

Reimagining Life Education: Integrating Cultivation-Reading Practices in Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract: In traditional Chinese society, individuals were immersed in a series of life experiences that had a profound impact on their worldview and outlook on life. This influence persists into the modern era, where natural and agricultural living remain significant aspects of Chinese society. In the contemporary era, societal violence is an occasional phenomenon that is influenced by modernity. It is therefore of particular importance to explore the life elements within the context of cultivation-reading education (agricultural and scholarly education) to facilitate the development of life education. This study primarily investigates the life elements in cultivation-reading education, compares it with life education, and explores the shared principles between the two. It also examines how cultivation-reading education can guide values, attitudes towards labor, and worldviews. The research findings indicate that there are substantial life elements within cultivation-reading education. The integration of traditional Chinese culture into life education is a viable approach that can effectively advance current life education practices.

Keywords: Life education, Cultivation-reading education, Educational principle.

1. Introduction

China is a country with a long history of agricultural civilisation, spanning thousands of years. Over millennia of farming, the Chinese people have gradually developed a philosophy of life that is in accordance with the natural rhythms of the environment. In the past studies, scholars have investigated the educational spirit and wisdom inherent in the tradition of Chinese philosophy, such as the holistic perspective of the relationship between heaven and humanity, which reveals an educational spirit of unity with nature, which is cultivated through relational thinking [1]. The cultivation-reading education is an educational model formed based on the "harmony between heaven and humanity" educational spirit. People cultivate their fields during sunny weather and read indoors when it rains. Farming and reading are complementary pursuits. People believe that one who forsakes farming for books will inevitably suffer hunger and cold and one who neglects books in favour of farming will lose sight of propriety and righteousness [2]. Recently, the cultivation-reading education represents a novel and promising direction for academic inquiry in China. In 2021, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China published a notice regarding the implementation of the "Plan for Strengthening and Improving Cultivation-reading Education in Agricultural Universities". This document emphasises that cultivation-reading education, characterised by the simultaneous pursuit of farming and reading, represents a vital means of promoting the exemplary traditional

culture of farming and reading. It encompasses a range of comprehensive educational functions, including moral cultivation, intellectual development, physical strengthening and aesthetic appreciation [3]. Thereby underscoring the significance and efficacy of cultivation-reading culture.

In recent years, campus violence incidents that violate bioethical norms have occurred frequently, drawing significant public attention. According to UNESCO's 2019 Global Data Report on School violence, including bullying, is widespread: one in three learners is bullied at school every month globally. In 2019, at least 10% of learners aged 8-10 had experienced cyberbullying, rising to 20% of learners aged 12-14 [4]. The increasing incidence of adolescents showing disrespect for others' lives has sounded an alarm, prompting greater emphasis on life education. In traditional Chinese culture, cultivation-reading education contains rich life concept, which is different from life education but complementary to each other, emphasizing practical experience and spiritual growth. Cultivation-reading education aims to enable educators to deeply understand the laws of world operation and the rhythm of life while thinking about their relationship with nature and others. It has room for in-depth development in China, where farming culture has a profound influence, and provides certain educational methods for China to carry on the inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, building upon the urgent need to strengthen life education, exploring the life rhythms within cultivation-reading education can enhance its role in shaping educational subjects' views on life. Investigating the connections between cultivation-reading education and life education further elucidates the educational value of cultivation-reading education. Seeking methods to cultivate life rhythms in cultivation-reading education aims to better guide the formation of values, work ethics, and worldviews among educational subjects, contributing to the enhancement of life education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Clarification

Prior to the main analysis, it is necessary to clarify the concept of cultivation-reading education and its economic and cultural context. Related concepts, such as life education and labor education, should also be defined to facilitate subsequent research.

2.1.1. Conception and Origin of Cultivation-reading Education in China

In AC 635, the *Zhou Shu* vividly depicts ancient Chinese farming practices: During the time of Shen Nong, heaven rained millet, and Shen Nong cultivated and sowed it. He made pottery, smelted axes, and crafted hoes, plows, and hoes to clear the wilderness. Then the five grains flourished, aiding in the ripening of fruits [5]. Liu Yaling et al. argue that the cultivation-reading culture, based on an agrarian economy and situated within rural communities, is a unique Chinese cultural lifestyle integrating farming and education as one, with Confucian ethics serving as its core values [6]. This practice represents a distinctive way of life in China, combining survival and learning. The cultivation-reading education system has its origins in the period of the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring and Autumn period [7], deeply influenced by China's long-standing agrarian economy and agrarian culture. Lyu et al. assert that the essence of cultivation-reading education is the combination of farming and reading, advocating a value system of unity between knowledge and practice, and promoting the integration of subsistence production work with the enhancement of intellectual capabilities [8].

