

International Chinese Language Education and Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind

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Abstract: Human society is now confronted with a variety of threats. Given that, the idea and initiative of building a community of shared future for mankind is positively echoed by people around the world. Accordingly, international Chinese language education should play an active role in building a community of shared future for mankind, which is determined by the mission and nature of this educational cause. The idea of building a community of shared future for mankind points a right way for the development of international Chinese language education, injects new vigor to this cause, and also creates a more friendly and favorable external environment. International Chinese language education should help facilitate the building of a community of shared future for mankind and contribute Chinese wisdom to the common progress of mankind in the new era.

Keywords: international Chinese language education, a community of shared future for mankind, Chinese wisdom

On January 18, 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech entitled “Work Together to Build a community of shared future for mankind” at the United Nations Office at Geneva, Switzerland. Xi elaborated the vision and significance of “building a community of shared future for mankind and achieving shared and win-win development” for the

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whole world, and proposed a corresponding initiative on China's behalf. The initiative was highly regarded by world leaders and resonated worldwide, as it touched upon the common concerns of people all over the world, i.e. prosperity and development. Since the turn of the 21st century, human society has been confronted with a variety of threats, such as environmental pollution, wars, nuclear crises, disease outbreaks, food safety challenges, poverty, economic crises, non-traditional security threats, terrorism and unilateralism. In such a context, people of all countries should work together to build a community of shared future for mankind and strive for lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness, inclusiveness and a clean and beautiful world. Peace has always been the common aspiration of mankind and international Chinese language education should play a due part in building a community of shared future for mankind.

The Mission of International Chinese Language Education and the Building of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind

Since its establishment as a discipline, international Chinese language education has shouldered such a mission: teaching Chinese language and spreading Chinese culture worldwide to increase communication and cooperation with people around the world and promote world peace. As President Xi Jinping (2017), "Since the end of the Cold War, people have pursued a shared aspiration, namely, to expand cooperation and promote common development." Development cannot be done without cooperation; cooperation is on the premise of mutual trust; mutual trust is based on mutual understanding; mutual understanding requires common tools for communication. Language happens to be the tool for communication that facilitates the most convenient and effective interpersonal interactions. Over the past years, English has steadily advanced towards becoming a global common tongue, but is not yet used by all countries as an official language. Even in the UN, English is only one of the six working languages (with the other five being French, Russian, Arabic, Spanish and Chinese). By contrast, Chinese is the most widely spoken language as a mother tongue worldwide. There is an increasingly strong desire for non-Chinese to learn more about China through Chinese language learning. That is why international Chinese language education is of particular significance at present. After all, international communication and cooperation cannot be carried out just in English. Chinese students are now learning other nations' languages and cultures while numerous students of other nations are learning Chinese language and culture. It is precisely in such a context that international Chinese language education as a discipline came into being. As China further advances its Reform and Opening up, it is undergoing a great rejuvenation of historical significance. China is continually strengthening its ties with countries across the world in the areas of politics, economy, trade and culture and this is attracting more and more people overseas who hope to get closer to China and learn more about what is going on in this vast oriental land. In contrast with those who want to consolidate their relationships with this both old and young country and its people, some people overseas are skeptical about China's peaceful emergence, playing up a so-called "China threat" theory. Even those skeptics

exhibit an urgent desire to learn more about China. To better understand a country's politics, society, economy and culture, one has to have a good command of its language. Otherwise it would be like "seeing flowers through a mist," or a blurred vision. There are so-called experts on Chinese issues without any knowledge of the Chinese language. Their China-related views are inevitably biased and often nowhere near reality. Against such an international backdrop, international Chinese language education can play an important role in making a difference.

