gradually developed from the industrial economy to the knowledge economy age. On the one hand, the knowledge economy age prompted all kinds of high technology developing rapidly, which causes plenty of learning channels, and the new teaching methods became a part of traditional ways of school education. On the other hand, the formed knowledge economy age accelerated knowledge and information daily updating. Therefore, for fostering talent with critical thinking skills, the most important thing is aware of the importance, attitude, and methods of lifelong learning.

With the society development, the global population structure has changed by two trends of the birth rate decreasing and life-time dilation, which led to the shortage of young labors and the retirement extension. Besides, life-time dilation makes people keep learning to deal with knowledge increasing of the retirement and life-time dilation. Daily life is changed by increased leisure time and improvement of life quality, which is led contemporary people pay more attention to learn than ever before.
Research on Ancient Chinese Lifelong Learning Thoughts

Although the lifelong learning theory was introduced and applied to Chinese education from overseas in recent years, in fact, it had existed in ancient China and it had not been explicitly defined as “lifelong learning” from beginning to end. Among numerous viewpoints on lifelong learning in ancient China, the elaborations made by Confucius and Xunci are the most profound and comprehensive ones.

Confucius’ Viewpoints on Lifelong Learning. First of all, Confucius proposed “make no social distinctions in teaching” in The Analects of Confucius—Duke Ling of Wei, meaning all the people shall learn, which means that it has the bud of whole people learning specified in modern lifelong learning theory. [2]

Secondly, “Study hard, neglecting one’s meals; being so happy as to forget worries and not knowing that old age is just around the corner” specified in The Analects of Confucius—Expressions not only reflects Confucius’ tireless attitude for learning and teaching, but also reflects his proposals on lifelong learning. Also in the book, “Two heads are always better than one. Learn something good from others and improve oneself by finding some problems from others” means that each person can learn from anyone with merits as well as from anyone with faults and it reveals the possibility of each person making free transformation between a subject and an object in education. [3]

Thirdly, according to The Analects of Confucius—Words of Zizhang, Zi Gong answered the question “Where does Confucius learn from?” made by Gongsun Chao of Wei State with the words “My teacher learns everything from everywhere. Is it necessary for him to have a fixed teacher?” The story reflected that Confucius learned his knowledge in a comprehensive manner, namely the horizontal learning ways of lifelong. Learning shall be diversified, not only formal learning provided by schools is required, specific informal learning at any time is necessary, and informal learning at anytime and anywhere in daily life is also requested.

Fourthly, “It’s good to live with people with virtues. If you live with people without virtues, how can you prove that you are a wise person?” described in The Analects of Confucius—Virtues and “Confucius will ask everything after entering the Imperial Ancestral Temple” described in The Analects of Confucius—Etiquettes and “Be tireless in teaching” reflected Confucius’ spirit of learning at anytime and everywhere.

Finally, Confucius also proposed the concept of “Improve oneself to make people happy” (from The Analects of Confucius—Questions of Yuan Xian), meaning lifelong learning is people-oriented. The purpose of lifelong learning is not only to make learners improve themselves, but also promote the sustainable development of the whole society. [4]

Xunci’s Viewpoints on Lifelong Learning. Xunci also had a complete system on lifelong learning theories: Firstly, “Study shall be continuous”, meaning that study or learning cannot be stopped. Secondly, “A gentleman shall learn extensively and reflect on what he learns every day, and then he will be a wise man and will not commit wrong deeds.” and “A person will not know how high the sky is without climbing a high mountain, he will not know how deep the ground is without going into a deep brook and he will not know the extent of knowledge without listening to the words made by ancient kings”, meaning that people shall study in a wide range of things and various practices. Thirdly, “A journey of one thousand miles begins with one step; without small streams, there would be no oceans and seas. Perseverance can carve metal and gold” meaning that the only way for improving oneself is to adhere to learning. [5]

Development Situations of Chinese Lifelong Learning and Lifelong Education Theories

China introduced lifelong learning and lifelong education theories in 1980s and rapidly applied them to educational practices, which promoted the reform and development of Chinese education system in a positive manner. In accordance with the Education Law of the People’s Republic of China, implemented on September 1st, 1995, “The nation shall promote educational reforms,
improve the coordinated developments of education at all levels and of all types, establish and enhance lifelong education systems in order to adapt to Chinese socialist economic development and social progress.” “The national shall encourage and develop multiple forms of adult education to make all citizens have proper political, economic, cultural, scientific, technical and professional education as well as lifelong education.”

