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The Humanism of Ancient Chinese Shuyuan and Its Enlightenment to Modern Higher Education

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Abstract: Ancient Chinese Shuyuan (traditional academies) represents a unique and highly influential educational institution, serving as an indispensable carrier for the historical inheritance and continuous evolution of Chinese culture. At its cultural core, the Shuyuan system is profoundly anchored in humanism. Nourished predominantly by classical Confucianism, this inherent humanism manifests prominently across four fundamental dimensions: the foundational educational principle of prioritizing moral virtue above all else, the cultivation of an inclusive and remarkably open educational philosophy, the profound educational wisdom demonstrated through deliberate environment-shaping, and the establishment of a deeply harmonious, mutually respectful teacher-student relationship. Since the dawn of modern times, accompanied by the formal abolition of the traditional Shuyuan system and the subsequent rapid rise of Western-style modern education, a profound cultural discontinuity has unfortunately occurred within the broader Chinese cultural tradition. This rupture has led to a significant loss of indigenous pedagogical wisdom. Therefore, systematically reviving the core tenets and structural system of Shuyuan within the framework of modern higher education to effectively bridge this historical and cultural discontinuity is of immense practical value. Such a revival not only facilitates the comprehensive reform and sustainable development of contemporary Chinese higher education but also fosters a more holistic, culturally resonant approach to cultivating modern talents equipped with both professional expertise and profound moral integrity.

Keywords: chinese shuyuan; humanism; cultural discontinuity; higher education; educational philosophy; confucianism

1. Introduction

Shuyuan was a special educational institution in ancient China and one of the main carriers for the inheritance of Chinese culture, playing an immeasurable role in the development and flourishing of Chinese culture [1, 2]. In most cases, ancient Chinese Shuyuan enjoyed relatively free space for running schools, effectively avoiding drawbacks such as utilitarianism brought by official education and the imperial examination system. This enabled Shuyuan to return more easily to the essence of education, respect educational principles, and be more free, open, and inclusive, thus forming a profound humanistic spirit and becoming one of the main positions for inheriting cultural traditions. In the context of advocating "cultural confidence," inheriting and promoting the humanistic educational spirit of Shuyuan and drawing on ancient educational wisdom are undoubtedly significant for the development of modern education in China, particularly modern higher education.

2. Cultural Origin of Shuyuan and the Formation of Its Humanism

Chinese Shuyuan originated in the Tang Dynasty. In the early Tang Dynasty, scattered private Shuyuan emerged as places for scholars to study and pursue academic research. During the Kaiyuan reign, official Shuyuan appeared [3]. Emperor Xuanzong

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successively established Lizheng Shuyuan and Jixian Shuyuan, whose main functions were book collection and compilation, "to collate ancient and current classics and books, clarify national decrees and institutions, and provide consultation and responses." Lizheng Shuyuan is recognized as the earliest one in China.

In the Song Dynasty, the development of Shuyuan reached its peak. The number of Shuyuan increased more than tenfold compared with the total in the Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties. Moreover, the educational functions of Shuyuan at this time became more complete, forming four institutional systems: book collection, sacrificial rites, teaching, and academic land; their management systems were also more sound, Shuyuan culture matured, and social influence expanded continuously.

In the Yuan Dynasty, Shuyuan began to show a tendency of "officialization." The Yuan rulers intervened in the management of Shuyuan, meddled in the appointment of positions such as professors and heads of Shuyuan, and sought to train the scholar class as cultural tools to spread ruling ideology among the grassroots people. Meanwhile, the ruling class actively promoted Neo-Confucianism of Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Zhu Xi and established its orthodox status. Eventually, Shuyuan originally centered on private scholarship and free lectures were incorporated into the official education system [1].

In the Ming Dynasty, rulers focused on developing official education and the imperial examination system, leading to the gradual decline of Shuyuan culture [4]. Shuyuan was banned four times in the Ming Dynasty, and Shuyuan culture fell into decline.

