

**RESEARCH ON LIU ERXIN WITH EDUCATION AND INDUSTRY  
UNDERTAKINGS IN MODERN GANSU**

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**Abstract**

As a famous scholar, educator and industrialist in modern Gansu, Liu Erxin was not fond of chasing fame, but devoted himself to education and industry careers all his life, and made significant contributions to the development of education and social welfare in Gansu. On the basis of collecting relevant historical materials earnestly, this article briefly introduces the general situation of cultural geography in Gansu, focuses on analyzing Liu Erxin's life experience and academic achievements, and objectively excavates Liu Erxin's major accomplishments in the aspect of education and industry, with a view to providing some scientific research achievements for the research of modern Gansu regional culture and some historical materials of celebrities.

**Keywords:** Liu Erxin; Gansu in modern times; Education; Industry

**Introduction**

Liu Erxin, an influential figure in the field of education and social activities in modern Gansu, was not receiving sufficient attention for various reasons. Until the 1980s, research discoveries on Liu Erxin increased gradually, some important articles including: "Liu Erxin and His Poems "(1980), "Liu Erxin's Life and Writings"(1997), "Research on Liu Erxin"(2015) , mainly analyzes Liu Erxin's works and academic ideologies from the perspective of literature. In addition, there are also some monographs, such as Liu Erxin—A Great Scholar in Gansu wrote by Dai Enlai in 2020, mainly summarize Liu Erxin's life experience and academic views objectively. However, at present, there is comparatively little research on the different aspects of Liu Erxin. Therefore, this article lay emphasis on Liu Erxin's contribution to education and industry in Gansu, and intends to promote the related research.

**General Situation of Cultural Geography in Gansu Province**

Gansu, one of the birthplaces of Chinese civilization, is situated in the northwest of China, at the intersection of the Inner Mongolia Plateau and Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. The territory of Gansu is vast, "with a total area of 454,000 square kilometers." [1] Gansu has bountiful historical and cultural resources, which has always been the necessary way for the Silk Road,

as well as a decisive channel for artistic and commercial communication between China and the West. Depending on trust statistics, the Silk Road is 1,700 kilometers long in Gansu.

As the most important section of Silk Road in the East, the change of political structure, the development of economic form and the prosperity of culture in Gansu is closely related to this land transportation artery. In a sense, the regional culture of Gansu is Silk Road culture. In the meantime, as a crucial area for communication among various ethnic groups in ancient China, Gansu is a strategically geographical place, where the central plains dynasties all built the Great Wall here. Therefore, it is also considered to be an “open-air museum” of the construction history of the Great Wall.

As a bridge of the convergence of Central plains culture and Western Regions culture, Gansu is also the frontier for communication between different areas. In the process of historical evolution, a unique culture posed by the Silk Road and the Great Wall culture is gradually formed. What is more, the formation of Gansu’s diverse cultures can be inextricably linked to the promotion of education, and there has been a wonderful atmosphere of valuing education here since ancient times. “The origin of ancient education in Gansu originated earlier, and at least in the late Western Han Dynasty, there were special administrative officers.” [2] In the Sui and Tang dynasties, indigenous culture was prosperous and education developed rapidly. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, “under the background of highly bureaucratization, Gansu achieves the popularization of academy education, from the provincial capital to the countryside.” [3]

At the end of Qing Dynasty, especially since the Opium War broke out in 1840, China was forced to open its door under the fierce attack of Western powers’ ships and cannon. As China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country gradually, Gansu province in the northwest also fell into a tragic situation of economic depression and harsh living conditions. At the same time, Chinese traditional culture for thousands of years was also facing unprecedented impact. Faced with domestic difficulties and foreign invasion, lots of advanced intellectuals in Gansu insisted on several explorations and attempted to save the country and revitalize Gansu, and Liu Erxin was one of the representatives. As an influential social celebrity in Gansu, Liu Erxin’s life was closely linked with this land.

### **Liu Erxin and Educational Cause of Gansu**

Liu Erxin (1865-1931), born in Gaolan County, Gansu Province, was a famous scholar, educator and industrialist in modern China. Grew up in a scholarly family, Liu Erxin had been studying in an old-style private school since childhood and was eager to learn different kinds of knowledge. Later, he entered Lanshan and Qiugu Academy, where he learned from eminent scholars Zhang Guochang and Liu Guangzu. This learning experience laid a solid foundation for the formation of his academic thoughts, and also had a positive impact on his education career afterwards. Liu Erxin was admitted to the successful candidate in the highest imperial

examinations in 1889, and was appointed as an editor by the Imperial Academy in 1894. After serving in Beijing for a period of time, he witnessed much heartache in society, then returned to Gansu to concentrate on academic education.

