

From Mr. Zhu to Ni Huanzhi: A Study of the Image of Intellectuals in the Educational Transformation of Modern China

Yan Xing*

College of Tourism, Huaqiao University, Tangshan, Hebei, 063000, China

Abstract. In the twentieth century, China underwent huge social transformations, probably with equally great changes in education. Under the influence of the influx of Western learning in this period, traditional education models were challenged, and new schools, together with new educational concepts, started to come into being. Inside this process, the roles and images of intellectuals changed a lot as keen observers and active participants in social change. The paper compares two representative figures, Mr. Zhu from *White Deer Plain* and Ni Huanzhi from *Ni Huanzhi*, in efforts to comprehend the intellectuals in their various roles within the context of contemporary Chinese educational reforms. Mr. Zhu was a protector and promoter of traditional culture and thoughts, while Ni Huanzhi was an advocate for new cultures and ideas. Their divergent paths, and different roles in society, have been carved out by different life experiences. This paper also explores differences in positions in educational reforms, contributions toward educational progress, and strategies in the face of social changes. The significance of these preceding analyses is to assess their historical value with a view to drawing reflective lessons and insights that would enlighten contemporary educators.

1 Introduction

This innovation in education is one of the key drivers of social progress. Intellectuals, as participants and promoters of this transformation, have seen their images change and attract significant attention. Mr. Zhu from *White Deer Plain*, authored by Chen Zhongshi and published by People's Literature Publishing House in 1993, and Ni Huanzhi from *Ni Huanzhi*, serialized in Education Magazine in 1928 by Ye Shengtao, are quintessential representations of intellectuals engaged in the education sector. There is no shortage of research on the role changes of intellectuals during the educational reforms in modern China, and the scholarly focus on Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi is also quite diverse [1, 2]. Some scholars, viewing Mr. Zhu from the perspective of Confucian culture, consider him as a figure "akin to Confucius" [3]. Regarding Ni Huanzhi, other researchers have examined his ideological shifts and life path during historical upheavals, viewing him as a "revolutionary petty-bourgeois intellectual" [4]. However, comparative studies on Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi are rare.

* Corresponding author: levij@usf.edu

As images of intellectuals in contemporary Chinese literature, both Zhu and Ni Huanzhi are characteristic of their times and have deep historical connotations. Zhu is a traditional intellectual, deeply immersed in traditional culture and with a deep Confucian heritage. Ni Huanzhi is a young intellectual who actively embraces modernisation and explores new ideas and methods. In the face of major social change, their ideas and practices not only share similarities but also contain profound differences. These differences have been precisely shaped by their living environment, historical background, life experiences and education received. Through a comparative study of Zhu and Ni Huanzhi, this article attempts to explore the differences in the choices of intellectuals involved in the education industry in the face of social change and analyse the reasons for these differences, thus providing historical reference and inspiration for contemporary education reform.

2 Analysis of intellectual image of Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi

2.1 Analysis of the images of Mr. Zhu

In the whole novel *White Deer Plain*, Mr. Zhu acts as a representative defender of traditional culture, who has profound cultural inheritance and belief [5]. Mr. Zhu lived through the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, which was the turning point of Chinese society shifting from traditional feudalism to modernism. During that period, the feudal imperial system was gradually decaying; Western culture and ideas started to infiltrate, and old and new thoughts clashed with great intensity. In addition, frequent natural disasters have characterized sharp social conflicts and widespread hardship during that time.

In the novel, Mr. Zhu grew up and lived in the relatively closed rural society of Bailuyuan, which was relatively traditional. This environment deeply immerses him in and influences him with Confucian culture. Despite challenges, Confucianism still maintained a strong influence in the rural society of that time. Moreover, most of Mr. Zhu's schooling was through family heritage and private tutoring, which more deeply identified him and internalized Confucian ideals within him. Thus, due to a combination of era-specific, social, and personal factors, Mr. Zhu steadfastly adhered to Confucian moral values in a turbulent societal environment, striving to cultivate the moral qualities of the younger generation through the establishment of traditional academies and maintaining the stability and harmony of rural society.

