

# An Analysis of the Educational Thoughts in Lao She's Novels

Xiang Xu

School of Humanities and International Education  
Xi'an Peihua University  
Xi'an, China 710125

**Abstract**—In the history of Chinese modern literature, there is a subtle interactive relationship between literature and education. Many writers in the history of literature have been engaged in educational work, and their works are also infiltrated with educational thoughts, and Lao She is one of them. With rich experience in educational practice, Lao She has a deep understanding of all levels of Chinese education and foreign education. He also reflects complete, systematic and clear educational thoughts in his works, for example, the criticism of the drawbacks of traditional Chinese education, the reflection of children's education and youth education. In Lao She's novels, the educational thought and the critical thinking of nationality are also closely related. Therefore, education is an important dimension to understand Lao She, and the educational thoughts in Lao She's novels have also left valuable wealth for future generations.

**Keywords**—Lao She; educational thought; national character

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Chinese modern literature, literature and education present a subtle interactive relationship. Since the "May 4th" New Culture Movement, Chinese ideological community has assumed the long-term task of enlightenment. Enlightenment requires the elimination of old ideological and cultural system and the establishment of a new cultural system. During such process, "cultivating people" is fundamental, it has some similarities with educators' "educating people". Or, the root of "cultivating people" lies in education. The new literature born in the new cultural thoughts will inevitably bear the heavy responsibility of "cultivating people", and the "cultivating people" thought in literary works is transmitted through educational novels. Many writers in the May 4th Movement period explored Chinese education through novels, such as Ye Shengtao, Bing Xin, Ba Jin, etc., among whom Lao She is also one.

Lao She himself has rich experience in educational practice. In his 60 years of life experience, "almost never disconnected with education" [1] Mr. Lao She was born in poverty, initially attended the normal school, after graduation, he worked as primary school master, persuading officer, middle school teacher, Chinese teacher at the Oriental College of London University, University professor, etc., Lao She has been engaged in education for a long time, not

only in China, but also in overseas countries such as the United Kingdom and Singapore, and has been contacted with students of various ages and types, combined with the era in which Lao She was located, is an era in which China's new and old cultures collide. On the one hand, Lao She was deeply aware of China's traditional educational concept, and at the same time was exposed to advanced foreign educational concepts, so he has a sober and sensible understanding to all kinds of phenomena in the education sector. Therefore he began to think about China's education through the creation of novels. Lao She's creation embodies complete, systematic and clear educational thoughts, such as the criticism of the drawbacks of traditional Chinese education, the reflection of children's education and youth education. At the same time, through the exploration and reflection of educational thoughts, Lao She's National critical thinking was reflected in his novels as well.

## II. CRITICISM OF THE DRAWBACKS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE EDUCATION

Since modern times, Chinese ideological community has faced a transformation from tradition to modernity. In this process, the criticism of the old world has become an important task of many literary works, and a prominent aspect of the old ideology and culture is the traditional education concept. Lao She always believes that education plays an important role in China's development. To a certain extent, education can save the country. Lao She believes that "the people who want the society and country to be prosperous, the first task should be education development" [2]. In fact, China's traditional view of education cannot shoulder the heavy responsibility of saving the country, and even becomes a hindrance to China's development. The exploration of educational thought in Lao She's works to a great extent is a criticism of the drawbacks of traditional education.

Lao She's criticism of the drawbacks of traditional Chinese education is mainly concentrated in "Official" and "Salary", the core of the old education, that is, studying is for the old thoughts of high officials and good salary. China's traditional thinking has always been "A good scholar will make an official", and this concept has not been able to adapt to the development of the times in modern times, and has even become an obstinate illness that hinders the

development of Chinese society's history and culture. In Lao She's works, he portrays the image of scholars who consider "official" and "salary" as the ultimate goal of life. Of course, this kind of image is more of a negative image. Some kinds of scholars are very shallow and ignorant. On the surface, they advocate new knowledge and new education. In fact, these are just tools for decorating the facade. These people are still vulgar and ignorant for the sake of money. For example, the teacher in the novel "Biography of Niu Tianci" insists on using the "spoon-feeding" method to teach, which is unable to teach any useful knowledge to students. The only reason he came to Niu's house to be a teacher is to get the financial support from Mr Niu, he is just looking for "a place to eat". The purpose is actually very vulgar, because the teacher does not have the correct method of education, and does not teach in accordance with his aptitude, so Niu Tianci learned nothing. In the novel there is a group teacher image of the elementary school that Niu Tianci later attended. They all attack each other and use the students to satisfy their own personal interests. In "Lao Zhang's Philosophy", the county governor Nan Feisheng was dressed in a suit and packaged himself as a new-style education official. When he visited the school, he thought that the platform should be shifted. Otherwise, the feng shui would be bad and would "harm" the parents.

