

# The Enlightenment of Yan Zhitui's Moral Education Thoughts to Contemporary Education

Hua Wei

College of Marxism, China Jiliang University, Hangzhou, 315000, China

Email: weihua9697@163.com

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**Abstract:** To improve contemporary education system and promote Chinese excellent traditional culture, this study absorbs the essence from ancient Chinese moral education and focus on Yan Zhitui's thoughts. As a great educator in ancient Chinese, Yan's thoughts embodied traditional Chinese moral values, many of which are worth of learning. The educational methods advocated by him also have deep enlightenment to contemporary education. We can tell from Yan's thoughts that contemporary education should be based on cultivating healthy personality and excellent character of the educated, and focus on guiding the educated to establish values and aspirations. At the same time, educators must improve themselves and create a favorable environment.

## 1. Introduction

Yan Zhitui (531-595) was a great litterateur and educator in ancient Chinese, born in ancient Linyi, Langya which is today's Shandong Province. One of Yan Zhitui's ancestors named Yan Hui, he was an extraordinary pupil of Confucius. So the culture of Yan's family culture was inherited from Confucianism and the descendants of Yan family were all educated in Confucianism. Most of them were occupied with literary work and entered politics.

Born in such family, Yan Zhitui read widely and assiduously and show extraordinary talents when he was young, and he was praised by the scholars and officials.

But Yan's life was not smooth. On the contrary, he can only drift along in the era of turmoil and war. He had served four dynasties in his life from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to Sui Dynasty, which could be considered disloyal in ancient China, but obviously he was a survival. He had a high-light moment when he was highly credited by the emperor, but he also had a time in prison and fled all around. He wrote in his autobiography that there was no place for me in the world. With so much things he been trough, he summarized and reflected his life experience and wrote the "*Admonitions for the Yan Clan*", and teach his descendants the philosophy of life which including moral education. The influence of his thoughts on later generations is quite profound through thousand years.

## 2. The Formation Background of Yan Zhitui's Thoughts

Yan Zhitui lived in a time of disaster and war. His ideas were deeply influenced by the times. During the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the country was divided and society was in turmoil. The ideological and moral culture were complex. There were several characteristics at that time: First, the political lost control over social ideas and values. Years of war led to the decrease of the imperial sacredness. Contempt for imperial power was widespread in society. As a result, the function of authority to control over social thoughts and moral orientation was weakened. Second, Confucianism and Buddhism are parallel, but Confucianism is still the main sect. During that time, there were many ideological trends in the society. Confucianism pursued the unification and imperial supremacy. Metaphysics pursued the freedom and liberation of individuality, and Buddhist pursued the detachment of self-spirit. Though the social thoughts were very active, but Confucianism still hold the dominant position.

Third, the national culture is complex. At that time, there were cultures from different nationalities and different regions conflict and blended, such as Central Plain Culture, Nomadic Culture, and Farming Culture. In order to promote harmony among nations meanwhile maintain their own rule, some remote tribal rulers made decisions of chinesization in terms of living habits and social customs. Although the ethnic contradictions are profound and complex, the integration of national culture is the main trend. Various culture trends were intended to assist the rulers in guiding and controlling social ideas and values, in order to maintain political stability. Yan Zhitui lived in such an era, and his moral education thoughts also had distinct characteristics of that time.

### **3. The Goal of Yan Zhitui's Moral Education**

Yan Zhitui divided the educated into three categories: “the person of the wisdom, the person of the fool, the person of the middle”[1]. Yan Zhitui’s thought fully considered the subject of education. The genius and the mentally handicapped person are a minority in the society. The most people in the world are on average, and ordinary people are the most extensive subjects in education. So the goal of education is to make most ordinary people get improved, and to increase their knowledge and foster their virtue. Nowadays, regardless of the level of intelligence, people are necessary to be standardized and guide with moral education. If a genius without ethical guidelines, he may cause an unpredictable negative impact on him-selves and even the whole society. Special education methods can be adopted for special people, but the ordinary people are the founders of social morality, and the improvement of the overall ideological and moral level of the society depends on the effect of moral education on the majority of “the middle.”

In addition, Yan Zhitui believed that the ultimate goal of education was to cultivate talents who can “make values to the world”. Yan Zhitui believed one should do practical things for the country while he was getting paid by the monarch. And the country should cultivate talents including “the statesman, writer, historian, soldier, architect and so on” [1], which are useful to the country, rather than hypocritical speech maker. The most direct way to show patriotism is to contribute to the country. Yan thought cultivating the concept of patriotism and contribution is the ultimate goal of moral education. That idea contained a strong sense of patriotism. Realizing the all-round development of human beings is the ultimate goal of Chinese education. Whether the educated can realize their personal value in a certain field is one of the key points to measure educational achievements.