Mr. Zhu's adherence to traditional culture is evident in many aspects. Firstly, he is dedicated to the transmission of Confucian classics. He established Bailu Academy and personally taught Confucian classics to the village children. He firmly believed that traditional education could cultivate the children's moral qualities and shape their character. Mr. Zhu's commitment to traditional culture is not only reflected in his transmission of the classics but also in his conduct and moral standards. In Bailuyuan, a place rife with power struggles and conflicts, Mr. Zhu consistently maintained his independence and principles. He resisted the temptations of power, refrained from engaging in intrigue, and upheld his moral integrity.

There are specific instances illustrating this. For example, in the novel, Mr. Zhu leads a very simple life. He wears coarse clothing, eats simple food, and his clothes are hand-sewn by his wife, reflecting his adherence to the Confucian ideal of frugality. Mr. Zhu rarely involved himself in political disputes. Despite numerous government invitations for him to assume official positions, he politely declined, preferring a life of simplicity and inner peace over a political career, embodying a certain Daoist transcendence from worldly affairs.

In the rural society of Bailuyuan, Mr. Zhu, with his noble character and profound knowledge, became a spiritual leader for the people. In the novel, he often played the role of

a mediator in disputes among fellow villagers and managed to resolve them with wisdom and fairness, thus gaining villagers' trust and respect. During troubled times, Mr. Zhu drafted the "Village Covenant," which was mostly based on Confucian rites and became a standard behavior and a basic way for governance at Bailuyuan to ensure behavioral regularity of villager members and social harmony. Mr. Zhu, whenever there was a disaster, participated in all rescue operations to help the affected people in real life, spiritual, and mental aspects. He called for unity in support and collective resistance to the adversity, inspiring the fighting spirit of the village and boosting their confidence. By this moral practice, he set an example before the villagers.

Mr. Zhu had an idealistic view of rural society, believing that social harmony and stability were achievable through education and morals. However, realizing these ideals under the harsh social realities proved pretty difficult [6].

2.2 Analysis of the images of Ni Huanzhi

In *Ni Huanzhi*, he is an idealistic and passionate young intellectual resolved to dedicate himself to social reform through education. Ni Huanzhi lived during the early to mid-Republican era, a time of unprecedented social change and revolutionary fervor. It was this era of political upheaval in China: the collapse of the feudal imperial system, the abortive attempt at democratic republicanism, the warlord conflicts, and the cooperation and split between Nationalists and Communists. Economically, national capitalism struggled to develop, and the rural economy sank into crisis. Culturally, there were New Culture and May Fourth movements representative of a wide diversity of ideologies and intellectual liberation and cultural innovation movements. Such a complex and dynamic age has thus shaped Ni Huanzhi in his thoughts and life path. Exposed to the darker side of society and firsthand suffering of the people, he was moved to rummage deeper into the root causes of social problems and potential solutions.

By living in more open and turbulent urban or peri-urban areas, Ni Huanzhi was subject to the severest social upheavals and influxes of new ideas that provided opportunities for the reception of diversified thoughts and cultures. This kind of open atmosphere would encourage incessant pursuit after knowledge, broaden horizons, and deepen perception of the critical role of education in transforming the nation's destiny.

Since he was young, Ni Huanzhi had idealized saving the nation and its people. After graduation, he therefore dedicated himself to rural education and tried to reform it by implementing changes in education. While working at a township higher elementary school, he cooperated with the principal, Jiang Bingru, on educational experiments that combined moral education and student labor. These efforts were, however, obstructed by forces of feudalism and conservative ideas, hence their failure to complete their educational reform. In any case, Ni Huanzhi's philosophy of education no doubt stands far ahead of its times, demonstrating the bravery and wisdom of a pioneer in education reform.

However, there was an intrinsic conflict between Ni Huanzhi's ideals and social reality. He used to think that education would purify the corruption and darkness in society. However, with the alternation of history and some major events, his way of thinking began to change drastically. For example, the Xinhai Revolution, May Fourth Movement, and May Thirtieth Movement reshaped society and deeply impacted Ni Huanzhi's view of life and values as well [7]. From the predicaments of rural schools to personal life setbacks and unpredictable socio-political upheavals, he went through intense experiences about the huge gap between ideals and reality, gradually realizing the limitation of personal ideals.

