On Reading Education Thoughts in the Traditional Family Instruction

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Abstract. As an integral part of traditional Chinese culture, the traditional family instruction contains rich educational thoughts. Inheriting the reading education thoughts in the traditional family instruction is conducive to clarify the reading purpose, correct the reading attitude, optimize the reading method, and determine the reading orientation. Besides, it also has strong reference and guiding significance for popularizing nationwide reading and building a learning society.

Introduction
Reading is not only an important way of learning, but also an essential way for a country or a nation to develop spirit and inherit civilization. As the foundation and prerequisite for building a learning country, nationwide reading is a systematic project that requires the common effort of the family and the society. The traditional family instruction is an organic part of Chinese traditional culture, which contains quite a lot of educational thoughts and wisdom. Fully excavating the reading education thoughts in the traditional family instruction greatly contributes to the promotion of nationwide reading and the construction of a learning country.

Clarifying the Reading Purpose
The reason and value of reading is the first question to be solved in reading. Undeniably, there are also some articles in the traditional family instruction that regard official work as a major goal of reading, but that is not the mainstream idea of the traditional family instruction. It generally more emphasizes that later generations should constantly revise and perfect themselves through reading, so as to become a gentleman of noble moral character and understanding of reason and propriety. In the Qing Dynasty, there was a person called Peng Yulin who was known as the four leading officials with Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang and Hu Linyi. After hearing that his nephew was negative about the world because of the imperial examination, he immediately wrote a letter home. In the letter, Peng stressed that the focus of reading should be put on “improving moral cultivation and expanding meritorious achievements in the work”, and what readers should really worry about was that “one cannot practice the virtue of being a saint, cannot achieve family harmony, nor govern the country well”. Therefore, it was really not worth worrying about the failure of the imperial examination. Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty warned his children that the purpose of reading was to seek the actual effect of self-cultivation and conduct oneself in society. In addition, a famous Confucian Gan Shuchun, educated his descendants that the purpose of reading was not to be promoted to become rich or glorify the ancestors, but to understand the principles of propriety and become a good person to the villagers and a fine son or daughter to the parents. To build a nationwide reading society today, we should use the above-mentioned precepts in the traditional family instruction to encourage ourselves and admonish the posterity. It is also necessary to correct the mentality of reading. That is to say, we should consciously abandon all kinds of utilitarian and entertaining reading view, and resolutely resist “the idea of the uselessness of reading”. Instead, reading should be regarded as a way to constantly develop, perfect and transcend oneself, and great effort should put into creating a good atmosphere for reading.
Correcting the Reading Attitude

As the saying goes that “attitude determines everything”, the attitude of reading is the key to the effectiveness of reading. The traditional family instruction attaches great importance to educating the younger generation on the correct reading attitude, which is mainly reflected in three aspects. First of all, to read with respect. The family instruction generally believes that the correct attitude determines the results of reading, holding the view that “if we want to know the reading level of the younger generation, we do not have to look at their temperament or talent. We need first see if they are reading with respect, and we will probably know if they will be successful in their life”. Reading with respect can “change the stupid to the clever. Such people can honor their parents even if they can’t be loyal to the court; they can keep their heart good even if they can’t achieve their ambition.” Reading without respect means that “nothing can be achieved in old age. Even succeeding for a while, he will fail after all. As an official, he will hurt the country, and does not have strategies to preserve himself.”[1] Secondly, to be diligent in reading. There is no royal road to learning. “Diligence is the path to the mountain of knowledge and hard-working is the boat to the endless sea of learning”, so diligence is the proper attitude towards reading. In Yan Family Instructions, it mentions that “since ancient times, the wise emperors have still needed to study hard, let alone the ordinary people!” In order to exhort his children to read hard, Yan Zhitui took great pains in citing examples such as “Su Qin pricked his thighs with a cone to prevent drowsiness; Wen Dang threw his axe in a tall tree and made up his mind to study in Chang’an; Sun Kang read in the light of snow; Che Wuzi gathered the fireflies in bags to read at night; Ni Kuan did not forget to bring the scriptures when working on the farm; Lu Wenshu picked the leaf of cattail for writing when herding sheep”. Finally, to practice lifelong learning. Never give up learning at any age or any time, and take the attitude of studying as if one could never learn enough. Zeng Guofan, read tirelessly no matter of his age, position and situation. That is to say, he kept reading in both favourable circumstances or adversity from an energetic adult to an old man with twilight teeth decay, no matter to be a scholar or an highest ranking official. He admonished his children with his own experience that “it is not until old that one starts to read, which is like watering a withered leaf and it doesn’t help in spite of how many times it is watered. Therefore, the ancients admonished not to wait for the time to learn; but if one could keep watering like tilling the land, the crops would also wither without harvest, but vegetables might still be a little bit of remedy.”[2]