2.1.2. Conception of Chinese Labor Education

Chinese labor education based on deeply Chinese traditional culture. The term "labor" connotes hard work and effort, which is its natural attribute. The subject of labor is human beings, which is its

essential attribute [9]. The development of labor education ideas is deeply rooted in specific historical and social contexts, being shaped by historical changes and societal conditions. Chinese traditional culture emerged from a family-based agricultural production system, where agrarian civilization and familial heritage are fundamental [7]. For ancient Chinese, the concepts of labor and cultivation were closely intertwined. China experienced a prolonged period of agricultural civilization, which has left vestiges of farming labor in contemporary labor education. The primary objectives of labor education are to foster the formation of a labor consciousness, enhance positive work attitudes, and cultivate good work habits. Its core and critical focus lie in cultivating the learners' labor capabilities and qualities [10]. Labor education integrates life skills into the curriculum and enhances physical fitness through practice. It also instills qualities such as diligence, bravery, and endurance in the learners over time.

2.1.3. Conception and Development of Life Education

Marx noted that the first premise of all human history is, undoubtedly, the existence of living individuals [11]. In 1968, the discipline of life education was formally introduced. Emphasizing respect for life and the experience of living, American scholar J. Donald Walters proposed a revolutionary educational philosophy known as life education. He established the Ananda School in northern California as a practical base for implementing the principles of life education [12]. Since then, life education has gradually been recognized as an important educational issue in Western countries. In 2005, the Chinese Ministry of Education and Health emphasized the inclusion of mental health education and counseling as a key agenda item in schools' ideological and political education, along with continuous improvement of support mechanisms. In 2006, the Yong'an Life Education Research Center was established in Tianjin, and the Chinese Youth Life Education Base was founded in Beijing [13]. Following these initiatives, life education research centers were subsequently established across the country, highlighting the importance of life and its understanding. Liu and Li define life education as an educational practice aimed at guiding students towards a correct understanding of human value and life, fostering an appreciation of the true meaning of living, cultivating a humanistic spirit, nurturing a pursuit of ultimate beliefs, developing a caring disposition, and enabling them to lead a modern civilized lifestyle [14]. Educators have the responsibilities to provide a foundation for students to recognize and respect life. Also, life education needs to encompass teaching knowledge about life, contemplating its purpose, understanding death, and reflecting on the nature of the world and the relationship between humans and the world.

2.2. The Guiding Role of the Three Views of Cultivation-reading Education

Cultivation-reading education, combining theory with practice, has educational effects that include shaping values, guiding attitudes toward labor, and broadening worldviews for its participants.

2.2.1. Value Education

Firstly, cultivate positive qualities in the educational subjects. Lyu and Liu argue that cultivation-reading education embodies unique spiritual symbols and practical wisdom from thousands of years of Chinese rural society, linking humans with nature [8]. Chinese people developed the virtue of diligence and frugality early on through their long history of arduous agricultural production and living. Wu and Lyu acknowledge that the cultivation-reading education embodies the ritual traditions and evolutionary logic of Chinese society nurtured by Confucian culture. This educational process not only imparts knowledge and skills but also transmits cultural heritage and virtues, cultivating wisdom and virtue through spiritual exchange and guiding the formation of values in educational subjects [15]. Cultivation-education places students in natural settings, where contact with nature

strengthens both their physical constitution and character. The daily life and learning in cultivation-education provide an environment for moral education and the transmission of traditional Chinese culture, facilitating the cultivation of virtues endorsed by mainstream values. Immersive practices in natural environments offer more opportunities to notice elements of life in nature, fostering a connection and comparison with oneself. This can strengthen the subjects' concept of life, imparting significant educational value.