If such scholars are mostly ignorant, there is also a kind of scholars who show the danger of moral misconduct. The most typical example is Lao Zhang in "Lao Zhang's Philosophy". In his works, he is a typical official departmentalist. The "official standard" thought originated from the Chinese imperial examination system and has been deposited in the Chinese collective unconscious. Entering the official career is the lifelong pursuit of many scholars, because being an official means privilege and wealth. The initial intention of Lao Zhang was to earn money, and he even set up his students for that. After gathering a lot of wealth, Lao Zhang realized that "There is no business better than be official. Doing business could only earn a bit of money, but be an official could earn both fame and fortune!" From then on, he actively participated in political life, began to crawl everywhere, and finally became the Director of Education. Zhao Ziyue in "Zhao Ziyue" is also under the "Study and being official" card, and pursuing the religious of "three in one" with "fame, fortune, and official". Ma Zeren in "Two Horses" is also an official fan. He feels that being an official is the most decent thing. He also advises his son to "apply to an official after returning to China."

Education should bring science and civilization, but in the traditional Chinese concept of education, education is mixed with "Official", "Salary" and feudal ideas, and it has become a trend. Until modern times, this vulgar education concept is especially hindered the development of the country and the progress of society. Therefore Lao She spared no effort to criticize the drawbacks of traditional education, which also reflects the conscience and anxiety of Lao She as an educator.

### III. LAO SHE'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

Lao She has rich experience in educational practice. He has a deep understanding of all levels of Chinese education and education at home and abroad. He also reflects complete, systematic and clear educational thoughts in his works.

#### A. Children's Education

Lao She's first job after graduating from Normal University was the headmaster of a primary school. In Lao She's educational career, the earliest contact was with children. Lao She's concern about children's education is closely related to the environment in which he was located. The May 4th Movement period was an era of enlightenment, humanism was prevalent and "human" were infinitely magnified. Children as the initial stage of "human" development also attracted great attention from the academic community. "The concern for children has never been a problem for individual families. It is linked to the concern of the future of the entire nation, and is closely related to the attempt to transcend the weak position of the nation in terms of population quality, standard of living and political status in the world camp." [3] In a sense, children's enlightenment education can also promote the enlightenment of society, so the issue of children's education has also become an enthusiasm for the times. Lu Xun, Bing Xin, Ye Shengtao and others have put forward the views of children's education. This trend of the times naturally affected Lao She, while Lao She himself loves children very much, and has also created many works on children's subjects, such as "Xiao Po's Birthday" and "Xin Ai Mi Er". In addition, Lao She also discussed his concept of children's education through some essays. It can be said that Lao She has a strong interest in children's education and has formed his concept of children's education.

First of all, Lao She believes that the key to children's education is do not mix any feudal superstitions in education, because the old feudal superstitions will destroy the nature of children. In "Lao Zhang's Philosophy", Lao She wrote such a satirical scene, "when Educational Officer Nan Feisheng inspected the school, he believed that the platform built in the west of the classroom is the 'White Tiger Terrace'", which will harm the students' parents. The indoctrination of feudal superstition is undoubtedly not conducive to the growth of children.

Secondly, Lao She believes that children should be provided with a beautiful and harmonious growth environment and scientific education methods. He believes: "The environment always exists before people's conscious and purposeful education, giving children a subtle influence on their mind and body." [4] A good environment can cultivate children's temperament, and a good environment includes family, school and social environment. In the novel "Biography of Niu Tianci", Mr. And Mrs. Niu did not give Niu Tianci a good family education. The teachers and students in Niu Tianci's school were sentimentally indifferent, and the school atmosphere was cold. This undoubtedly led Niu Tianci to a wrong path. In terms of teaching methods, Lao She advocates heuristic teaching and

promotes the intuitiveness of educational approaches and means.