It is fair to say that the boom of international Chinese language education relies heavily on the improvement of China's comprehensive national power. This has been testified by Wang Zulei and Wu Yinghui (2015) in their co-authored report on the development of the international communication of the Chinese language. Clearly the Belt and Road Initiative has been echoed by many countries. Yet during its advancement, there was bound to be various barriers, of which language and cultural barriers were inevitable. After all, each language has its own discourse system and means of expression. Ignorance of such a discourse system will result in bias, misunderstanding and even hostility. The fundamental mission of international Chinese language education is to remove possible language and cultural barriers to allow better communication and cooperation among people from different countries and regions, reduce prejudices and misunderstandings and secure more understanding and common views. In this sense, a community of shared future for mankind cannot be built without the support of international Chinese language education. Regarding the mission of international Chinese language education, no consensus has yet been reached among all related scholars. Hu Fanzhu, Chen Jiaxuan and Zhang Hongqian (2018) provided their answers to two primary questions, i.e. "What is international Chinese language education?" and "How should international Chinese language education be conducted?" arousing heated debates in academic circles. Prior to that, Hu Fanzhu and Chen Jiaxuan (2011) had argued that "it is 'why to teach' that primarily determines 'what to teach'" in the discussion of "what to teach in international Chinese language education." According to Hu and Chen, "Chinese language teaching aims to promote world peace. Language is the best tool for communication, promoting world peace and shaping an ideal of cultural diversity." It is beyond doubt that language is the best tool for communication. As far as I'm concerned, language can promote world peace, although this does not necessarily mean language is the "best tool for promoting world peace". Building world peace involves the joint efforts of multiple sectors such as politics, military affairs, economics, diplomacy, culture, philosophy, religion and scientific technology, each of which plays a crucial part. Accordingly, building world peace requires various tools (those concerning politics, military affairs, diplomacy, culture, philosophy, religion and scientific technology) and language.

Essentially, the mission of international Chinese language education is exactly about language education (Zhao, 2013). Language and culture are like the two sides of a coin and cannot be separated. This fact is determined by the very nature of language as a system of symbols carrying a corresponding cultural mark. Representing the crystallization of a language's collective cognition, each system of symbols is a carrier of its culture. This is the "ontology" of a language. Also, language is a tool for thinking and communication. A language that is applied to thinking and communication affects the thinking and

communication of the people who use that language. That is the “application” of language. Neither the “ontology” nor the “application” of a language can exist without its culture. A language implies the values of individuals and social groups who speak it. Yet, those people are usually too accustomed to such values to notice them (Cui, 2005, pp. 33-79). Given this, there is no need for international Chinese language education to excessively highlight its “cultural communication” significance, as language learning naturally covers learning the culture underlying the language being learned. This self-evident argument is also the theoretical basis of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is a common practice for any country to promote and popularize its own language and culture. While considering this practice to be well justified, many countries prefer to practice it without much open discussion. The association of international Chinese language education with the “promotion of Chinese culture” can create unnecessary barriers to this educational cause. Not long ago, The White House National Security Council (NSC) held a hearing on the issue of the Confucius Institute, which confirmed that China’s previous concern was not “unfounded worries”. Language teaching and cultural communication naturally go hand in hand, bringing “a good spring rain” that “enters the night unseen, like the wind, and moistens things finely, without a sound.” Both “promotion” and “communication” leave somewhat of an impression of imposition, which may produce counterproductive results. Lu Jianming (2016) argued, “It has to be specified that our top priority and also the most immediate task is to try all means to help overseas learners of the Chinese language to learn and master the language, particularly the written language as soon as possible. The international popularization of Chinese language, or to say international Chinese language education, must not deviate from this core task. The relationship between Chinese language teaching and cultural education should be well balanced.” Lu’s remarks were clear, relevant and to the point. Education is one thing, while promotion is another thing. Education is a cause of vital and lasting importance. It is a long and difficult journey which cannot be completed by those seeking quick success, instant benefits and once-and-for-all solutions, nor by those “shifting with the wind” and following whatever the fashion may be. Educators are supposed to be determined and such a determination only comes from cultural confidence.

The idea of building a community of shared future for mankind is of great significance to the development of international Chinese language education. The reason why building a community of shared future for mankind can receive warm responses and evoke intense resonance worldwide lies in the fact that this idea goes with the tide of global development. The “community with a shared future for mankind contains the truth of the world” (Ye, 2016). International Chinese language education should also go with the flow by transforming “China’s effort to sell” to “overseas desire to learn”. In short, China should actively promote the endogenous power and external attraction of international Chinese language education.

The Idea of Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind and the Driving Force for the Development of International Chinese Language Education

The development of any discipline or cause has to be driven by an endogenous power and a

