

A Study on Naxi Life Education and Wisdom in Lijiang, China

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Abstract

Currently, life education has become a crucial component in fostering the healthy development of young people, fulfilling their spiritual and cultural needs, and enhancing their quality of life. In China, the Naxi ethnic group's approach to life education encompasses practices that hold significant research value for promoting life education. This paper employs methods such as literature review and field research to conduct an in-depth analysis of Naxi life education. It examines the value and significance of Naxi life education and wisdom, offering insights and implications for the educational field.

Keywords: Naxi Life Education; Life Education; Approaches to Naxi Life Education

1. Introduction

The Naxi is one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. According to the sixth national population census conducted in 2010, the Naxi population numbered 326,295, with 240,580 primarily residing in Yunnan Province, constituting 73.7% of the total Naxi population. Renowned for their long history and vibrant culture, the Naxi people have gained international acclaim for their World Cultural Heritage site—Lijiang Ancient City, the World Memory Heritage—for Dongba ancient literature, and ancient Jinsha river rock paintings, among other cultural treasures such as Dongba culture and Baisha murals.

This research explores Naxi life education and wisdom in Lijiang through a combination of literature review and fieldwork.

2. Research Questions

How did the Naxi, an ethnic minority group, create such a brilliant civilization? What kind of culture underpins the prosperity of this world cultural heritage? What is the impact of the enduring Naxi life education in their region? Exploring and studying the life education of the Naxi people and compiling some life education experiences that can be learned from this will undoubtedly be of significant value and relevance to contemporary education reform.

3. Literature Review

The study of life education can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the New Education Movement and the Progressive Education Movement that emerged in Europe and the United States. Figures such as William Albert Wirt, Marietta Johnson, and Parker F. W. advocated for various educational reforms that promoted learning through activities centered around learners' interests. One of the most representative figures in this movement is John Dewey. Dewey posits that education is not merely a preparation for future life; rather, education is the process of life itself, where people continuously form and transform their experiences within the living environment. Dewey's ideas greatly influenced Tao Xingzhi, who was studying at Columbia University in the U.S. at the time. Rosenberg, Marshall and Eisler (2003), applied the theory of life education to early childhood, primary and secondary education, as well as general higher education for research and practice. Stephen

F. Duncan and Goddard (2011) applied the life education theory to the study of family education, proposing a comprehensive framework for the implementation of family life education, program design, and so forth.

According to the China Knowledge Network database, a total of 22,520 articles related to “life education” were collected. Out of these, 3,001 articles specifically used the keyword “life education”, while only 31 articles were related to “Naxi education”, and a concerning zero articles were related to “Naxi life education”. The search results indicate that the interest in “life education” has been steadily increasing since 2000. “Life education” aids students in establishing a proper outlook on life, survival, and living. It serves as a vehicle for implementing national socialist core values, moral education, and quality education. If effectively practiced, it can also enhance the construction of China’s socialist core values, making them more appealing. Improved practice of “life education” would further promote the development of China's socialist core values and ensure that those educated truly benefit from it.

In the realm of life education theory as applied to curriculum resources development research, Zhang Jianzhong's *“On Tao Xingzhi’s Theory of Life and Aesthetic Education and Its Contemporary Revelation”* and Guan Xia’s *“Research on Tao Xingzhi’s Thought on Aesthetic Education”* both explore perspectives from “truth, goodness, beauty, knowledge, emotion, and intention, teaching and doing”. However, the two articles have distinct foci. The former delves more deeply into the logical aspects of “teaching and doing”, while the latter presents a more systematic argumentation of “truth, goodness, and beauty, knowledge, emotion, and intention, teaching and doing”. Nevertheless, the final chapter on