Secondly, it guides educational subjects to form a value of cherishing life. In traditional Chinese philosophy, Confucianism emphasizes an integrative view of "benevolence" that encompasses both holism and nature. This benevolence starts with self-love and extends to family, friends, and ultimately to all living beings [16]. It embodies respect and care for life. The life ethics and values of "cherishing life" and "valuing harmony" in cultivation-reading education continue to profoundly influence Chinese lifestyles and values today. Liang Yuan also endorses this view, cultivation-reading education fosters a life consciousness that respects nature, reveres the natural order, cherishes life, and holds a sense of awe for natural laws. Advocating for learners to be guided towards the Confucian ideals of constantly striving forward like the sky and cultivating moral integrity like the earth [7]. Exploring the life elements in cultivation-reading education can guide educational subjects toward a greater appreciation of life and respect for nature, making the educational process more immersive and influential subliminally.

2.2.2. Labor View Education

Cultivation-reading education is rich in labor content. First, labor view education is the important part in holistic education. Rousseau noted that labor is an inevitable responsibility for social beings [17]. In the current context, labor view education is no longer merely physical labor; it integrates multiple aspects including moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and practical elements to shape the labor values of the educational subjects. Its components promote the holistic development of learners. Secondly, cultivation-reading education integrates labor and study by combining daily life with agricultural practices, and it carries forward certain traditions from ancient China. Cultivation-reading education focuses on foundational survival skills and moral character development, thereby contributing to comprehensive human development [7]. It incorporates exemplary traditional Chinese morals and daily etiquette into the labor curriculum. This approach promotes the development of manners alongside labor activities, shapes the labor values of the educational subjects. Thirdly, Lu and Liu conceptualize cultivation-reading education into two dimensions: "cultivation" and "reading." Through "cultivation," the essential role of labor in education is reinforced, fostering students' physical health and sense of social responsibility. "Reading" enriches the essence of wisdom education, nurturing students' cultural literacy and encouraging them to expand their knowledge and elevate their intellectual horizons [18]. The direct experiences of the learners are validated through indirect experiences gained from reading, which in turn better guides and shapes their perception of labor.

2.2.3. Worldview Education

Firstly, it aims to cultivate the notion of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Amidst escalating global crises, international society has progressed from early environmental education focused primarily on protecting the environment to current approaches that emphasize coexistence between humans and the planet. The ancient Chinese text *Xunzi's Discourse on Heaven* states, the sun and moon take turns to illuminate; the four seasons succeed one another; "yin" and "yang" transform greatly; wind and rain are widely bestowed; all things receive their due harmony to thrive [19]. This highlights the ancient Chinese emphasis on the concept of "harmony." In ancient China,

farmer follow natural laws, emphasizing respect for all forms of life and the creation of an ecologically harmonious environment [20]. One goal of cultivation-reading education is to foster harmonious coexistence between the learners and nature to ensure the continuity and realization of life's value. Cultivation-reading education retains agricultural labor methods, thus making learners to adhere to the natural rhythms of agricultural work when engaging in practical activities. In this context, learners develop a better understanding and respect for nature, gaining insights into natural patterns through crop growth and weather changes, fostering the concept of harmony between humans and nature.

Secondly, there is the cultivation of sustainable development concepts among educational subjects. Following World War II, UNESCO evolved from an early focus on environmental education aimed at solving environmental issues to a more comprehensive approach emphasizing harmonious coexistence and shared prosperity with all life forms under the 2030 Sustainable Development Education agenda [21]. UNESCO has established international frameworks such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change to shape the global discourse on sustainable development education and advocates for the localization of sustainable development education through curriculum mainstreaming, which involves integrating relevant content and pedagogies into curricula, and institutional mainstreaming, which requires support from institutions, communities, and policies [22]. This provides a possibility for China to conduct sustainable development education in combination with its own farming culture. The Chinese Ministry of Education has issued relevant documents calling for schools to develop and improve teaching methods and facilities for cultivation-education. Cultivation-educational programs are conducted within the natural environment of China's rural areas, integrating traditional agricultural culture to offer educational participants a life and natural experience with Chinese characteristics, which foster greater interest of nature, and much-needed ecological sustainability awareness.

2.3. The Life Elements in Cultivation-Reading Education

Marx noted, what individuals are depends on how they express their lives. Thus, their being is consistent with their productive labor, both in terms of what they produce and how they produce it [11]. This emphasizes the relationship between labor and human nature. As an educational form that includes productive labor, cultivation-reading education provides feasibility for exploring its life elements for educational purposes.