favorable external environment, and requires the combined effect of “good timing, geographical convenience and harmonious human relations”. International Chinese language education is a discipline and a cause, which means its development also requires the combined effects of “good timing, geographical convenience and harmonious human relations”. As Lu Deping (2016) put it, “An effective approach to the international popularization of the Chinese language should give consideration to the conditions of both the sender (China) and the receiver (foreign countries or regions). By conditions, we mean a driving force from the sender and a drawing force from the receiver, as well as the interactions between the two forces”. Lu’s argument makes sense. The driving force of international Chinese language education depends on the Chinese people, their understanding of this cause of education, strategic positioning, action planning, level of discipline development, capacities of basic and applied research, as well as the standards of talent training. China must maintain an objective analysis of the existing problems in its international Chinese language education and formulate feasible solutions. There are many approaches to international Chinese language education. Among these approaches are the national education systems of relevant countries and the Confucius Institutes across the world. How to enhance the soft power of the Confucius Institutes is now an issue requiring serious study (Cui, 2018). China’s continuously rising hard power and soft power create an opportunity to develop international Chinese language education. This is what we call “good timing”. China, the birthplace of Chinese language, has developed a solid academic basis for the study of Chinese language and the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. Over the past decade China has cultivated and reserved a large number of professionals. As of September 2015, there were 363 institutions of higher learning offering Bachelor of Arts (BA) programs in international Chinese language education, with a combined enrollment of 63,933 students. There were 108 institutions of higher learning offering professional master’s programs in this discipline, with a combined enrollment of 10,133 students (Shi, 2016). As of December 31, 2016, there were 512 Confucius Institutes and 1,073 Confucius Classrooms established in 140 countries and regions across the global^①. This is what we call “geographical convenience”. The initiative of building a community of shared future for mankind, proposed by President Xi Jinping, has pointed the right direction for the development of international Chinese language education, put forward new requirements, set up a bigger platform and won the support of people of all countries. This is what we call “harmonious human relations”. The idea of building a community of shared future for mankind provides endogenous power for the development of international Chinese language education as a discipline and a cause.

The reason why this idea provides endogenous power for the development of international Chinese language education mainly lies in the following four aspects:

First, international Chinese language education should serve the cause of building a community of shared future for mankind. Language education itself can be purely technical. What to teach,

① Website of the headquarters of Confucius Institutes <http://www.hanban.edu.cn>

how to teach, how to learn and by what means to teach and learn, along with the philosophical background and theoretical framework of teaching and learning are all purely academic questions which are combined to lay a basis for the development of international Chinese language education as a discipline. Under the guidance of the idea of building a community of shared future for mankind, however, relevant Chinese scholars should also study the philosophy and environment for the development of international Chinese language education and must avoid pan-politicization and ideologization of such issues as what to teach, how to teach and why to teach. The specific goal is to accomplish the mission of Chinese language education; while the ultimate goal is to facilitate the building of a community of shared future for mankind. The lofty goal belittles any utilitarianism-driven selfish ideas. It is true that international Chinese language education can benefit China, which, nevertheless, is a rational reward to China for all of its contributions.

Second, international Chinese language education should follow the steps with the building of a community of shared future for mankind, which is a practice, as well as an idea. As President Xi Jinping (2017) put it, “Actions hold the key to building a community of shared future for mankind. To achieve this goal, the international community should promote partnership, security, growth, inter-civilization exchanges and the building of a sound ecosystem.” In particular, cultural exchanges are closely related to international Chinese language education. In recent years, a mechanism for Sino-foreign people-to-people exchanges is taking shape and emerging as an important platform for China to communicate with other civilizations. The Ministry of Education of the PRC specially established the China Center for International People-to-People Exchange (CCIPE). International Chinese language education should also be a major part of this platform so that its related alumni network, educational exchanges and cooperation resources can support Sino-foreign people-to-people exchanges. Take calligraphy education as an example. It is an organic part of international Chinese language education (Chinese writing system) and also an integral part of the abovementioned people-to-people exchanges (exchanges in the art of calligraphy). The Chinese language is the most ancient writing system of all presently used languages in the world. To many learners, this time-honored language is both intriguing and difficult to master. The art of Chinese calligraphy, which was developed based on this writing system, is mysterious and enigmatic to learners growing up in an alphabetic writing environment. Previously, exchanges in Chinese calligraphy were restricted to cultural and artistic areas. At present, however, students at Confucius Institutes also learn Chinese calligraphy. Presumably many of those who are learning Chinese calligraphy will subsequently fall in love with Chinese characters, then the Chinese language and eventually the country of China. Thus, Chinese wisdom sows the seeds of “harmony” and “magnanimity” overseas and will one day harvest “win-win fruits”. That is why international Chinese language education is essential to the building of a community of shared future for mankind.