Under the influence of revolutionaries like Wang Leshan, Ni Huanzhi began to focus on and participate in mass movements, shifting from liberalism to collectivism, eventually dedicating himself to revolutionary struggle [8]. However, even after he had turned to social

revolution, he could not extract himself from the pernicious effects caused by the tremendous gap between ideal and reality. He finally sank into deep pessimism and despair and died of frustration due to illness.

3 Comparison of intellectual roles in educational change

3.1 Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi's roles in educational reform

Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi represent two kinds of intellectuals in the wave of educational reform, while sitting at a loose squirrel. Mr. Zhu represents people who believe in old traditional culture and educational models and safeguard them. Never does he doubt the significance of old education ideas and methods, but all his life he has been devoting himself to leading rural students to inherit traditional knowledge. Oppositely, he realizes that changes in society are unretrievable. Amid the backdrop of a changing era, Mr. Zhu experiences internal confusion and contradiction. On one hand, he strives to maintain the core values of traditional culture; on the other hand, he attempts to understand and accept new ideas and concepts, trying to integrate them into his teaching, thereby playing a role in the enlightenment of new thoughts. Ni Huanzhi, on the other hand, is a typical practitioner and reformer of new education. He actively embraces new educational concepts and methods, committed to promoting the modernization and innovation of education. He not only experiments with various innovative techniques in educational practice but also advocates for and pushes forward educational reform with the hope of changing the social status quo through education. He represents all the intellectuals who dare to oppose tradition and seek new ways [9]. His ideological turn-around and struggle are a small epitome of petty-bourgeois intellectuals in their confusing, awakening, and fighting process during troubled times; this Forms a miniature portrait of the modern Chinese intellectuals searching for the way to save the country.

3.2 The role of intellectuals in promoting educational progress

Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi have different focuses in promoting educational progress. Rural education development is promoted by Mr. Zhu through moral education; as such, he specifically stresses the importance of moral cultivation as a foundation for improving students' all-round qualities. Ni Huanzhi stresses urban educational reform with practical innovation. He boldly tries out new patterns and methods of education, including project-based learning and situational teaching, training students for creativity and critical thinking. Ni Huanzhi's reform practice not only enhanced the students' interest and effectiveness in learning but also supplied new ideas for urban educational reform.

3.3 Responses to the challenges of social change

Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi differed on the ways to deal with social changes. Mr. Zhu used traditional wisdom, mixed with some new ideas, to react to massive social changes in the new era. Much about the deep heritage and value of traditional culture had a deep understanding from him, therefore; to continue traditional education, he also tried to blend the introduction of the need for new educational elements for the requirement of social change. This strategy is educationally stable while it imparts new contemporary connotations for education.

While Ni Huanzhi is more oriented to seek new educational ways out of conflict. Feeling the deficiency of traditional education in some regards, he seeks new concepts and techniques

for education and tries them out in practice. Confronted with changing social conditions, he faces up to the challenge and innovations boldly and readjusts and improves the model of education to adapt to the new situation in society.

4 The social significance of the image of intellectuals

4.1 The historical value of the images of Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi

Whereas Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi are not merely fictional protagonists, they are real witnesses to the history of education reform in modern China. Their figures, experiences, choices, to some degree, weigh on different stages and aspects of educational change in modern China; it also symbolizes the intellectual dilemma scholars faced when everything is changing around them.

The image of Mr. Zhu reflects the backwardness and rigidity of feudal education in the Late Qing Dynasty [10]. In dramatic contrast to the educational environment he lived in, Mr. Zhu's activities were brimmed with traditional Confucian ideology, focusing on the method of classical transmission and moral education, with indifference toward individual differences and new requirements occasioned by social changes in education. Mr. Zhu holds fast to tradition, vividly showing the sense of responsibility and mission traditional educators have, and it also reveals their helplessness and confusion in the impact of waves from an era of change.