In the Qing Dynasty, Shuyuan witnessed great development. During the Yongzheng reign, the government vigorously promoted its construction, and provincial Shuyuan began to be established. The number, scale, and distribution of Shuyuan nationwide expanded continuously, with "5,836 Shuyuan founded or restored, basically popularizing urban and rural areas." In the late Qing Dynasty, the corrupt and incompetent Qing government was unable to resist the strong impact of Western culture, and Shuyuan culture suffered a devastating blow. Emperor Guangxu issued an imperial edict to convert all local Shuyuan into modern schools [5]. With this reform and the abolition of the imperial examination system, traditional Chinese Shuyuan gradually withdrew from the historical stage.

The above review shows that the development of Shuyuan underwent a process from official to private, from elite to civilian, embodying a profound humanistic spirit [6]. The humanistic spirit of Shuyuan mainly refers to emphasizing moral education, environment-shaping, and mutual love between teachers and students, integrating the improvement of individual moral and cultural cultivation with the cultivation of social responsibility awareness, promoting the transformation of social mores through individual change, and thus advancing the civilization and progress of the whole society.

Ancient Chinese Shuyuan was centered on Confucianism. Confucian cultural concepts on education, self-cultivation, and state governance laid the theoretical foundation for the formation of the humanistic spirit of Shuyuan. The idea of "investigating things, extending knowledge, rectifying the mind, making the will sincere, cultivating the self, regulating the family, ordering the state, and bringing peace to the world" put forward in *The Great Learning* of *The Book of Rites* became the core concept of its education [7]. Meanwhile, Confucian educational concepts such as "education for all without discrimination" and "teaching benefits teachers as well as students" profoundly influenced the school-running guidelines of Shuyuan. Educational measures proposed by Confucius, such as "teaching with tireless zeal" and "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude," were fully reflected in the educational activities of Shuyuan.

In addition, the humanistic spirit of Shuyuan was also deeply influenced by Buddhist and Taoist cultures. Taoist ideas of "Tao follows nature" and "harmony between man and nature" provided a theoretical basis for Shuyuan's emphasis on environment-shaping education; Buddhism, especially Chan Buddhism, emphasized the self-cultivation method of "enlightening the mind and seeing the nature, pointing directly to the human heart," which also exerted a direct impact on the teaching methods of Shuyuan [2].

3. Basic Connotations of the Humanism of Shuyuan

Nourished by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, the core humanism of Shuyuan lies in four aspects: the educational principle of prioritizing virtue, an inclusive and open educational philosophy, the wisdom of environment-shaping in education, and a harmonious teacher-student relationship [8].

3.1. *The Educational Principle of Virtue First*

The education of Shuyuan was centered on Confucian culture. Based on ethical relations rooted in family and blood ties, Confucianism emphasizes "benevolence means loving others" and extending care from oneself to others to achieve unity under heaven, thus forming the moral ideal and code of conduct of "cultivating the self, regulating the family, ordering the state, and bringing peace to the world," as clarified in *The Great Learning*: "Those who wished to manifest their illustrious virtue to the world first ordered well their states; wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families; wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their selves." As a base for the research and dissemination of Confucianism, Shuyuan took the inheritance of Confucian moral ideals as their mission: "Shuyuan is established to nurture talents, with virtue cultivation as the top priority. A scholar with talent but no virtue is worthless." By improving individual moral standards and personality cultivation, Shuyuan aimed to remedy the times and benefit the world. Therefore, "honoring virtue" became the primary principle.

Firstly, to enhance students' moral cultivation, Shuyuan took Confucian classics as the main learning content, supplemented by various schools of thought and historical books. Secondly, successive Shuyuan formulated strict regulations to standardize moral behaviors. The most famous one is *The Regulations of Bailudong Shuyuan* compiled by Zhu Xi, which almost became a model [6]. Covering ethical norms, learning procedures, self-cultivation, and interpersonal conduct in detail, it reflects that "the regulations of ancient Shuyuan were full of the spirit of moral progress."