Liu Erxin was keen on learning and wrote quite a large quantity of books, mainly including: The First Collection of Guozhai, the Sequel of Guozhai, Other Collections of Guozhai, Diary of Guozhai, Encouraging Learning, etc. These works were listed in New General Annals of Gansu Province. Furthermore, he also wrote Reconstruction of Little West Lake, the Excerpts of Children's Language and other monographs, who could be called a true master of Gansu. After the defeat of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the foreign powers set off a frenzy to carve up China, and China entered a turning point of life and death, a large number of advanced Chinese people began to rethink the way to save the nation. In the face of a serious crisis, Liu Erxin strongly advocated that "the rise and fall of national fortunes depend on talents, and the quality of talents depends on education." [4] Consequently, the main purpose of his education cause was to cultivate talents with both ability and political integrity for the country.

Liu Erxin believed that "encouraging learning and achieving universal compulsory education" was a fundamental method to change the shortage of talents, lagging economy and outdated concepts of Gansu region and even the whole country. He emphasized that a favourable social atmosphere could be formed by education, and then national strength could be gathered increasingly, national spirit could be invigorated, and territorial security could be safeguarded. In the aspect of education, Liu Erxin had a unique concept. As far as teaching methods were concerned, he insisted that "as a teacher, patience and love were the soul of education rather than strictness." [5] That was, teachers should not be too strict with students in the process of teaching, but need to moderate seriousness and encouragement. Just like a breeze and drizzle could nourish all things in the world, only when teachers had love in their heart and be kind to students could get a desired result. On the contrary, if teachers criticized students too harshly, they would be bored with learning and had other adverse consequences.

Liu Erxin considered that "reading must not pursue short-term interests, and when knowledge was accumulated to a certain extent, students would discover the pleasure of reading." [6] He had absolute faith in a theory—a person's learning quality depended to a large extent on whether they studied diligently and persistently. Only by persistence could reading become a habit, and gave people a chance to bring together all the individual parts of knowledge, so as to truly experience the joy of reading and the power of knowledge in the entire process. He also noted that although there were differences in people's gift, long-term persistence in the study could shorten the gap effectively and made up for the deficiencies.

Moreover, Liu Erxin advocated that schools need to set up practical courses. He believed that contents of education should come from reality, and students were supposed to be encouraged to contact things, observed the world with their own eyes and obtained truly useful knowledge. During his tenure as the provost of Gansu Higher School, Liu Erxin was distressed by isolation

and backwardness of Gansu, so he added new practical subjects including foreign language, military science, legal system and gymnastics based on actual needs, and yearned for liberating students' mind by practicing. His view not only reflected a concept of keeping pace with time, but also found a feasible way to train new talents.

Liu Erxin lived in an era of great changes and turning points, at that time, China was facing a heavy national crisis, and domestic contradictions were also very acute. Confronting the grim situation of internal and external troubles, he actively insisted that education could save the country, and dedicated his life to the development of Gansu's culture and education.

He held the post of principal of Wuquan Academy twice, and then served as the provost of Gansu Higher School for five years. During this period, Liu Erxin vigorously carried out reforms and made it clear that the purpose of running higher schools was to train talented people with "lofty aspirations, sufficient knowledge, and noble character" [7], and some courses such as physics and chemistry had been offered to adapt to new trend of the times. Meanwhile, he spared no effort to support backward students, and funded Gansu students to go to other provinces for further studies.

Liu Erxin was also concerned about primary education. He held that primary education was the foundation of the entire educational cause and the key to improving national quality. In the year of 1906, he raised funds and set up the first primary school in Lanzhou—Xingwenshe Primary School of Gaolan county. This school had abundant experienced teachers, and made a good start for later primary schooling. After the Republic of China, it expanded to four primary schools. He had been teaching for more than 30 years, and his students finally became remarkable talents in various industries all over Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and other neighboring areas. For example, Zhao Yuanzhen and Shuizi were famous scholars and educators, Wang Xuan and Zhang Wei were influential politicians.

### **Liu Erxin and His Industrial Contribution**

Besides firmly believed that education could save China, Liu Erxin convinced that boosted industry was also an important way to save the nation, so he focused on developing the cause of industry as well as education. As a native of Gansu, Liu Erxin conducted fundamental investigations on the industrial structure of different sectors in Gansu, and "wrote authoritative Measures for Overall Planning of Gansu Industry." [8] He identified the scope and direction of industry, and put forward detailed solutions. At the same time, he asked famous industrialist Zhang Jian for advice on relevant matters, and wrote to the Gansu government to request funding to assist local industries.

