

On the Philosophy of Subjectivity Education in China

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Abstract

This paper discusses the definition of the philosophical term subjectivity made by Chinese philosophers and the application of the philosophical subjectivity in Subjectivity Education led by Dina Pei and her associates. Subjectivity is the manifestation of the attributes of the subject in his objectification activity, mainly including autonomy, activeness and creativity. Subjectivity Education grafts the theories onto educational theories and has conducted experiments on a nation-wide scale in the past twenty years all over China. Subjectivity Education is leading Education in China from tradition to modernity.

Keywords: Subjectivity Education, philosophy, China, Dina Pei

1. Introduction

Towards the end of the 19th century, the American educational reformer John Dewey inaugurated “New Education” or “Progressive Education” in America, and towards the end of the 20th century, a Chinese educational reformer named Dina Pei, a professor and researcher at Beijing Normal University, initiated “Subjectivity Education” or “Subject Education.” As a philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, Dewey (1963) saw the significance of personal experience in the growth of an individual, and elaborated a theory of education, based upon the growth of children’s experience. The quality of education hinges on the quality of personal experience. The two principles of experience “continuity” and “interaction” are the longitude and latitude of experience. An individual growth is an on-going process. Every experience changes the individual and potentially opens the doors for further development. From this point of view, the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those that have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those that come after. Experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves towards and into. “Interaction” refers to both the objective and the internal conditions. Any normal experience is an interplay of these two sets of conditions. Taken together, or in their interaction, they form what we call a *situation* (Dewey, 1963, p.42). A qualified teacher should be able to design and judge situations and see to it that they are educative.

Subjectivity Education does not fail to see the importance of children’s experience, but focuses on the studies of the qualities of children that educators ought to develop in order to make them become the pillars of the socialist country, and on the approaches to the realization of these qualities of children. Education in China in the 1980s was under the influence of the former Soviet educational philosophy and system. Dominant theories and principles of education were formulated upon Marxist theories. With the opening-up and reform of economy and society after the Cultural Revolution, Chinese philosophical and sociological scholars and researchers found it necessary to discuss issues of humanitarianism and alienation. Discussion of Karl Marx’s theory of alienation involved discussion of the relationship between the subject and the object. In the socialist mode of production and society, people’s potentials should be fully developed and actualized. If so, educational institutions (mainly schools) should assume the responsibility to develop these potential qualities of school children which may be further developed in the society. Given this social background, the next question then is what potential qualities a student is supposed to develop. In order to answer this question, educational researchers and educators turn to the philosophical discussion of the subjectivity of the subject. It is, therefore, unlikely that Pei and her associates construct their theory of education on that of Dewey’s experience. Their theory is deeply rooted in ideology and Marxist philosophy in China.

According to the researchers of Subjectivity Education experiments (Education Department of Beijing

Normal University & Renmindadao Primary School of Anyang, 1994) and Hua Guo (2010), the experiment formally started in 1992 as one of the key programs of the eighth Five-Year planned doctoral research fund of the Ministry of Education for humanities and social sciences, applied by Dina Pei and her associates. 20 years has passed and it is burgeoning with the rapid development of the economy and society. As Bao (2001) puts it, Subject Education is leading the education of China from tradition to modernity. Why is it so? In the following section, we will discuss the philosophical ideas of Subjectivity Education in the hope that we will have a better understanding of the underpinning ideas and principles of Subjectivity Education and probably of the officially-launched quality-oriented education.

2. The Philosophical Background of Subjectivity Education

The idea of Subjectivity Education was formed and developed in the early 1980s, put into experiment in the early 1990s, and spread all over China at the turn of the new millennium. No idea of educational reform can be detached from the social, cultural and intellectual milieu where education functions. The term “subjectivity” was borrowed from philosophy and elaborated and elucidated in the conception of educational theories. “Subject” and “object” are two key concepts in epistemology, with the former referring to the active, cognizing individual (who has motives, will, consciousness, beliefs, attitudes, value judgment, etc.), and the latter to that on which the subject acts. The subject interacts with his physical and social world around him and manipulates his intention into the product of his activity. In the process of his interaction and manipulation, the subject himself is objectified and at the same time develops into a more mature subject. Given this view of the shaping and forming of the qualities and attributes of an individual (the subject), teachers and students alike can be viewed as subjects, and the teaching and learning activities as objects. In this teaching-learning community, the teacher manipulates his intention into the teaching and learning activities, and the student manipulates his into his learning process. The student’s learning activities, assigned and sometimes designed by the teacher, are supposed to be held responsible for the formation and development of the student’s personality, cognitive abilities and other personal attributes such as initiative, self-reliance, self-control, perseverance, and strong will. All these attributes generated in the process of teaching-learning activity are collectively termed as the “subjectivity” of the subject. Therefore, subjectivity is what a student as a subject demonstrates when he acts upon the object. Objectification is the function of the subject’s action upon the object. Different subjects with different attributes dealing with different objects and simultaneously with other different subjects will come out as different objectified subjects. Objects for the student subject include whatever occurs that the student is confronted with in the space and time of his school activities. The teacher may be viewed as the object of the student subject from the perspective of the student, as the teacher is the main element of the situation, and also as a subject, since it is he who designs and manipulates the teaching-learning activities that involve the student and it is he who actively interacts with the student. The complexity of the situation is that in the process of objectification one student subject will interact with other student subject(s), and the interaction between the teacher and one student subject will affect other student subjects in one way or another. Therefore, education or instruction is regarded as an inter-subject process. Education ought to view students as subjects and develop by inter-subject activities their subjectivity that they need to resort to and further develop when they enter the real world outside school.

