

RESEARCH ON ACADEMIES OF XINZHOU IN SHANXI PROVINCE DURING MING AND QING DYNASTIES, 1368-1840

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Abstract:

The academy is a unique cultural institution in ancient Chinese society, which integrates teaching and research, and has made a marked effect on the inheritance of civilization in the long history of Chinese education. Among them, academies in the Xinzhou area of Shanxi province, develop in the Ming Dynasty and prosper in the Qing Dynasty, advancing the evolution of education in Shanxi and even the entire country. This article takes Xinzhou regional academies from 1368 to 1840 as the research object, introduces the geography and humanities of this region in detail, excavates educational characteristics of regional academies, and objectively expounds their historical functions.

Key words: Period of Ming and Qing Dynasties; Xinzhou Academies; Educational Features; Cultural Functions

Introduction

As an important educational organization in Chinese history, academies took education as the medium to expand people's knowledge and skills, influenced people's thoughts and conduct, and played a key role in the dissemination of ideology. Xinzhou area of Shanxi province had a history of nearly 600 years of academies, which had left a strong mark on the history of Chinese academies. However, at present, current academic research on Xinzhou provincial academies is relatively weak, and there are some problems such as scattered research and weak pertinence. Therefore, based on relevant historical materials, this article presents historical track and development vein of local academies minutely, hoping to enhance the influence of Shanxi Xinzhou academies through joint efforts gradually.

Geographical and Cultural Features of Xinzhou in Shanxi

Shanxi is located in the middle reaches of the Yellow River valley, which is one of the most important birthplace of Chinese civilization. In the centuries-old historical process, Shanxi "not only has an important political position and prosperous economy, but also creates Jin culture with rich connotation and distinct personality." [1] Xinzhou, an influential city, is part

of *Jin culture circle*. It is positioned in the north-central part of Shanxi, with Taihang Mountain in the east and Yellow River in the west. It has a unique geographical advantage and is known as “the key of northern Shanxi”. The current administrative area of Xinzhou includes

Xinfu district, Yuanping city, Dingxiang county, Wutai county, Dai county, Fanshi county, Jingle county, Ningwu county, Shenchi county, Wuzhai county, Kelan county, Hequ county, Baode county and Pianguan county. With a total area of more than 25,500 square kilometers, it is the largest city in Shanxi province and has a strategic position.

Xinzhou has a long history and diverse cultural heritage. “It is not only the blending belt of Yangshao culture in the central plains and Hongshan culture in the north, but also a junction of farming civilization and nomadic civilization, and a two-way channel of communication between the northern and central plains culture.”[2] As early as the Neolithic Age, human beings hunted for farming here. Since the county was established in 410 A.D., Xinzhou had been called Xiurong for a long time. Looking into thick history books, Xinzhou had a profound heritage and outstanding figures had emerged all the time. Yang Ye, a famous general in the Northern Song Dynasty; Yuan Haowen, a noble historian in the Jin Dynasty; Fu Shan, an outstanding ideologist in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties; and Xu Jiyu, who was known as “the great Chinese pioneer in modern times who opened his eyes to the world”. “Splendid Xiurong” represented an incisive summary of Xinzhou’s humanistic history.

The magnificent cultural heritage of Xinzhou comes from an excellent education system, and local dense educational atmosphere is inseparable from the vigorous development of academies. During the long changes of the times, the academy has gradually become a symbol of Xinzhou’s humanistic spirit. Academies have a long and distinguished history, they originated in the Tang Dynasty, flourished in Song and Yuan dynasties, popularized in Ming and Qing, and completed modernization transformation from academies to modern schools at the end of Qing. In a word, “the academy is a cultural and educational organization in which Chinese scholars enjoy new printing technology, carries out various activities including reading, teaching, lecturing, writing, collecting and engraving books, as well as cultural accumulation, research, creation and dissemination.” [3] After over a thousand years of development, the academy had become an indispensable part of cultural life of scholars and even the history of Chinese education.

The development of Xinzhou academies could be roughly divided into three periods: the growth period of the Ming Dynasty, the prosperous period of the Qing Dynasty, and the transition period of modern times. From 1368 to 1840, more than thirty academies were built in the Xinzhou. The main academies listed as follows: Ningwu established Ningwen Academy in 1515; Jingle established Censhan Academy in 1587; Pianguan established Danlin Academy in 1743; Dingxiang established Jinchang Academy in 1751; Xinzhou established Xiurong Academy in 1775; Baode established Lianfeng Academy in 1837, etc.