Lifelong education and lifelong learning have differences; in the meantime, they supplement each other. On one hand, lifelong education is performed by governments; it is a kind of educational concept and institutional reform from top to bottom; in addition, it is the institutional guarantee for personal lifelong learning. Without whole society lifelong education guarantee, it is hard to truly realize personal lifelong learning. On the other hand, lifelong learning is performed by individuals and it is from bottom to top. The purpose of lifelong learning is to improve one’s quality, capability, realize one’s objectives so as to propel social developments. In case individuals have no will or ability for learning, it is unnecessary to talk about the lifelong education construction for the whole society. [6]

In the 21st Century, people face global economic, technological, and social culture environments with increasingly complicated changes and challenges. In such global environments and historical background, Chinese modern lifelong education system consists of not only full-time education, but also part-time education and industrial (enterprise) education system (see Table 1).

| Table 1. Chinese Modern Lifelong Education System. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Full-time Education System** | **Part-time Education System** | **Industrial (Enterprise) Education System** |
| Preschool Education: kindergarten | Degree Education | University Education (Bachelor, Master, PhD) |
| Primary Education | Primary School | Computer Network Education | Orientation, on-the-job, and job transfer trainings |
| Secondary Education | Middle School, High School | Online Program (include all kinds of major, but non-degree) | Continuation Education |
| Higher Education: University Education: undergraduate (Bachelor, Master, PhD) | Social Education | Community education: Leisure (holiday) education, education for senior citizens and family education, etc. |
| Institute Education: Master, PhD | | |

The improvement of the system has changed the current situation that all kinds of school education have no sufficient exchanges, provided multiple choices and opportunities for numerous educates, made formal education system more flexible and informal education modes more open. In addition, educational institutions, school running modes, course offerings, student composition and funding sources are encouraged to be diverse so as to meet the various demands of people on education. Multiple methods such as network can be performed to realize the advantages of all kinds of educational forces and break the time-space restrictions of learning so as to make learners select learning ways as per social needs and their own conditions and improve the lifelong, network, openness, diversification and socialization features of educational structure systems.

However, as a long-term learning strategy, it is far from enough to solely depend on the improvement of lifelong education system. China shall also improve other aspects so as to reinforce and propel the development of lifelong learning.

**Ways for Improving Lifelong Learning Development of China**

Firstly, legislation of lifelong learning shall be made. Although the legislation on lifelong learning can not only publicize the ideas of lifelong learning, but also normalize social and personal
conducts, as a matter of fact, China has only simply mentioned lifelong learning and lifelong education in the *Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, but no any special legislation on lifelong learning has been made so far. On the contrary, the USA issued the *Lifelong Learning Act* as early as 1976 and Japan issued its *Lifelong Learning Revitalization Law* in 1990.

Secondly, enhancement of theoretical research on lifelong learning shall be performed. Chinese theoretical research on lifelong learning has always been behind lifelong learning practices. China shall not only enhance its theoretical research and innovations on lifelong learning, integrate relevant research results into social practices and provide guidance, but also focus on the new trends and new achievements of overseas relevant theoretical research and apply rational experiences to Chinese lifelong learning development practices so as to form the lifelong education system with Chinese characteristics.

Thirdly, the role of institutions of higher learning shall be better utilized. In order to adapt to the requirements of lifelong learning, institutions of higher learning shall help college students to cultivate the awareness of lifelong learning, establish concepts of self-directed learning, define learning objectives and utilize scientific learning methods at first. Then, as the providers of formal learning, such institutions of higher learning shall adopt laboratory teaching instead of using classroom teaching or academic lectures. Laboratory teaching not only applies to science and engineering subjects, but also applies to liberal arts subjects such as finance, accounting and management. For example, stock, futures, foreign exchange simulation operation systems and ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) sand table simulation training courses can use sand tables. Finally, college students shall be guided and instructed to enhance their formal and informal learning.

Fourthly, adult education shall be developed greatly. Further education and trainings are informal learning and they are important components of lifelong learning. As a result, the continuous learning of social members shall become an important part and a new growth point for education development and the establishment of lifelong learning system.

Fifthly, the management of lifelong learning plans shall be enhanced. Besides giving full play to the local initiatives of lifelong learning, governments shall enhance the macro-control and supervision on lifelong learning plans so as to realize lifelong learning objectives and reduce the blindness brought by local programs for lifelong learning.

Finally, the role of modern distance education and information technology shall be better utilized. In traditional classroom teaching model, it is impossible to realize the three objectives, expanding education scale, improving teaching quality and reducing school running costs, at the same time. The rapid development of information technology has brought unprecedented development opportunities for lifelong learning and provided important guarantee for China to establish a learning society under the condition of relatively insufficient education resources. Modern distance education can not only break time and space restrictions, but also provide more learning opportunities for persons of various levels and at different ages so as to realize the above education development objectives simultaneously.

**Summary**

Looking around the world, lifelong learning is a long term strategy and a global trend to improve economy, technology, and social culture of countries. As the biggest developing country, China not only needs to learn practical experience from western countries, but also needs to summarize improving ways to develop lifelong learning.

**References**