This view of education is in accordance with the mainstream of philosophical discussion in China. In the 1970s and 1980s, immediately after the Cultural Revolution and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, the “philosophy of man” became the hot topic among Chinese philosophers (Yuan, 1988a). It was believed among Chinese philosophers that philosophy had experienced ontological philosophy, epistemological philosophy and philosophy of practice, and entered a new era of “philosophy of man,” which addresses the issues of man, such as man’s existence, life and development, including the development of his subjectivity. The issue of “value” was also a hot topic at that time. Yuan (1988b) asserted that “value” has a philosophical nature and is related to subjectivity. The subject’s activity is value-driven. In the course of activity, the subjectivity of the subject is reified in the object. This process is called “objectification.” Self-objectification changes not only the object, but the subject himself as well. Objectification functions as something that strengthens and further develops the subjectivity of the subject. The value of the subject activity hinges not only on the usefulness of the object, but also on the quality of the development of the subject’s subjectivity. This is the main reason why subjectivity has been widely discussed in all areas of

Yuan (1988c) ascribed the heated discussion of the philosophical issues of subjectivity to the change of the society. He pointed out that subjectivity had become a banner, a guiding principle and a slogan in all areas of philosophy, humanities and social sciences. This was not an accidental phenomenon, but a demand of the reality. Reform and modernization was a worldwide trend. In developed countries, industrial and agricultural modernization had brought a high degree of material civilization, but modern society had also caused the loss of human personality, split personality and the loss of the subject. People had become one-sided, or deformed. "Alienation" was viewed by many philosophers as the basic characteristic of contemporary Westerners. Restoration of human subjectivity was seen as the only means to get rid of the dilemma of modern Western civilization. In an article on the relationship between human attributes, human nature and human subjectivity, Yuan and Han (1988) defined human subjectivity as follows.

"What is human subjectivity? Simply put, human subjectivity refers to the general and common attributes of human as the subject of activity, and to the specific attributes of human that differ from those of ordinary human and those of the object of the activity. Although subject in philosophical conception has different senses, it generally means the dynamic, active and creative attributes of the subject in an activity, apposed to passiveness of the object, and the consciousness and autonomy of the subject, opposed to his instinctive and blind activities. In sum, human subjectivity refers to activeness, creativity and autonomy that are manifested in subject's interactive activity with the object."

Yuan (1991) further argues that the philosophy of Marxism differs from idealism and old materialism regarding subjectivity. First, the philosophy of Marxism contends that subjectivity is tied to practice. The subjectivity of an individual is not innate. It is formed and developed through his practice. Yuan asserts that some people merely know that subjectivity is a prerequisite for practice, but are not aware that it is also the result of practice. Without interpretation of the subjectivity from the perspective of practice and epistemology, it is naturally hard to interpret the concrete characteristics and features of subjectivity. Second, subjectivity is related to objectivity. Human activity is interaction between the subject and the object. The subject actively and dynamically acts on the object, and the object responds to the subject. As the object is the objective existence that cannot be changed at the will of the subject, the subjectivity of the subject is constrained in one way or another by the object from fully demonstrating himself, and therefore the subject is forced to accept, understand and employ the laws of the object. In this sense, the subjectivity and objectivity are opposed to each other and at the same time complementary to each other. Third, subjectivity is associated with intention. Human activity is one that contains a causal relationship and that is done with human intention. Finally, the subjectivity of an individual is related to that of a collective. Subject may refer to an individual, a collective or a society. Accordingly, subjectivity may indicate the subjectivity of an individual, a collective or a society. Their relationship can be viewed from two respects. On the one hand, there is no subjectivity of a collective or a society without the subjectivity of an individual, since a collective or a society is composed of individuals; on the other hand, an individual is always living in a collective or a society, and the subjectivity of an individual is developed in a collective or a society. Without a collective or a society, there will be no subjectivity of an individual.