It could be observed in the above data that the evolution of Xinzhou academies had two

characteristics. For one thing, the reign of Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty was the period when most of the academies were established. For another, academies of Xinzhou could be separated into different levels, that was the government, state, county and town, such as Heming Academy in Ningwu, Xiurong Academy in Xinzhou. It was worth mentioning that especially in the Qing Dynasty, the number of town academies in Xinzhou increased sharply, which made a substantial contribution to popularizing national enlightenment education and primary education of local people.

The Educational Characteristics of Xinzhou Academies

“Social stability and economic development depend on talents, and cultivation of talents depends on education. Therefore, setting up academies can directly serve the country and provide the impetus for social progress by nurturing many talents.”[4] During the period of Ming and Qing, Xinzhou academies mainly aimed at fostering officials and talents in other social fields who were capable of serving people with both morality and ability. Xinzhou Academies had a wide range of educational objects, in terms of age, from teenagers to adults, educational objects of academies included people of all ages. From the perspective of the types, students of academies “mainly fell into two categories: shengyuan and tongsheng.”[5]

Xinzhou academies covered three major parts: lecturing, collecting books, and engraving books, among which lecturing was the most important and mainly embodied educational functions of the academy. After passing examinations and being appointed, teachers were permitted to teach courses. Lectures could be classified into two aspects: general teaching of basic knowledge and preaching lectures involving academic communication. Educating contents of Xinzhou academies in the Ming Dynasty were rich and varied, there were three main categories. The majority of academies set up Confucian classics, including *Classic of Changes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Poetry*, *Record of Rituals* and *the Spring and Autumn Annals* as their main educational contents, such as Wenjiang Academy in the reign of Emperor Hongzhi and Wanli. These precious classics were critical to the establishment of social ethics and correct orientation of folk customs.

“History education is founded on general guide books and programmatic books.”[6] In addition to Confucian classics, academies in the Ming Dynasty also required students to learn those general guide and programmatic history books related to political evolution of previous dynasties, such as laws, regulations and geographical customs in order to help students have a full understanding of Chinese history. Moreover, some academies taught some practical knowledge and skills. For example, Jianlong Academy in Baode during the reign of Emperor Wanli offered course about abundant knowledge about crop cultivation.

At the same time, in the Ming Dynasty, the lecture system prevailed in Xinzhou academies, where scholars from different schools came together to speak and debate. Regional academies also opened to the audience. The lecture system not only improved academies' school-running

level and expanded the scope of education, but also contributed to regional academic activities. Fu Shan, a well-known ideologist, was invited to give lectures at Guanxi Academy, and every class of him was crowded with people.

In the Qing Dynasty, “the atmosphere of giving lectures in academies disappeared gradually, and imperial examinations became the mainstream.”[7] The Qing court plainly stipulated that examination of the academies should be dominated by Stereotyped Writing, so most academies in this period, such as Doushan Academy in Dai county and Jinhua Academy in Shenchu county, took Stereotyped Writing as primary teaching contents. For the purpose of serving the imperial examination, “In 1744, Emperor Qianlong issues a new regulation to stipulate the education of academies based on the students’ qualifications. Exceptional students should be allowed to give priority to studying Confucian classics and authorized history, then study the dual rhythm, while those students with common qualifications have to study the eight-part essay firstly.”[8]

Ever since the late Qing Dynasty, with the continuous spread of western natural science and humanities to China, many academies in Xinzhou broke the cage of Stereotyped Writing and introduced a lot of advanced scientific and technological knowledge of the West, such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, and weapon manufacturing, etc. It also offered courses to detail territories, races, populations, political systems, religions of different continents in the world, not only broadened Chinese horizon, but also promoted the communication between Chinese and Western cultures greatly. In short, the teaching contents of academies were extensive and profound, including both the knowledge system of ancient Chinese society and Western science. More importantly, flexible, diverse forms of academies and harmonious relationship between teachers and students were dominating reasons for its long existence.