3.2. *The Inclusive and Open Educational Philosophy*

It is generally believed that ancient Shuyuan belonged to elite education, but it has been argued that the teaching levels of Shuyuan ranged from low to high. Some scholars have stated that the lower levels were similar to charity schools, while the higher levels were equivalent to later liberal arts universities or literary research institutes. Even within the same Shuyuan, teaching content varied in levels. For example, Sushui Shuyuan in Xia County, Shanxi, founded in the Yuan Dynasty, enrolled outstanding scholars and young learners and taught them separately, according to historical records. Shuyuan in different regions had different teaching contents due to varying levels of economic development and education popularization. In addition, ancient Shuyuan generally owned academic land. The income from academic land, apart from covering the expenses of Shuyuan, subsidized poor students. These measures enabled its education to truly implement hierarchical teaching and education for all without discrimination, meeting the educational needs of people from different backgrounds and cultural origins.

Shuyuan maintained an open academic attitude and advocated free academic lectures. The famous "joint lectures" and "lecture assemblies" in the history of Shuyuan were typical reflections of this academic stance [3]. During the Southern Song Dynasty, when Zhang Shi presided over Yuelu Shuyuan, he invited Zhu Xi to give lectures, leaving a much-told story in Chinese cultural history—the Zhu-Zhang Joint Lecture, which pioneered academic exchanges in the form of "joint lectures" in Shuyuan. The Goose Lake Meeting took place in June 1175. Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan, two great masters of Neo-Confucianism, met at the Goose Lake Temple at the foot of Goose Lake Mountain in Qianshan County, Jiangxi, to discuss topics such as "the method of learning." The two held sharply conflicting views and failed to reach a consensus. Nevertheless, the story of the Goose Lake Meeting has echoed through history as a remarkable legacy.

3.3. *The Educational Wisdom of Environment-shaping*

Ancient people advocated the idea of harmony between man and nature, excelling at "observing the astronomical phenomena to discern seasonal changes; observing human culture to transform and civilize the world," perceiving the mysteries of life and pursuing life values. From the very beginning, ancient Shuyuan fully recognized the edifying effect of the environment on people and attached great importance to creating an academic environment where man and nature coexist harmoniously. Chinese Shuyuan were usually located in picturesque, quiet places with mountains and rivers, away from urban noise to facilitate concentrated study. For instance, Bailudong Shuyuan is located at the southern foot of the Five Old Men Peaks of Lushan Mountain in Jiangxi, surrounded by three mountains with the Guandao Stream running through it, shaded by dense trees.

In addition to natural environment selection, Shuyuan placed special emphasis on shaping the internal humanistic environment [9]. Its buildings were generally divided into two parts: sacrificial buildings and teaching buildings. Sacrificial buildings were mainly ancestral halls for worshipping ancient sages and worthies. Teaching buildings mainly included libraries, lecture halls, and dormitories. The two types of buildings were generally symmetrically arranged along the central axis.

The architectural decorations fully embodied the humanistic spirit of value concern. They mainly consisted of plaques, couplets, and stone inscriptions. Plaques hung at the gate or on the walls of Shuyuan were mostly philosophical and educational, aiming to exert subtle influence on students. Receiving imperial inscriptions and plaques was a great honor for an ancient Shuyuan. For example, the plaque "Yuelu Shuyuan" was personally written by an emperor of the Song Dynasty, while the plaques "Learning Reaches the Innate Nature" and "Orthodox Lineage South of the Yangtze River" were inscribed by emperors of the Qing Dynasty, marking the core status of the Huxiang School in inheriting Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and symbolizing the cultural orthodoxy of this millennium-old institution. The plaque "Seeking Truth from Facts" hanging in the lecture hall was personally written by a prominent academic figure in 1917, originating from "studying and cherishing the ancient, seeking truth from facts" in an ancient historical text. This spirit was later enriched and developed into a broader academic principle, becoming a significant cultural contribution of ancient Shuyuan to modern Chinese society. In addition, the well-known "Tablet of Educational Thoughts" in Bailudong Shuyuan and the couplet "The sounds of wind, rain and reading reach our ears; the affairs of family, state and world concern our hearts" in Donglin Shuyuan embody the philosophy of learning and patriotism, inspiring generations of scholars. These words attached to buildings have become "silent lectures" that subtly influence the spiritual world in a symbolic form.