2.3.1. The Subject Life in the Context of Cultivation-reading Education

In the educational process, students should be considered the primary subjects of education. Li Fengtang argues that in the educational process, teachers should respect students' status as life subjects. They should guide students to develop a correct awareness of their own life subjectivity, stimulating their self-awareness, initiative, and creativity in life development [23]. Tang Lifang points out that in daily educational activities, students are often exposed to things and phenomena distant from life itself [24]. As a result, their understanding, experience, and cognition of their own lives and human life in general can become distorted. Therefore, enhancing the subjects' appreciation and understanding of life requires a closer connection with life. The subject of life refers to the students who are experiencing the educational process. Cultivation-reading education is an educational form that relies on the natural environment, with farmers' lives intricately connected to the natural cycles of seasons. Cultivation-reading education retains the fundamental characteristics of agricultural labor. Through this experience, students sweat, feel the joy of work, the pleasure of harvest, and the regret of poor yields. This allows them to truly appreciate the value of life in the natural world and the value they create through their own labor. At the same time, the traditional cultivation culture in rural

education urges people to reflect on maintaining their well-being, ensuring survival, achieving personal fulfillment, and continuous self-improvement through "cultivating oneself." It also emphasizes the pursuit of self-reliance and growth and the flourishing of one's life [25]. This approach fosters individual student development, nurtures innovation, cultivates a multicultural perspective, seeks mutual understanding among people and the true meaning of life, and emphasizes harmony and joy in living [7].

2.3.2. Objective Life in Cultivation-Reading Education

Firstly, time is fundamentally linked to life. In the process of cultivation-reading education, the time and effort invested by the cultivating subject become evident in the object. Jiao points out that time, in its fundamental meaning, is a life orientation—it aligns with the unique rhythm of individual life creation and experience growth [26]. Su and Cao, based on Chinese traditional culture, clarified the basic framework of China's agrarian philosophical system. They summarized that changes in "geographical advantage" in traditional Chinese agrarian practice conform to the rhythm of "heavenly timing." Through the historical origins and role of "agricultural timing" in ancient agrarian production, they confirmed the conceptual consistency between "agricultural timing" and "heavenly timing" [27]. Next is the relationship between land and life. In the tradition of agrarian culture, land is essential and tangible, considered as "lifeline". This represents the highest philosophical understanding and experience of life. The philosophy of agrarian civilization is pragmatic, given the interconnection of life, production, livelihood, living, ecology, and occupation—all with the land [28]. Thus, in the context of cultivation-reading education, time and land both embody a strong life concept. Examining the ecological philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity" in ancient Chinese agricultural proverbs and integrating time and land in the context of cultivation-reading education, can help learners reassess the interactions between humans and natural ecosystems. This approach holds significant implications for mitigating contemporary ecological crises and fostering the development of an ecological civilization.

2.3.3. Life in the Context of Cultivation-Reading Education Environment

The timing of cultivation and study in this education model varies according to the seasonal changes, and the lives encountered during the educational process are closely related to the learning subjects. The close association between crop growth and seasonal changes instills a strong awareness of time. Tang Lifang notes that human life in social life is not a solitary existence but rather engages in interactions with other subjects [24]. The natural life in this context encompasses all elements of nature that the cultivating subjects encounter. Chinese Daoism derived the philosophical principle of "yin and yang complementing each other, governing each other, seasons succeeding one another, generating and inhibiting each other" from the coexistence and mutual interaction in agricultural ecosystems [29]. Zhang Zailin's research has revealed that the sixty-four hexagrams of *The Book of Changes* do not represent sixty-four conceptual categories in a logical sense, but rather are expressed through a form of "life semiotics" [30]. This clearly demonstrates that Chinese philosophy, deeply influenced by agrarian culture, embodies profound views on life. In the process of cultivation-reading education, learners engage with various forms of life in the natural environment, gradually absorbing these views through environmental immersion.

2.4. Methods and Principles of Life Education from the Perspective of Cultivation-reading Education

In his cultural notes *The Value of Culture*, Wittgenstein observed, lightning is more commonly seen today than it was two thousand years ago, but it no longer causes astonishment. One must wake up

and be astonished by this natural phenomenon." Here, Wittgenstein points to the loss of awe and mystery in nature due to humanity's reverence for science, suggesting that rampant exploitation and desecration of nature will have consequences for humans [31]. Ancient agrarian proverbs demonstrate the unity between humans and nature, emphasizing that human survival depends on the use of natural resources. They suggest a symbiotic and holistic relationship between humans and nature with an inherent interconnectedness [32]. The connection between nature and humans is fundamentally based on human survival, which provides the possibility for exploring elements of life education within the context of cultivation-reading education.