“Tao Xingzhi’s Characteristics of Aesthetic Education” is lacking in analysis. Zhang Yongwei's article, *“The Use of Living Teaching in High School Art Education”*, takes as its starting point the detachment of high school art education from students' lives. The study examines the dialectical unity between life and the history of art education, emphasizing the importance of life without standing on a certain theoretical height. Additionally, the study is deficient in practical application, as some teaching designs cannot be realized according to the analysis of the actual situation, thus becoming detached from the significance of teaching. Zhou Xiaoxiao’s *“Implications of the Life Education Perspective on Art Education in Rural Primary and Secondary Schools”* also studies the issue of art education under Tao Xingzhi’s life education perspective. However, its research direction is somewhat broad, focusing mainly on teaching space, relationships with other disciplines, and the use of local resources. This includes the development of art resources, but only as a symbolic reference without in-depth research and exploration. For instance, curriculum resources of the Stone painting and handmade calligraphy and painting paper have been practiced, but only photos serve as evidence, nor did it explain the problems encountered in the process of developing local resources under the guidance of the concept of life education and how they were solved. In summary, the study of curriculum resources in art education is a minor point that has not been thoroughly investigated.

According to the anthropology of education, one of the key dynamics of education is cultural integration. This involves the function of organizing and combining various cultural characteristics into a coherent system, which can significantly influence and be expressed through education. Without

cultural integration in education, cultural change within the educational system is not possible. The essence of cultural integration is not merely the summation of traits but a developmental process. In this process, educational administrators, implementers, and participants continuously construct educational practices through “cultural selection”. The outcome is directed towards cultural adaptation and educational innovation, meaning the evolution and advancement of education through “cultural selection” within a new cultural context.

The theory of cultural integration underscores the systematic, structural, and functional aspects of the cultural process in education. This perspective aligns with educational research that highlights the integrity of individual educational practices. From cultural integration to adaptation and innovation in education, the essence lies in the specific process of cultural selection, which is why this study centers around cultural selection as its core concept. Throughout the development and transformation of Naxi education, “selectivity” has been an intrinsic attribute of both culture and education, present from start to finish. The structural stratification and theoretical model of cultural integration more effectively elucidate this “selectivity”.

Professor Feng (2001) “*Anthropology of Education*” delineates cultural integration into three levels: Firstly, the level of survival and adaptation, which encompasses a significant amount of practicality and technology. This includes technology, customs, entertainment, socialization, etiquette, and ethics, among other elements. The primary focus here is on the practical and technical aspects of culture, which facilitate human adaptation to the environment and ensure survival. Secondly, there is

the level of group belonging, which builds upon the foundation of survival adaptation to express the need for communal affiliation. Lastly, the level of creative aesthetics reflects the “universal cultural values and shared wisdom and emotions of all humanity”, and is grounded in educational development and aesthetic progression.

4. Methodology

The method of fieldwork is to explore the life education and wisdom of the Naxi ethnic group. Consequently, the Naxi region of Lijiang in China was visited and researched.

5. The Concept of Naxi Life Education

The concept of Naxi life education is a choice that reflects Naxi culture and the outcome of cultural integration. The amalgamation of diverse cultural resources has shaped the concept of Naxi life education, encompassing the unique Naxi perspectives on nature education, wisdom education, humanity education, morality education, and life education.

5.1 The Nature Education Concept

The Naxi people hold the belief that everything possesses a spirit. Since ancient times, they have conducted sacrifices to the gods of nature. Additionally, the Naxi have long embraced the concept

that “man and nature are brothers”, a fundamental belief in natural ecology, which has effectively contributed to the protection of Lijiang's ecological environment.

The Naxi people revere nature, deities, mountain spirits, and their ancestors. They hold the belief that spirits inhabit all things and that natural phenomena and objects such as the sky, mountains, water, sun, moon, wind, rain, thunder, and lightning possess spirits. Following the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism to Lugu Lake, its influence has been assimilated. The Daba, lamas, and religious ceremonies, including sacrifices to mountain gods and ancestral spirits, as well as the insertion of flags and hanging ceremonies, facilitate communication between humans and nature, between humans and the spirits and deities, and the relationship between humans and their ancestors, promoting harmonious coexistence.