3.4. *A Harmonious Teacher-student Relationship*

Although the education of Shuyuan was not completely free from the constraints of the imperial examination system, it respected educational principles, valued the inheritance of teaching traditions, and emphasized the importance of building good teacher-student relationships. Education and teaching function as a system influenced by many factors, with the teacher-student relationship being a critical component. Almost all educational behaviors are reflected in teacher-student interactions.

The deepening of teacher-student relationships was achieved through the teaching process. Shuyuan generally adopted an education model centered on student self-study, supplemented by teacher guidance, fostering a relatively relaxed learning atmosphere. Teachers assessed students' academic levels primarily through examinations, rewarding excellence and addressing poor performance, affirming achievements, identifying deficiencies, and providing directions for improvement. In this process, teachers demonstrated care for students, and students expressed gratitude to teachers, naturally deepening their relationships over time. Additionally, teachers and students interacted through lectures in lecture halls. Teachers could freely express their views during

lectures—for example, Zhang Shi advocated the debate between righteousness and profit, Lü Zuqian promoted understanding principles and practicing them, and Zhu Xi emphasized investigating things to extend knowledge [10]. During teaching, students could raise questions, debate, and discuss freely with teachers. Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi is a compilation of discussions between Zhu Xi and his disciples. This spirit of mutual benefit between teaching and learning exemplified the humanistic idea of equality.

Care and concern in daily life were also essential for maintaining teacher-student relationships. Living together for extended periods, teachers and students naturally developed a kinship-like sense of belonging through interactions and poetic exchanges, fostering mutual care. Zhu Xi referred to his student Cai Yuanding as an "old friend" in daily life. During Sun Fu's studies, a poor scholar in the Song Dynasty, his teacher Fan Zhongyan not only generously helped him overcome difficulties but also secured a teaching position for him in the Shuyuan he managed, enabling him to focus on his studies. Such warmth and care in daily life acted as a catalyst for strengthening teacher-student relationships. When Zhu Xi passed away, more than a thousand of his disciples held a funeral for him despite restrictions. Similarly, Huang Daozhou, who died a martyr resisting the Qing Dynasty, was honored by four of his disciples who sacrificed their lives on the same day [11]. These examples vividly illustrate the profound affection between teachers and students in Shuyuan.

4. Modern Value of the Humanism of Ancient Shuyuan

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the abolition of Shuyuan, education was fully Westernized, new-style schools were established, and Western curricula were comprehensively introduced, giving birth to modern universities [12]. Chinese universities adopted the Western education system, which brought advanced ideas, scientific knowledge, and cultural technologies to China. Especially after the founding of the People's Republic of China, this contributed significantly to the development of advanced productive forces, industrialization, and the rapid progress in catching up with and surpassing developed countries worldwide. During this process, the scale of China's higher education expanded rapidly, creating the world's largest higher education system.

With the rapid development and expansion of higher education, drawbacks in Chinese universities have become increasingly apparent, leading to deep-seated crises and challenges [10]. A prominent issue is the erosion of the humanistic spirit in universities under the combined pressures of globalization, marketization, and technologization, resulting in the alienation of education. This is evident in the prevalence of formalism and utilitarianism in moral education, a lack of humanistic care, weakened critical thinking, and insufficient innovation capacity. These factors have caused Chinese higher education to shift further from specialization to vocationalization. Individualism has become widespread, and university education has, to some extent, fostered many "refined egoists."