For more than twenty years from 1906 to 1928, Liu Erxin took the pursuit of the welfare of Gansu people as his top priority, established modern machine industry and set up over thirteen social welfare organizations at last. In 1915, after sent specially-assigned persons to Dasheng Cotton Mills in Nantong learned advanced technology, Liu Erxin opened spinning mills,

match factories and other workshop-type factories in Lanzhou. Later, he set up Longyou Industrial Association to invest in many companies and revitalize the local economy.

In the late Qing Dynasty, because of the social unrest and chaos, it was extremely difficult to purchase and transport books in Gansu, and the majority of students' vision were limited seriously. In view of this situation, Liu Erxin founded Longyou Leshan Publishing House in 1911. This publishing house published and distributed various kinds of books, including the essence of ancient generations and the works of contemporary masters. In the year of 1922, Liu Erxin set up a non-profit organization—Wuquan Library, in which collected a large number of high quality Chinese and foreign books. These public welfare organizations had a historic role in inheriting Gansu local culture and boosting the development of education.

On December 16th, 1920, a massive earthquake measuring 8.5 on the Richter scale occurred in Haiyuan, Gansu province, affecting an area of more than 1.5 million square kilometers, killing and injuring over 200,000 people. Supported by all sectors of society, Liu Erxin presided over earthquake disaster relief affairs in person. Gansu Earthquake Relief Office, which he established totally received a donation of about 300,000 tael, which were used primarily for infrastructure construction such as repairing bridges, dredging rivers and rebuilding cities. The scope of disaster relief covered Gansu and surrounding disaster-stricken areas.

Shortly after Haiyuan earthquake relief ended, Liu Erxin spent the remaining funds on a long-term future-oriented disaster prevention project, that was Fengli civil storehouse. The management system of the civil storehouse was adequate. Grain was bought at a reasonable price in the harvest years to ensure farmers' income, and sold at a low price in the famine years to prevent illegal merchants from driving up prices and disrupting the market.

There was a severe drought in Gansu in 1929, the tragic scene so shocking that plenty of people became destitute and homeless in Lanzhou. Gansu officials and Liu Erxin's students were the primary force in disaster relief. The Fengli civil storehouse immediately set the stage for releasing daily necessities. Liu Erxin also went to disaster areas conduct to rescue operations, and simultaneously cooperated with the Police Department to set up a number of porridge factories to provide clean water and porridge, which played a positive role in disaster relief.

Lanzhou's famous landmark, Five Spring Mountain, was built in the Yuan Dynasty, and continuously repaired in the Ming Dynasty. However, most of the buildings on the mountain had been destroyed in the beginning of 21st century. Liu Erxin mourned for the tragic destruction of scenic spots and historical sites, and he started a fund-raising campaign for people from all walks of life to rebuild Five Spring Mountain. Eventually, he raised more than 40,000 tael of silver.

From the beginning of the summer in 1919, Liu Erxin carried on planning and designing around the clock, and it took five and a half years to complete the whole project in 1924. After

several times of expansion, not only original temples had been renovated, but more than ten buildings were added to “make the layout of Five Spring Mountain more and more reasonable, beautiful and distinctive.”[9] At the same time, different kinds of flowers and trees were planted, Five Spring Mountain had gradually become a picturesque tourist attraction.

On account of accumulated rich experience in gardening when Liu Erxin built Five Spring Mountain, Lu Hongtao, provincial military governor of Gansu, specially hired him to guide the reconstruction of Little West Lake in Lanzhou in 1924. Liu Erxin did his best and also wrote more than twenty antithetical couplets for these famous scenic spots, which greatly enhanced the cultural heritage of Little West Lake Park. The construction of various public welfare buildings “permeates Liu Erxin’s attention to regional urban construction, and promotes the ecological and cultural construction as well as urban development of Lanzhou.”[10]

After Liu Erxin passed away in 1931, people came from far and near held various activities to commemorate his distinguished contribution to the construction of Gansu. In 1935, Lanzhou people admired his noble deeds and cast a bronze statue for him in Five Spring Mountain. In 1939, Zhao Yuanzhen, a student of Liu Erxin, took the lead in setting up a middle school at the former site of Lanzhou Confucian Temple to commemorate this selfless pioneer.

## Conclusion

Since in the late Qing Dynasty, modern China had been at the crossroads of changes, Liu Erxin followed the new trend of the times. On the one hand, adhering to the ideal of Chinese traditional intellectuals to save the country and the people, he persisted in writing books and kept his mind on the cause of education with great enthusiasm, and actively promoted the transformation and development of modern education in Lanzhou. On the other hand, Liu Erxin keenly grasped the pulse of times, took the initiative to learn advanced Western knowledge, spared no effort to set up industry, combined industry with education, promoted the development of industry by supporting education, also relied on industry to provide funds for education, and made an indelible contribution to the development of Gansu in modern times.

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