5.2 The Wisdom Education Concept

Wisdom is an advanced form of creative thinking, rooted in the physiological and psychological faculties of life. It encompasses all abilities to perceive, memorize, understand, analyze, judge, and elevate nature and humanity. In our daily lives, wisdom manifests through the enhanced ability to solve problems.

Wisdom education has always been emphasized in the life education of the Naxi people. Dongba, considered the wise men of the Naxi, are spiritual teachers who embody the arts of witchcraft, medicine, and craftsmanship. Their thoughts are original and unique, and their wisdom and insight are unmatched. In the realm of life education, they interpret education from a perspective of wisdom,

elucidating the teachings found within the Dongba classics. The Dongba ancient literature, recognized by UNESCO and included in the Memory of the World Heritage List, documents aspects of astronomy, geography, calendar, folklore, and history within Dongba culture. It has become a seminal text of Naxi culture and is revered as the Naxi people's "Book of Wisdom".

5.3 The Humanity Education Concept

The essence of humane education is humanistic education, and its core lies in the cultivation of the humanistic spirit. The humanistic perspective of education in Naxi life education is reflected in three aspects.

Firstly, the sentiments of loyalty to the rulers, love for the country, and preservation of unity are deeply rooted in family and national sentiments. These sentiments have been a continuous thread throughout China's 5,000-year history and have been the fundamental driving force for the Chinese nation to stand among the nations of the world. Family and national sentiments also serve as a thread to the history and culture of all ethnic minorities in China, forming an important cornerstone and lifeline for the survival and development of all ethnic groups. The Naxi people's family and national sentiments, with a long, deeply rooted, and richly unique history and culture, exemplify this. Despite their remote location and relatively small population, the Naxi people have consistently shone with the glory of loyalty to the country and filial piety in the historical development. They have sincerely repaid the country after the family, and family and national sentiments have long become the significant cultural genes flowing through the Naxi people's veins. The development of Naxi family and national sentiments

can be divided into five stages: The first stage is the ancient family and national sentiments recorded in the World Memory Heritage Dongba Ancient Literature, with a central reflection in the Dongba Classics, such as “*Human Migration*”, which is the source of Naxi family and national sentiments. The second stage is the national sentiments of the Naxi ancestors during the Han and Tang dynasties. The event of “*Song of the King White Wolf*” recorded in the *Tales of Eastern Han Dynasty* highlights the sense of national identity of the Naxi people’s affection of his motherland, marking a new chapter in the history of Naxi’s national sentiments. The third stage is during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, where the Naxi people were cultivated to consciously safeguard national unity through major historical events such as “the Yuan tribesmen coming on an expedition on sheepskin rafts”, “Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang of Ming Dynasty granting the Naxi Chieftain the surname Mu”, and “Changing the Chieftain system to the system of state-appointed officials in minority areas”. “Sincerity for the country” is the profound connotation of family and national sentiments.

In the history of the Naxi people, a profound sense of family and patriotism has been the fundamental driving force behind the historical development of Lijiang. This is evident in the significant historical events and the judicious decisions and actions of key figures in Naxi history. From the late Song Dynasty, Naxi ancestors journeyed to the Jinsha River to assist the Yuan tribesmen coming on an expedition on sheepskin rafts, aiding them in their southern conquest of the Dali Kingdom and thus advancing the unification of the nation. Consequently, Lijiang gained widespread renown. By the dawn of the Ming Dynasty, the Naxi were known as “the first to come over and pay allegiance to the ruler,

highly appreciated by other ethnic groups, and serve the country sincerely”. During the Ming Dynasty, Mu’s Family in Lijiang was honored by the emperor on numerous occasions, and the region became known as “the wealthiest of all counties”, a borderland “versed in poetry and literature, imbued with civility and righteousness”.