3. The Application of the Philosophical Subjectivity in Education

In the late 1970s, Guanyuan Yu (1978), a well-known economist in China, stressed the necessity and importance of scientific research of education, especially educational psychology. He (1979) further elaborated his view of education as an epistemological phenomenon. He stated that education consists of a triangle relationship involving the educator, the educatee and the object of environment. The educator is the subject. The educatee is also the subject from an epistemological perspective, but the object of the educator. He (1980) then formulated the theory of the triangle relationship as a "three-bodied" relationship. He compared the triangle relationship of the teacher, the student and the environment to that of objects or bodies in the universe. The relationship between two objects in the universe is always affected by another object in the environment. Likewise, the relationship between the teacher and the student is always influenced by the environment. The idea of the three-bodied relationship was criticized by Mingyuan Gu (1981, 1991), a famous educational theorist, and others. Gu maintained that the student is not only the

object, but also the subject. His personality, integrity and dignity ought to be respected. Teachers ought to raise their awareness of self-development. Instead of the three-bodied relationship raised by Yu, Gu (1991) postulated that there are three elements in the education process: the teacher, the student and the object for cognition (mainly the content of teaching materials). There is actually no significant difference between the three-bodied idea and the three elements assumption. It is quite obvious that the two-bodied, two-way relationship of the subject and the object cannot be fully explained without some consideration of the environment. Both the teacher and the student are subjects when we view them from their respective perspective. As a designer and organizer of the teaching activity, the teacher has to deal with the student, the content of teaching and the environment, and manipulate his intention into his operation. In this sense, the teacher is the subject. On the other hand, the student has to deal with the teacher, the content of teaching and the environment. In this sense, the student is the subject. Since the overall aim of teaching is to promote the development and growth of the student, the teacher subject should be held responsible for the growth of the student subject, and therefore, the student subject should be placed at the center of the teaching process. Although different theories of Subjectivity Education emerged in the 1990s, none went beyond the triangle relationship between the teacher, the student and the teaching content (including the environment). Despite the differences regarding the complexity of the relationship involved in the process of education, all theorists in the field of education agree that the development of the subjectivity of the student subject is the first and foremost task in education.

At this critical point in the history of Chinese education, a group of educational theorists and primary school teachers led by Dina Pei started their educational research, based on the theories of subjectivity. They (Education Department of Beijing Normal University and Renmindadao Primary School of Anyang, 1994) claimed that their educational experiment was an experiment of the application of theoretical ideas, more exactly the application of the philosophical concept of subjectivity. This can be plainly seen from their definition of the core concept subjectivity. Their definition is an exact echo of philosophers' statement.

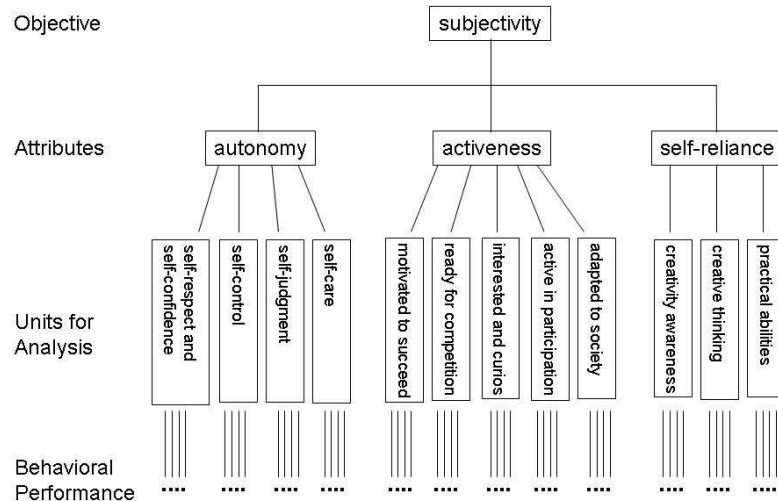
Subjectivity is the essential nature that man possesses as the subject in his objectification activity, the functional manifestation of man when he, as an epistemological subject, interacts with the outside world, and the dynamic feature revealed when the subject interacts with the object. On the one hand, the subject manipulates the objective world consciously and actively; on the other hand, it consciously and actively creates the objective world. Therefore, man's subjectivity is mainly embodied in his autonomy, activeness and creativity. (Education Department of Beijing Normal University and Renmindadao Primary School of Anyang, 1994)

Autonomy is the subject's ability to gradually understand and realize himself; activeness serves as the ability to make judgment in order to actively adapt himself to the reality; and creativity is the ability to go beyond the reality. The development of students' subjectivity would enable them to act as subjects and to become socialized and individualized, and thus the realization of the students' active and vigorous development. Subjectivity is a concept of coherent unity of the subject's consciousness and performance.