Optimizing the Reading Method

A good reading method is of great significance for improving the quality of reading. The traditional family instruction pays great attention to the summary of reading methods. Based on the former experience and objective rules of reading, a series of common and universally applicable reading methods that can be used for reference have been abstracted. First of all, to read as early as possible. The traditional family instruction holds that people’s childhood, adolescence and youth are the golden period of reading, for they are at the stage of physical development with a strong desire for knowledge and less interference from the outside world. Therefore, they are easy to concentrate on reading. If one does not cherish the gold years and only starts to thinks of reading and studying when he is old, the effect will be discounted naturally. Yan Zhitui held that “for young children, the mind is sharp and easy to concentrate. After growing up, the mind tends to be easily dispersed. Therefore, children should be educated early and never let the best opportunity go.” Gan Shuchun, the famous Confucianism in the Qing Dynasty admonished his offspring that “for cultivating young people’ reading habits, the age of eight to twenty should be treated most carefully. For when one is young, one is absorbed in mind, and the books read at that time will not be forgotten even in old age. But after reaching the age of twenty, people become more and more knowledgeable along with more hobbies, and they forget while reading. By the time the mental strength gradually weakens, the memory also slowly declines.”[3] Secondly, to read extensively. If one wants to have a wide range of knowledge, one must read extensively and constantly to improve and enrich oneself. As Liang Qichao suggested, “with the expansion of learning content, the content of life expands
proportionally”, and based on his personal experience that “every once in a while, with the emerging of new interest, I fell like experiencing a new life, like the sun rising in the morning or the new load emerging from the water”, he admonished his son Liang Sicheng to “take the chance of one or two years after graduation and set aside time to learn common sense, especially in literature or humanities.”[4] Thirdly, to read persistently. Zeng Guofan, in virtue of his own drilling and grinding calligraphy experience of “adhere to copying and practicing handwriting in the morning and evening unremittingly”, educated his son Zeng Jize that “persistence is the first virtue of life. No matter how old you are and how difficult the thing is, as long as you persist, it will be like planting trees and raising livestock, on which you can see them grow mature without noticing them in daily life. If you can work hard on everything with quick and brave action from now on, you will be able to unconsciously make great progress in less than one year or two.”[5]

The above are the main points of reading method mentioned in the traditional family instruction. It can be seen that the ancient people had paid much attention to the reading methods rather than reading without thinking, some of which are quite scientific. Though their methods are not necessarily suitable for the present people, the thought of reading in a methodical way and some common methods summarized in the long-term reading are worth emulating or using for reference. For example, “to read early” is quite in line with the results of modern physiological research. Therefore, we should critically and creatively inherit, develop and transform the reasonable elements, instead of being indifferent and totally negating them.

**Determine the Reading Orientation**

In *The Book of History*, the sentence “it is action instead of knowing that is difficult” refers to it is easier said than done. For that reason, the traditional family instruction emphasizes that “although the scholar is knowledgeable, it is behavior that is fundamental”, “the knowledge learned in the book is still too simple, and to get a deeper understanding, one has to do it”, claiming that the root of reading is practice. Therefore, it advocates the reading orientation of “combination of knowledge and action, with knowledge as guidance”. Zhu Bailu believed that the key to reading was “to earnestly practise what one advocates”, that is, to put the sense of the book into practice and to learn how to be an upright person. He quoted the opinion of the early Confucianists that “contemporary people do not know how to read, just like reading *The Analects of Confucius*, and they remain the same after reading, equivalent to not reading”, teaching the children and grandchildren “every time you read, ask yourself: can I do what the book says? and think of the book when doing something: how did the ancients do it?”[6] Sun Qifeng called those who know but do not take actions as “illiterate”. He emphasized learning for practice, and knowledge and action should go hand in hand. That is, be sure to experience it in yourself, applying what learned from the book to guide practice, “when you read, you must become literate. Or, isn’t there a reader who is illiterate? I said, to read the word ‘xiao’ (means *filial piety* in English), we have to fulfill the duty of serving our parents. When reading the word ‘di’ (means *brother* in English), we must understand the truth of obeying the elder brother.” The author thinks that the reading orientation of “combination of knowledge and action, with knowledge as guidance” in the traditional family instruction is worthy of our reference. General secretary Xi Jinping put forward many times that “we should improve our ideological level, solve practical problems and achieve self transcendence in the atmosphere of loving reading, reading hard, reading good books and reading well”. The key to reading lies in guiding practice and improving oneself. Everyone can’t distinguish reading from being a man or handling affairs, like “reading is reading, behaving is behaving”. In the process of promoting nationwide reading and building a learning-oriented society, we should, in particular, guide the general public to establish a correct reading orientation, to combine theory with practice and books with life, and to be an ideal, moral and responsible person learned from books. Besides, it is crucial to guide people to learn from the typical life as well as the example in the book, to consciously put the knowledge learned into practice and life, and to further enrich, perfect, and improve in practice.
Summary
To sum up, whether in ancient society or modern society, people’s desire for reading is the same. Deeply understanding the reading education thoughts in the traditional family instruction and learning from the past to guide the present have strong reference and guiding significance for correcting people’s reading attitude, deepening reading cognition, optimizing reading methods, setting an reading example, popularizing nationwide reading and constructing a learning society.

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References