Finally, Lao She believes that the core of children's education should be based on freedom and respect the free development of children's nature. There is no freedom in the growth of Ai Mi Er in "Xin Ai Mi Er". When she was born, she was banned from crying and breastfeeding. In her later growth process, she was even deprived of her imagination. In the novel, Ai Mi Er has no freedom from birth. She has been grown up according to the path chosen for her. There is no Children's simplicity and no nature. This kind of education will only bring bad results.

### *B. Youth Education*

Lao She not only pays attention to children's education, but also pays attention to youth education. During the May 4th New Culture Movement, youth was the main force of the movement. Lao She taught at Shandong University in the 1930s and also had a certain understanding of college students. Lao She appreciates the youthfulness of young people, but he is also deeply worried about some shortcomings of young people. Therefore, in Lao She's novels, there are also thoughts on the educational growth of young people.

Lao She believes that the key to youth education is personality education, which is to cultivate a healthy personality of young people. In Lao She's works, although young people are energetic, there are also problems of frivolity and blindness. Some young people have no life goals. For example, Zhao Ziyue in "Zhao Ziyue" and the college students around him, Zhang Tianzhen in "Divorce", who is crazy about foreign things and obsequious to foreigners, although these are all college students, and many of them have accepted Western-style education, but they are either do not want to study, just want to enjoy themselves with feasting and other kinds of entertainment, or they considered earn money as official the goal of life. These young people are undoubtedly lack in personality. Lao She gave him spicy irony in his works. In his works, Lao She is also very concerned about the group of young women and international students. He believes that many young women are naive, have insufficient understanding of social reality, have no economic foundation, blindly follow the Western concept of emancipating the mind, and blindly pursue free love. Many foreign students also hold vulgarity values, study abroad is to make it easier to get money and status after returning to China, or to understand only the skin of Western culture, but have no understanding of the true essence of Western culture.

At the same time, Lao She has also shaped some young people with ideal personality in his works, such as Li Jingchun, who advocates "Save China with reading", Li Zirong and Ma Wei, who advocate "Save China with industry". Most of these young people have a clear and strong sense of consciousness and can get rid of the shackles of old ideas and dare to walk out of the traditional way of life. These young people undoubtedly have a relatively sound

personality and also show Lao She's educational thoughts of youth.

## IV. LAO SHE'S EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT AND NATIONAL CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION

Lao She's criticism of the drawbacks of traditional education in his novels, his reflection on children's education and youth education, in fact, also fits the national character transformation thought of that era. Although Lao She's own thoughts are not radicals, the educational thought infiltrated in Lao She's novels and his ultimate goal of education are undoubtedly commit to national character transformation. Lao She himself is a writer with strong national consciousness, while thinking about education problems, Lao She's novels also run through the theme of national character criticism. "Lao Zhang's Philosophy" and "Zhao Zi Yue" expose the darkness of education and academic circles, criticize Lao Zhang's money slave and mean soul, and also criticize Zhao Zi Yue, a seemly new but in fact old young people. Especially in the novel "Two Horses", Lao She analyzed the different national characters of China and Britain from the perspective of comparison between China and the West. The British have patriotic feelings; in contrast, the Chinese are very indifferent to the state affairs. The old horse in the novel will say something that has no national concept in order to please the British, but Li Zirong is a young man with ideal personality, he combines the excellent factors of Chinese and Western culture. Not only he works hard, but also adapts quickly to British culture and can recognize the quality factors of British culture. The educational thoughts in Lao She's novels fit the national critical trend of that era, and also show the individual characteristics in Lao She's bones as a torchbearer.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on his many years of teaching experience, Lao She expressed his thoughts on education with his novels and formed a relatively systematic and complete educational thought. Throughout Lao She's educational thoughts, although there are inevitable limitations of that era, more and more outstanding modern educational concepts have also played an important role in the present. This is also the significance of Lao She's novels to history and the era beyond the literary value.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Lao She. How do I write novels [M]. Shanghai: Wenhui Publishing Company, 2009: 2. (in Chinese)
- [2] Lao She. The Complete Works of Lao She (Vol. 19) [M]. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing Company, 1999: 270. (in Chinese)
- [3] Xu Lanjun. "Children's Discovery" in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2011: 10. (in Chinese)
- [4] Cui Mingfen. Personality Education and Children's Education — On the Educational Thoughts in Lao She's Novels[J]. Journal of Liaocheng Normal University, 1990, (1). (in Chinese)