According to Pei (1996), the experiment was designed from three perspectives: autonomy (independence), activeness (including activeness in learning activities and social adaptation) and creativity, and with the following considerations: (1) different levels of subjectivity development of primary school pupils at the lower, intermediate and high stages, (2) subjectivity development in different teaching subjects; (3) the general level of the subjectivity development of the students under experiment; (4) the educational abilities of the parents; and (5) the levels of the subjectivity development of the teachers involved in the experiment.

The aims of the experiment stated in one of their report article (Education Department of Beijing Normal University & Renmindadao Primary School of Anyang, 1994) are: (1) to understand the basic structure and behavioral performance of school children's subjectivity in order to analyze the influential elements in the development of their subjectivity and seek approaches to the subjectivity development; (2) to establish a system of objectives for the children's subjectivity development and a system of evaluation; (3) to make special studies on the subjectivity-based education and activity-based instruction; and (4) to explore a new approach to educational experiments.

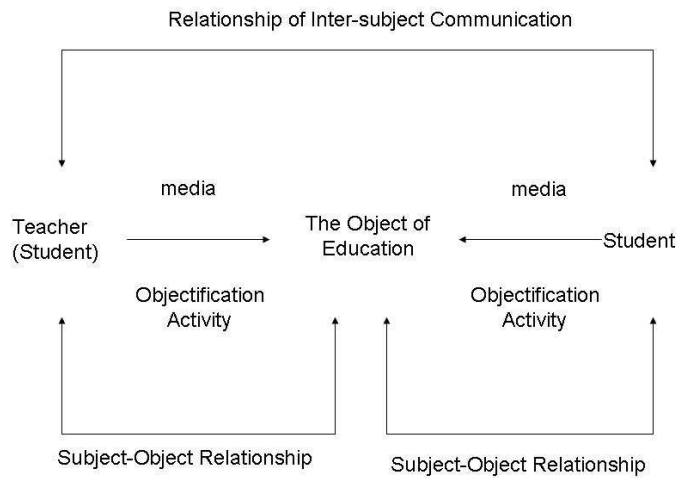
The theoretical framework of the experiment is a hierarchical structure with the subjectivity attributes of the student being the first level, analytical units the second level and actual behavioral performances the third



The Index System of Children' Subjectivity Development (Pei, 1996)

The past decade has witnessed the discussion of another basic attribute of subjectivity --- sociability. This attribute was formerly put under the attribute of activeness and is now upgraded from the level of units for analysis to the attributes level. According to Pei (2003), their consideration is that the psychological and behavioral structures of middle school students have developed and students at this level demand and expect more socialization. It is necessary to upgrade it to a separate attribute for the analysis of middle school students' subjectivity.

With the discussion of the role of social communication in the development of man in Marxist philosophy, the practice of social communication has become the hot topic. Just as Zhang (2006) stated, educational research is a science for the development of human beings. The target of the research is not "a thing." Educational activity forms "a human realm" of "I-you" relationship, rather than "a realm of things," where the "I-it" relationship is found. In educational activities, the relationship between the teacher and the student is not the subject-object relationship of knowing and being known or creating and being created, but an inter-subject man-to-man relationship of equality and dialogue. The diagram below is the framework of inter-subject communication. In the philosophy of practice, whatever the subject does is practice, and therefore the teaching-learning activities are educational practice. Communication is also a special kind of practice. Education is done through communication between the teacher and the learner. In this communication process, both the teacher and the student interact with the "thing" for which they communicate, i.e. the content of teaching, through a certain medium or media. It is clearly shown that their objectification process involves the inter-subject communication.



The Basic Structure of the Practice of Educational Communication (Zhang, 2006)

4. Conclusion

Educational research and experiments cannot be detached from the ideology of the society. In China, Marxist philosophy is the foremost philosophy that guides the Communist Party and all sectors of the society, and therefore there is no wonder that subjectivity that is discussed in Marxist philosophy has become the pursuit of educational research and experiments. Full development and realization of the subjectivity of individuals is an ideal. There is always the value of “what” that underlies education. A burglar can be active, dynamic, creative and sociable, but what he does harms society. That is the main reason why Subjectivity Education has turned in recent years to social-cultural communication between the teacher and the student. Value judgment is an ability that is developed through value-judgment educational activities of objectification. Subjectivity as the manifestation of the attributes of the subject should include morality --- the soul of the subject. China has a tradition of putting morality in the most important position. Subjectivity Education is carried out within this morality framework, and therefore morality education is an integral and important part of the educational experiments. Twenty years is a generation, and Subjectivity Education was initiated by the elder generation, has been practiced by the mature and will be taken up by the young. It is no exaggeration to say that it is Subjectivity Education that has led education in China from tradition to modernity (Bao, 2001).

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