Third, international Chinese language education should keep a foothold in China and at the same time have a global perspective. According to President Xi Jinping (2013), “The Chinese people should develop a global perspective to better coordinate domestic development with opening up to

the outside world, integrate the development of China into the development of the world, and combine the interests of the Chinese people with the interests of people of other countries.” Accordingly, international Chinese language education should develop a global perspective and size up the situation to combine its subjective efforts with the objective needs of people overseas. A global perspective is needed in corresponding text compilations, curriculum designs, teaching staff training, teaching practices, proficiency tests and academic research to see the world through China’s lens and the world to see China through the world’s lens. “In this information era characterized by big data, cloud computing, networking, globalization and space exploration, we (Chinese people) should think from a global perspective. The international popularization of the Chinese language should also be viewed from a global perspective” (Lu, 2016). Of course, China is part of the world and is not in opposition to the rest of the world. Global perspective here means China should not return to its old ways of a closed economy and isolationism, or turn a blind eye to global events. Such a global perspective is developed on the premise that international Chinese language education keeps a foothold in China, which after all is the very headquarters of this educational cause. Still, it is necessary to point out that international Chinese language education is not a business exclusive to China. In fact, it is also promoted by organizations in North America, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. In this regard, each region has their unique traditions, characteristics and advantages that are worthy of study. International Chinese language education, as a branch of language studies, belongs to second language teaching, for which China should draw on the successful experiences and research findings in second language teaching from countries across the globe.

Fourth, the building of a community of shared future for mankind helps create a better environment for the development of international Chinese language education. The history of human development over the past thousands of years indicates that war and peace is an eternal theme of mankind. Human civilizations have survived numerous bloody struggles and wars before reaching the levels of today. It is high time to have some serious reflection regarding a shared future for mankind. All of the wars in history, large or small, and particularly the two world wars, plunged people into misery and suffering and brought severe damages to economies, industries, and individuals at every level. At present local wars are ceaseless, and refugee problems are tormenting the whole world. Nuclear war is like the Sword of Damocles hanging over our head. Under such circumstances, the building of a community of shared future for mankind is a present imperative. This cause requires cooperation, interactions, and considerations regarding the interests and concerns of all peoples and nations. A community with a shared future can help create a favorable external environment for international Chinese language education, reduce skepticism from the outside world and expand common grounds. Emerging as a powerhouse for the growth of the global economy, China is playing an increasingly important role in international affairs. As an ancient Chinese verse goes, “The water seems wide at the full tide; A sail with ease hangs in the soft breeze.” International Chinese language education can seize this moment to “ride the waves and sail far”.

The Development Strategy of International Chinese Language Education and the Building of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind

Given that international Chinese language education is so closely related to the building of a community of shared future for mankind, its healthy development becomes a major concern. The successful development of any discipline or cause relies heavily on the formulation of a rational development strategy and accurate positioning. During the process of building a community of shared future for mankind, more consideration should be given to how international Chinese language education should fit the times, go with the tide of world development, meet social needs and resolve problems in development.

International Chinese language education as a discipline was developed from “teaching Chinese as a foreign language”, for which it inevitably bears the feature of being “foreign-oriented”. “Teaching Chinese as a foreign language” when conducted in China and offered to overseas students includes teaching both Chinese language and culture. By contrast, international Chinese language education is conducted overseas but it is worth emphasizing that the domestic part, teaching Chinese as a foreign language, remains the key issue and this must not be challenged when promoting international Chinese language education. The following questions concern development strategy and require corresponding top-level design. Where should international Chinese language education be located in China’s existing disciplinary system? How can international Chinese language education improve its development path while carrying forward its tradition? How can international Chinese language education coordinate “teaching Chinese as a foreign language” (in China) and “overseas Chinese language education” during development?

On the Disciplinary Status

The first question concerns disciplinary status. According to the discipline list most recently released by Department of Degree Management & Postgraduate Education (Office of the State Council Academic Degrees Committee)^①, international Chinese language education belongs to a second-level discipline (050103) in parallel with Chinese language and literature (050101), and Chinese language (050102) and is subordinate to the first-level discipline of China’s languages and literature (0501) (including those of the majority i.e. the Han Chinese and ethnic minority groups). I discussed the disciplinary positioning of international Chinese language education in another essay (Cui, 2015) and will not elaborate on it here. What is to be discussed here is its disciplinary status. As an emerging discipline, international Chinese language education is also an interdisciplinary subject whose basic theoretical framework should be built and improved for the purposes of talent cultivation and discipline development. A discipline without basic theoretical support cannot expect to go far. At present international Chinese language education is based on two disciplines, Chinese language and literature and pedagogics and it lacks a clear disciplinary boundary and an independent theoretical

^① *Catalogue of Disciplines Granting Academic Degrees and Cultivating Talents (2011)* released by the Ministry of Education of the PRC.

system. Accordingly, there is a lot to be developed in its applied research. Only by laying a solid foundation for international Chinese language education can its disciplinary system be built and its disciplinary status be consolidated.