Apart from teaching contents, educational concept was the main thread throughout the whole educational process. The primary educational concept of Xinzhou academies in Ming and Qing period was to respect Confucianism and Classics. “After the establishment of Ming Dynasty, respecting Confucianism Classics and advocating Neo-Confucianism are regarded as basic national policies.”[9] The Qing government continued to honour Neo-Confucianism as an essential means to coordinate interpersonal relationships and maintain social order. In the late Qing Dynasty, as the transformation of ruling policy, the Qing court adopted a cultural and educational policy that advocated both Neo-Confucianism and Sinology to consolidate the entire society.

On the other hand, academies in Xinzhou also vigorously promoted diligent and pragmatic teaching philosophy. Local officials and scholars in charge of education believed that diligent study and everyday practice could help students mastered different kinds of skills. Hence, “diligence” and “practicality” were the principles of both teaching and learning. Celebrities such as Du Changsheng and Wang Xilun in Xinzhou had been industrious in studies all their lives and led the way for students.

Besides, thinking carefully, being good at asking questions, and teaching students in accordance with their aptitude were also important concepts persevered by many academies. And educators of Chongshi Academy in Wutai and Qinglian Academy in Wuzhai called for students should be adept at thinking and asking questions to set up good habits of innovation consciousness. Inspired by this teaching method, students with unique gift could explore various knowledge spontaneously in a targeted manner. After long-term practice, they all grew into pioneers in diverse fields. The typical representative of Xinzhou area, Xiurong Academy, from the fortieth year of Qianlong to the twenty-eighth year of Guangxu, successively trained more than 400 talents for the country.

The Cultural Functions of Xinzhou Academies

The function of academic communication. The academy was not merely a place for giving lectures, but also an institution for knowledge communication and inheritance. It was a prominent feature of teaching which combined scholarly communication with conventional education closely, and the essence of ancient academies system in China too. Rich in cultural and educational resources, the academy was an excellent place for academic research. Numerous brilliant intellectuals made maximum use of educational resources and took the relatively open academy as an important platform for spreading valuable theories. Relying on the way of lecturing, they contacted with each other, which made academic ideas widely spread, as well as promoted the prosperity of different sorts of thinking.

During Ming and Qing dynasties, many academies in Xinzhou were not the bases for scholastic research and innovation, but also the stage for academic contention and communication. Among them, Guoyang Academy in Yuanping and Heyin Academy in Hequ were representatives. As for leading functions of Xinzhou academies in Ming and Qing, it could be known from the gathering masters and the large number of scholars.

The function of talents training. Since ancient academies were educational institutions, they were responsible for training students. By employing erudite scholars, the academy organically integrated students' self-study with teachers' guide, "forming a complete set of the teaching system, including free lectures and debates, and a combination of teaching and learning." [10]

In the teaching process, teachers actively mobilized students' learning enthusiasm, attached great importance to the development of students' comprehensive ability, fully improved teaching quality and reputation of academies, and created an enormous learning atmosphere, thus fostering plentiful talents for Shanxi. These talented persons had [both moral integrity and professional competence](#), after stepping into society, they still focused on spreading useful knowledge to society, and had a far-reaching influence on history. For example, Xue Fengyi, president of Xiurong Academy, devoted himself to the field of educational research more than 20 years, *his students spread* all over China.

The function of social education. As a regional educational institution, academies were the major implementer of social enlightenment, which played an extraordinary role in revitalizing local culture. In ancient China, academies with flexible organizational forms and rich teaching methods were also the principal implementer of conventional education except government-run rural schools. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the academy, as the foremost educational institution in Xinzhou, had a significant part in exploiting people's intelligence, stabilizing social order and directing the improvement of communal morality.

Additionally, the academy promoted cultural communication between different regions. Xinzhou academies had characteristics of openness, gathering scholars from different places. They brought valuable thoughts here with diverse areas, adding new connotation to local culture, so that Xinzhou regional culture could continue to develop in the process of integration.

Conclusion

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, academies in Xinzhou area of Shanxi province developed rapidly with a large scale, which made a decisive impact in the regional education as well as cultivation of folk customs and ethical concepts. As an influential educational organization, the academy is one of the outstanding representatives of Chinese culture, and has made an immense contribution to promoting Chinese culture to the world. With the advent of the new era, the academy, the main institution of Chinese traditional education, is constantly changing and stepping into the track of modernization comes with the development of social productive forces.

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