Secondly, the economic mindset presented openness and inclusiveness, equality and mutual benefit. The Lijiang Ancient Town, with no walls, stands as an open city. *The ancient Tea Horse Road* traverses the entire Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet region, fostering interaction and exchange among various ethnic cultures. As a significant cultural town of the Southern Silk Road and the ancient Tea Horse Road, multiple religions and cultures converge here, achieving the Lijiang Ancient City’s World Heritage Cultural Status. Fei Xiaotong personally inscribed the phrase “living town of the ancient Tea-Horse Road, the old town of Dayan”; Professor Xie Ninggao, Director of the World Heritage Center at Peking University, noted that “Lijiang, the living town of the ancient Tea-Horse Road, continues to drive and promote the economic development of all ethnic groups along the ancient route”.

Thirdly, there was cultural integration. Edward Burett Tyfo posits that “in a broad ethnographic sense, culture or civilization constitutes a complex whole, encompassing knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and all other abilities and habits that individuals possess as members of society”. The architecture, religion, murals, music, and various other elements of the Naxi people are not merely products of the fusion and development of multi-ethnic cultures. Instead, they are the result of the interaction and exchange between diverse ethnic cultures, leading to the eclectic, harmonious,

and integrated Lijiang culture. This allows tourists from around the world to experience a profound oriental ambiance and Chinese essence in Lijiang, which stems from the absorption and integration of Central Plains culture into the local Lijiang culture.

5.4 The Life Education Concept

Dr. Shu-Mei Chang, a professor at Kaohsiung Normal University in Taiwan and a Doctor of Education, believes that education on the concepts of life and death is “an education that, through exploring the nature of death and the various phenomena of dying and mourning, prompts us to deeply reflect on our relationships with others, society, nature, and the universe, thereby realizing the ultimate meaning and value of life”.

For the Naxi people, the most profound education on the concept of death is imparted through funeral ceremonies. In the view of the Naxi people, the three most significant days in their lives are birth, coming-of-age ceremony, and the funeral. The ceremonies and education associated with these three big events also reflect the Naxi people's reverence for life, gratitude for existence, and love of life.

Firstly, there is the reverence for life. Compared to neighboring ethnic groups such as the Zang, Yi, and Bai, the Naxi population is smaller. Their desire for life is primarily reflected in the worship of reproductive fertility. Naxi women regard plumpness as a beauty ideal, as giving birth to many children is highly valued. The design of Naxi women's clothing, featuring the shape of a frog, symbolizes the frog's prolific reproductive capabilities, embodying the wish to bear many offspring.

Secondly, there is gratitude for survival. Associate Professor Tian (2008) from Beijing Normal University explores the Naxi people's philosophy of coexistence with nature in Chapter 2 “*Half Brothers of the Same Father and Half Mother-Traditional Naxi View of Departmental Nature and Its Modern Significance*” of *The Naxi People in the Afterglow of the World of Gods and Spirits: Changes of an Ancient Nation*. He found that the Naxi people have discovered the principle of living in harmony with nature through this belief, which has been passed down through generations. Their gratitude for nature and survival is heartfelt and is reflected in their actions. They demonstrate their appreciation for favorable weather conditions by performing ceremonies, seeking blessings from the gods.

Thirdly, there is the love of life. The Naxi people exhibit a unique love for life, which Naxi scholar Cai (2002) describes in “*The Fascinating Aesthetic Psychological Characteristics of the Naxi*” as “natural humanitarianism”. The Naxi live freely in the shadow of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, spending half their time in self-reflection and the other half in communion with the gods. Even when a family member passes away, the community remains vibrant with singing and dancing, setting up hot pots to guide the deceased's spirit back to the land of ancestral spirits. Although the departed may be long gone, the living continue to celebrate life joyfully. This is so profound that Naxi myths have created a kingdom of love and beauty for suicide for love, a place where there is no trouble or sorrow, where hundreds of flowers bloom, herds of cattle and sheep graze, and the harvest is plentiful and abundant. In this realm, they love one another and live like gods, forgetting all the world's suffering and transcending all its pain.