The loss of the humanistic spirit in Chinese universities can partly be attributed to the discontinuity of Chinese cultural traditions in modern times. The abolition of the academy system created a clear break between traditional Chinese higher education and modern universities, preventing the cultural essence accumulated by Shuyuan over more than a thousand years from becoming part of Chinese university culture. Therefore, re-examining and reflecting on Shuyuan culture as an exemplary model of traditional education, and drawing on the essence of traditional Chinese education, is an effective way to build universities and university culture with Chinese characteristics in the new era.

Since the Republic of China, with the full Westernization of Chinese education, many insightful individuals have recognized the challenges posed by this cultural trend and have sought new approaches in theory and practice. Efforts have been made to integrate the Western university system with the spirit of traditional Chinese education to explore a new path for the development of Chinese higher education. As early as 1923, some intellectuals proposed transforming modern universities by drawing on the traditions of

ancient Shuyuan, arguing that the abolition of academies was a significant loss for China, as the spirit of independent research cultivated over a thousand years was no longer present.

One notable figure who explored the integration of Shuyuan's spirit with modern education was the founder of the Hunan Self-Study University. This initiative was influenced by Hunan's rich tradition of academy culture and the founder's personal connection to it, having studied and self-studied in Yuelu Shuyuan while running schools in Changsha. Established in August 1921, the Self-Study University combined the form of ancient Shuyuan with modern school content, adopting an autonomous approach to study various disciplines, discover truth, and cultivate talent. It incorporated Shuyuan's self-study-based research tradition while adopting modern curricula to determine learning content. Although the Hunan Self-Study University existed for only two years and three months, it had a significant social impact.

Unfortunately, this exploration of new education in Chinese higher education did not continue due to various historical reasons. Around the 21st century, Shuyuan returned to public attention. To promote innovation in undergraduate education, many universities began to adopt the Shuyuan education system model. In 2005, Fudan University pioneered this approach, using student residential communities as platforms and dormitories as carriers for second-class activities. These activities encouraged interdisciplinary communication and interaction, fostering students' all-round development. Subsequently, other universities, including Tsinghua University and Nanjing University, followed suit [7]. Tsinghua University, in particular, implemented significant reforms, establishing Xinya Academy in 2014, followed by 15 additional Shuyuans. By 2025, nearly 60% of Tsinghua undergraduates were enrolled in Shuyuan for training. By 2024, more than 100 universities nationwide had established over 400 academies.

The momentum of the Shuyuan system in undergraduate education in Chinese universities is substantial. It is important to note that the modern Shuyuan system is not a simple replication of the traditional model but is designed to align with the principles of modern education and the needs of social and cultural development. For instance, in moral education, the Confucian ethics of traditional Shuyuan have been adapted to emphasize "patriotism" and "social responsibility awareness." In academic research, practices such as "joint lectures" and "lecture assemblies" from ancient Shuyuan have inspired academic salons, interdisciplinary forums, and international conferences to promote academic exchange and collaboration. In teacher-student relationships, the interactive modes of ancient Shuyuan have influenced the establishment of tutorial systems and residential academies in modern universities. Thus, the revival of Shuyuan, integrated with the essence of ancient Chinese education, is not merely a return to tradition [2]. It offers a model for holistic education, stimulates cultural innovation, and provides a new direction for integrating ancient and modern approaches in ideological and cultural development.

5. Conclusion

Chinese Shuyuan, embodying millennial educational wisdom, represents a vital essence of traditional Chinese culture. The discontinuity between modern higher education and the Shuyuan tradition is a regrettable development in the history of Chinese cultural evolution, resulting in a significant erosion of the humanistic spirit within universities. This disconnect has rendered humanistic education akin to a river without a source or a tree without roots. Sole reliance on the transplantation and adoption of Western culture cannot fundamentally address this issue. The enduring essence of Shuyuan serves as one of the foundational sources of modern higher education. By reconnecting with these origins, university humanistic education can achieve clarity akin to Zhu Xi's realization centuries ago: "The canal is so clear because there is a flowing source of fresh water." Such an approach may enable Chinese universities to fulfill their

historical mission of cultivating exceptional talents with both virtue and ability, while also preserving and advancing traditional Chinese culture.

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