On the Relationship with Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

The second question concerns its relationship with teaching Chinese as a foreign language. International Chinese language education, born out of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, is inseparable from it. Some people consider teaching Chinese as a foreign language to be a move of “coming in” and international Chinese language education to be “going out”, which is in fact not so appropriate. In the new era, guided by the idea of building a community of shared future for mankind, whether it is about “coming in” or “going out”, there is only one ultimate goal of China’s language education – contributing to the building of a community of shared future for mankind with quality language education services. Given that, international Chinese language education and teaching Chinese as a foreign language belong to an inseparable organic whole. While committed to the school-running of Confucius Institutes overseas, China should also increase its investments in teaching Chinese as a foreign language domestically (which is now also an integral part of international Chinese language education) and give due support to its disciplinary development. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language in China has a sound and complete system, a solid foundation, normative teaching, outstanding academic achievements and a profound influence.

On the Relationship with Overseas Chinese Language Education

The third question concerns its relationship with overseas Chinese language education, which refers to the education of Chinese language and culture offered to the children of overseas Chinese. It has a longer history than teaching Chinese as a foreign language (in China) and international Chinese language education. Southeast Asian countries even developed their own independent systems of Chinese language education. Ever since the 1980s overseas Chinese language education has grown and prospered with the emerging “Chinese fever” and studies related to overseas Chinese language education has gone deeper. From a perspective of language teaching, overseas Chinese language education generally falls into the category of second language teaching and to a large extent overlaps with international Chinese language education. In terms of institutional settings, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council is responsible for supervising overseas Chinese language education, while the Office of Chinese Language Council International is responsible for guiding international Chinese language education. The two institutions, although stand off each other, each go their own way without much collaboration. In the context of building a community of shared future for mankind, overseas Chinese language education shoulders the same mission. International Chinese language education and overseas Chinese language education should coordinate development and share resources with each other. If possible, an integration of the two in top-level design would help avoid unnecessary waste and reduce unnecessary contradictions.

Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind and Chinese Wisdom

The idea of building a community of shared future for mankind has its realistic grounds which are based on the common values of mankind. “There are common values of mankind, as people of different countries and ethnicities all want to live a happy life, which is their common ideal” (Zhang, 2017). In an era of the global village, it is necessary for all people to give serious considerations to the status and role of Oriental wisdom in global governance. It is particularly noteworthy that the time-honored Chinese wisdom, through the baptism of modernization, has been revitalized. Such a baptism was enabled by the “spread of Western learning to the East”. The modernization of Chinese culture is essentially a process of discarding the dross and retaining the essence, and sifting the true from the false. By eliminating the dross, the Chinese people are thus able to carry forward the excellent parts of traditional Chinese culture. The exchange and mutual learning between civilizations can benefit human society. International Chinese language education, through language and culture teaching and cross-cultural communications, creates a channel for China to contribute Chinese wisdom to the entire world.

Chinese wisdom has formed a system different from that of Western wisdom. This system originated in ancient times and was already well developed in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475 BC-221 BC) when there was a contention of a hundred schools of thought. During the process of development, the system of Chinese wisdom has continued to absorb new ideas from foreign civilizations and this has continued to this day. Its very existence today is already a miracle. The core of Chinese wisdom contains the Chinese people’s world view and philosophy of life, which is a combination of the quintessential essences of the schools of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Legalism and Medical Skills. Such a world view and philosophy of life attaches great importance to the unity of Heaven and human and the observance of social ethics. It advocates harmony in diversity, win-win cooperation and common prosperity, which is quite different from the mindset of the zero-sum game in Christian cultures. The international landscape is constantly changing and becoming increasingly complicated. Against such a backdrop, Chinese wisdom can help turn hostility into friendship and therefore is a feasible solution to the challenge of world peace.

However, given that Chinese language is a complicated and abstruse art, not many non-Chinese can truly comprehend Chinese wisdom. There have been scholars, such as Lin Yutang, who have devoted vast amounts of time and energy to exporting Chinese culture to the West, but to little effect. Recent years have seen more translations of Chinese works into foreign languages. Due to differences in conceptual systems, however, the translation work is faced with many difficulties. Learning a foreign culture via translations is a “have to” choice. The best way to access Chinese wisdom is through the Chinese language. After all, the creators and speakers of Chinese have accumulated a

wealth of corresponding wisdom, which is recorded in our language. International Chinese language education not only imparts language but also disseminates Chinese wisdom.

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