5.5 The Moral Education Concept

Xu (2007) stated in his article “*Religious Influence and Countermeasures on Education in Borderland Minority Areas*” that religion has played a significant role in the dissemination and development of national culture. It serves not only as a special function of human spiritual activities—including moral, cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional functions—but also has an integrative effect, producing a far-reaching and long-lasting influence.

In the Naxi heroic myth, “*The War Between the Black and the White Tribes*”, the three exemplary virtues of honesty and trustworthiness, loyalty to the community, and filial piety to parents, displayed by the protagonist A Lu, illuminate the essence of heroism. These virtues also serve as a good example for the Naxi to teach their young. In “*The War Between the Black and the White Tribes*”, despite his parents' objections, Ah Lu still ventures to create the sun and moon for the White Tribe, solely to fulfill his promise.

5.6 Approaches to Naxi Life Education

Firstly, education through words and example is fundamental in one's life. Historically, the Naxi Chieftain's family members have been loyal to the country, guarding the borders for generations and fulfilling their duties with dedication as their values. The Mu family has shown absolute obedience to the central leadership, possessing a sincere patriotic heart, and has been wholeheartedly attached to the central ruler's jurisdiction. The central dynasty cherished the Mu family's loyalty, bestowing upon them the surname “Mu”. Throughout the ages, the chieftains passed down their teachings from generation to

generation. They have taught by example, instilling loyalty to the ruler and love for the country. Through extensive reading and learning, they cultivated a heart to serve the nation. By amassing a wide collection of books and inviting the world's finest teachers and elders, they have educated through three methods: reading, listening, and observing. As a result, the Mu family's six chieftains have become outstanding poets and artists.

Secondly, there is education through rituals. Rituals create an environmental and spatial field for individual life, fostering an atmosphere that encourages personal growth. They constitute a form of cultural and life education. As Ruth Benedict stated in her book *Patterns of Culture*, rituals are indeed a form of cultural and life education. She noted in “Cultural Patterns” that “it is widely acknowledged that puberty is a social issue, and the various rituals conducted during this period symbolize the transition from childhood to adulthood. This so-called transition into adulthood is not merely a biological event, but rather a culturally defined rite of passage”. For the Mosuo people, a branch of the Naxi, the coming-of-age ceremony is a pivotal event. In Lijiang, whether in Dadong, Fengke, Mingyin, or around Lugu Lake, Naxi children celebrate their Bar Mitzvah at the age of thirteen or fourteen, with boys receiving pants and girls donning skirts. The significance of this ceremony extends beyond acknowledging the child's growth into adulthood; it also signifies the child's readiness to assume familial duties and represents a prime method of family education.

Naxi funeral rites serve not only to appease the souls of the departed but also to impart lessons to the living. Through the Dongba funeral rites, the souls of the deceased are guided back to their

ancestral homes, retracing their lives and extolling their spiritual virtues. This practice ensures that the living remember the ways of their ancestors and preserve the nation's core values. For Naxi children, most life education is conducted during the funeral ceremony, which includes a retrospective of national history, elegies for the deceased, and reflections on aging, sickness, and death. In Naxi philosophy, there is a profound respect for life and contemplation of death, making the funeral ceremony a living lesson in life education.

Thirdly, there is the enlightenment from mythological stories. Naxi myths are rich and colorful, encompassing the origins of heaven and earth, the creation of the sun and moon, the birth of humanity, and the genesis of all things. The creation myth "*Song of Human Migration*", the heroic myth "*The War Between the Black and the White Tribes*", and the love myth "*Luban Lurao*" are considered the three jewels of Dongba mythology. These myths serve as the finest life lessons for Naxi children and youth, with their robust characters and compelling, emotive storylines. The creation myth "*Human Migration*" depicts the long and arduous journey of human and Naxi ethnic development, where flood myths, the creation of humanity, and other narratives reflect the nation's strong creativity and pride.