2.4.1. Principle of Emotional Experience

Human understanding at its earliest stage is sensory-based. According to Rousseau, these fundamental emotions enter the mind through the senses [17]. Deriving into the educational domain, Max argues that the best educational relationship is a lived experience, possessing its own intrinsic meaning [33]. The principle of emotional experience in life education leverages the educator's sensibility, incorporating natural resources. Feng and Jiang argue that fundamental human attitudes toward life should include appreciation and immersion in the meaning of life, affirmation and acceptance of one's own life, and affection and cherishing of others' lives and the entire living world [34]. Furthermore, experiencing patterns displayed in natural phenomena tends to foster resilience, respect, and love for nature, enhancing educational effectiveness. Tang Lifang argues that to enhance the life value of young individuals, we must regulate and guide their life practices and enrich their emotional experiences [24]. Cultivation-reading education utilizes practical approaches, incorporating natural resources into labor education. People gain direct experience and develop emotional connections through these practices. By exercising their agency to transform the natural world, they also come to appreciate the value of life and the environment.

2.4.2. Self-education Principle

Cultivation-reading education, deeply influenced by the culture of farming and reading, involves self-cultivation within the relationship between "Heaven" and "Humanity." The process of work not only impacts objects but also involves interactions with people, and behind these interactions between humans and objects lies the essence of human-to-human relationships [1]. In the process of education, learner's subjective consciousness is the basis of self-education, which has the characteristics of initiative and creativity, which is the inner power of self-transformation. During cultivation-reading education, educators guide learners to strengthen their capacity through practical engagement. Through interpersonal interactions, learners gain new experiences and engage in creative problem-solving. Reflection is another form of self-education. Hu Juren in the Ming Dynasty advocated for a method of "unifying learning and action," emphasizing that learning without reflection leads to confusion and reflection without learning is empty. Individuals must continuously learn, think, practice, and reflect to improve themselves [35]. Learners should cultivate their body and mind in nature and spend time outdoors to maintain health and enhance mental acuity [36]. In cultivation-reading education, practical activities typically involve repetitive agricultural tasks that enable learners to refine their farming techniques through iterative reflection. This promotes the development of reflective practices, enhancing the capacity for self-education.

2.4.3. Principle of Tacit Penetration

Traditional Chinese philosophy, nurtured in the rich soil of China, has developed its own unique values, dialectics, and methodology due to distinctive geographical and cultural conditions. It explores the relationships between heaven, earth, and humanity, focusing on the patterns of historical

development in ancient China while also giving significant attention to philosophical issues and human ethics. This is achieved through the eastern perspective and logic, recognizing the world and discovering objective laws of phenomena [16]. The principle of implicit permeation suggests that life education should subtly influence the learner. This can be achieved by shaping the learner's environment. Tang advocates creating conditions that immerse the learner in morally rich and realistic scenarios to realize the subtle effects of education [24]. Liang emphasizes that to achieve an education oriented towards life values, there needs to be a mutual transformation between education and life [7]. Cultivation-reading education integrates China's millennia-old agrarian traditions into its curriculum, enabling participants to gain direct insight into the arduous living conditions of ancient farmers who toiled "with faces to the soil and backs to the sky." The adage "no pains, no gains," which encapsulates the wisdom accumulated over millennia of farming, embodies the values of diligence and pragmatism that are implicitly imparted through this educational approach. Implementing such an educational approach facilitates the integration of positive values, which can subtly influence learners over time. This also reduces learners' resistance, enhancing educational effectiveness.

3. Conclusion

Cultivation-reading education and life education are innovative approaches that emphasize practical experience, spiritual growth, and social contribution. Through a literature review on both life education and cultivation-reading education, I found that while there is research in both areas, cultivation-reading education, being a relatively new concept, has received less attention from scholars. Our analysis suggests that cultivation-reading education can be linked to life education through natural education, opening possibilities for leveraging the commonalities between cultivation-reading education and labor education to foster life education. As educators, we must recognize that cultivation-reading education is an activity that integrates theory and practice closely, and its unique educational environment exhibits a practical orientation towards life. On this basis, cultivation-reading education can call forth the life of the educational subjects and guide them to manifest their own life awareness, providing a new direction and approach tailored to China's current situation.

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