### **4. The Connotation of Yan Zhitui's Moral Education Thoughts**

Yan Zhitui had clearly pointed out: “Holding the bottom line of morality and advocate virtue”[1]. In the aspect of content of moral education, Yan advocated benevolence and righteousness education. He believed that benevolence and righteousness is the criterion of individual morality.

Yan Zhitui thought that the education of ceremony was also indispensable in moral education. Ceremony is the foundation, and it is the fundamental principle people should stick to. Yan listed the etiquette norms inherited from ancient times in his work “*Admonitions for the Yan Clan*”. He not only advocated the inheritance of these norms from generation to generation, but also proposed to measure and adjust them according to changes of the culture and society, and then re-implement them. The etiquette norms embody a kind of reverence. The education of ceremony is not only to educate the children to abide by the etiquette norms, but also to educate them to strengthen their morality and become a person of integrity and nobleness.

Virtue and ceremony are also play an important role in contemporary education. Broad knowledge is not the key point to success. If one possess precise and professional knowledge in a certain kind of field but with low conscience, he might cause immeasurable harm to whole society. The education of morality can help people shape a healthy personality, and it is good for social stability.

## 5. Principles and Methods of Moral Education

Making development of children's physical and mental health through family education is of Yan Zhitui's great concern. In terms of educational methods, he advocated "majestic and mild" [1]. "Majestic" refers a dignified attitude and strict requirements, and let children be awe-stricken and maintain a correct attitude. The combination of majesty and kindness can prevent children from fond love and avoid finicky and arrogance, and finally develop good character and quality.

Yan Zhitui held that parents should make themselves as example. People follow the example of their superiors. Education is persuasive only if parents have made their own norms. Yan Zhitui believed that people are vulnerable to the surroundings when they are young, so it is very important to create a good educational environment for them. In addition to standardize themselves, parents also should remind their children to be careful with making friends, so that they can form a sound personality and cultivate noble sentiment in the good interaction with people, events and things around them.

Yan Zhitui thought that aspirations and ambitions should be cultivated from an early age. Establishing a lofty ambition in childhood is a key factor of being success. As Yan said: "If you have aspirations, you can sharpen it, and gain whatever you want, but without aspirations, one is a mortal." [1] People with ambitious can hone their own minds and achieve a career. The ambitions established in childhood are often profound and clear, and can provide a lifelong motive for them to realize their value.

## 6. Conclusion

Yan Zhitui's moral education system is complete and abundant, which is of great significance to contemporary education. His work "*Admonitions for the Yan Clan*" contains the main content of his moral education thoughts, which has high research value and referential significance.

Yan Zhitui always advocated applying the knowledge to practical problems, and he believed the ultimate goal of education is to cultivate practical talents that are valuable to country construction, rather than flashy but empty theorists. Theoretical education is necessary, but the theory must be implemented in practice in order to exert its value and demonstrate its significance. Practice can also test the scientific and truthfulness of theory and develop the theory.

Yan Zhitui's educated his offspring to adhere to moral values and make contribution to the country, which means getting educated can not only make up their own shortcomings and be a better man, but also make the world a better place with the idea of contribution and providing value.

We can learn from Yan's viewpoint that contemporary education should persist in cultivating the educated to take the world as their own responsibility, expanding their horizons, and teaching them embrace the world, and igniting their striving spirit.

Yan Zhitui's familial moral education thought is the core of his moral education thoughts, and he educated his future generations through the form of family precept. As a micro-collective unit in social life, the family is an important place for education. The factors of family are crucial to individual ideology and moral cultivation. Therefore, advocating a good family atmosphere is also an important part of contemporary education. Parents play a decisive role in education. So they should keep improving themselves and set a good example for their children, in order to provide a favorable educational environment and let their children grow under the correct guidance.

A favorable environment is foundation for the smooth development of education. Contemporary education does not only start from schools and families, but also take full advantage of virtual platform such as media and online websites. Yan Zhitui thought the influence of the environment on shaping personal character is profound and lasting. The diversification of the environment has made a huge change in the method of education. How to make good use of the virtual platform has become an important issue of contemporary education. Building a health online environment is also conducive to education.

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