In the heroic myth "*The War Between the Black and the White Tribes*", the Naxi people's simple philosophical view of the black and white world and their magnificent imagination of creating the sun and the moon have sparked our contemplation of the dichotomy between black and white; the love myth "*Luban Lurao*" has influenced the Naxi people's concept of love, instilling in them a persistence, strength, and bravery to die generously for their love from generation to generation.

Fourthly, there is growing up amidst song and dance. Folk dances and folk games are integral to Chinese culture and embody the wisdom of the Chinese working people over millennia. They are rich in cultural significance and educational value. In the context of Naxi life education, folk dances, folk games, and folk sports all play a crucial role. The Naxi people are renowned for their musical talents and possess a vast repertoire of intangible cultural heritage, including folk songs and dances. Among these, the Naxi's large-scale classical instrumental suite, “*Baishaxiyue*”, known as the “living fossil of music”, “*Remeicuo*”, and the colorful “*Naxi Nursery Rhymes*” have been designated as national-level intangible cultural heritage. Naxi song and dance music serves not only as a calling card to promote national culture but also as a vital bridge for fostering cultural exchange and communication, and even identity. It is a medium that connects hearts. There exists an international common language in music melodies, universal values in the protection of nature, education through entertainment, the dissemination of truth, goodness, and beauty, and the building of a harmonious society. At the same time, it can serve as the vernacular of the nation and culture to rejuvenate its roots, to strive for the country's glory, and to seek common ground among humanity.

Yang Fuquan (1990), a professor at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, analyzed the reasons behind the Naxi people's reverence for bravery and martial arts in his paper titled “*Exploration of the Naxi People's Spirit of Bravery and its Origin and Development*”. He identified traditional culture and life education as significant cultural genes. Professor He Chunyun from Yunnan University in his paper “*On Naxi Hunting Culture and Leisure Sports*” also explored how the Naxi traditional hunting

culture shaped the primitive sports of the Naxi people. He noted that Naxi sports and leisure activities significantly influence the development of Naxi youth, fostering a sense of manhood that emphasizes courage and martial arts. Up to now, the traditional sports of the Naxi ethnic group are still widely inherited and carried forward. This tradition has continued until the 1970s. Nearly 10 members of the Yunnan football team are from the Naxi ethnic group in Lijiang.

As mentioned above, the methods of Naxi life education encompass teaching through words and actions, ceremonial education, initiation through myths and stories, and development through songs, dances, and games, as well as through participation in production and labor, and engagement in festive customs. These methods collectively form the essential components of Naxi life education, enriching the physical and spiritual growth of Naxi children and fostering a conducive environment for their healthy development.

6. Conclusion and Reflection

Tao Xingzhi stated that “life is education”. In China, Naxi life education embodies a form of educational wisdom, boasting abundant life education resources and offering extensive scope for research. Tao Xingzhi's philosophy that “life is education” promotes the notion that education should be centered on life. Consequently, our educational practices and teaching methods should also focus on life, as should the development of curriculum resources. By integrating curriculum development with

the students' lives, education can revert to its essence, embracing the beauty of education and the arts, and fostering students' ability to learn with flexibility.

Besides, incorporating life education and national cultural wisdom into the development of curriculum resources can enhance the school's brand by shaping a new image that supports local economic and social development, as well as the inheritance and innovation of national culture. In terms of scientific research, it can foster the integration of industry, academia, and research, thereby elevating the service level for local technological innovation. In education and teaching, it promotes the preservation and inheritance of national culture, solidifies teaching characteristics, and cultivates a distinctive teaching brand. This approach increases the competitiveness and influence of majors and courses, develops their unique features, and more effectively promotes the overall brand building of the university.

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