In contrast, Ni Huanzhi became a leader in the new wave of educational reform. His changing image and life experiences epitomize the process of historical development whereby Chinese education gradually emancipates its feudal shackles and winds toward modernization and scientific advancement after the May Fourth Movement. Ni Huanzhi's search for and implementation of modern ideas of education represent the spirit of intellectuals in this new era: brave to innovate and explore. At the same time, his inner conflicts and struggles expose all the dilemmas and challenges that many intellectuals face in the rococo dance of educational modernization [11].

4.2 The implications of intellectual images for contemporary education

Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi provide not only profound values in research on education history for modern times but also intellectual resources and practical lessons. Such experiences are manifested primarily in two aspects: first, the requirement to balance ideals of education with social reality; second, the integration and innovative use of traditional and modern educational resources.

Mr. Zhu represents the tradition, while Ni Huanzhi actively reforms; these two educational personnel represent two major forces: one that preserves the essence and core values of education, and another that adapts to and leads social development. Society needs the unity of education upholding its nature of essential and core values, which includes the comprehensive development and free growth of personality. In contrast, education should respond to such social change and developmental needs of the times through readjustments and optimizations in goals and pathways. In a word, today's educators should realize how to strike an equilibrium between ideals and realities—that is, maintaining educational independence while integrating one's own power actively into the wave of social development for bottomless contributions to cultivate talents for a new era.

These two models, the traditional one represented by Mr. Zhu and the modern educative model pursued by Ni Huanzhi, are of irreplaceable value in contemporary education. Deep traditional and educational resources are found at the core of education in the fundamental

cultural legacy of the traditional pattern; the scientific, systematic, and creative characteristics of the modern pattern inject new vigor into education. Thus, the challenge to modern education lies in organically combining these two, creating complementary advantages, and collaborative innovation. We could inherit and carry forward the fine traditions of Chinese culture even better through innovative integration of traditional and modern educational resources and create a broader platform and space for the cultivation of the students' innovative spirit and practical abilities.

5 Conclusion

Comparatively analyzing Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi, this research exposes their uniqueness and commonality, highly exploratory roles in educational reforms, their responses to challenges, and broader social implications for modern Chinese education from these two intellectual figures. Mr. Zhu is the paragon of a guardian for traditional culture, revering classic works and believing in moral education that commemorates the responsibility bestowed upon traditional intellectuals regarding the inheritance and promotion of cultures. In contrast, Ni Huanzhi, with the courage to reform as an advocate of new ideas, vigorously sought after educational innovation. This shows that contemporary intellectuals have been rather perceptive in feeling out social changes and proactive in eliciting a response. Having different ideals of education and practical ways of promotion, both took education as their mission to enlighten people by teaching a new generation. Such shared passion in education and responsibility for intellectuals are common characteristics.

Within the context of the new education reforms, it is also relevant to consider intellectuals and their role. They were not only the disseminators of new ideas, introducing advanced educational concepts to China through writing, teaching, and public lectures to broaden the horizons of the common people, but active promoters for education reform. Willing to experiment and keeping options open to explore educational paths that would be suitable for the national conditions of China. Mr. Zhu and Ni Huanzhi were representatives of this group. Their respective efforts provided indispensable contributions toward the modernization of Chinese education and collectively shaped a new framework for modern education.

This study, therefore, bears significance for the modern educator: to be unwaveringly committed to education, to inherit and carry forward great traditional culture, and to be open-minded and bold to innovate. Only by so doing could the educational cause forge ahead and fulfill the goals of modernization in education, no matter how history changes.

References

1. Y. X. Ye. A Perspective on Tragedy: The Image of Teachers in Chinese Modern and Contemporary Educational Novels. Northeast Normal University, 02 (2014).
2. F. Li. The Evolution of Teacher Images in Chinese Modern and Contemporary Literature. JJPCEMC, (01): 176-179 (2016).
3. L. Wang, and X. T. Zhai. An Analysis of Mr. Zhu's Image as a Confucian Scholar in *White Deer Plain*. JGWC, (11): 4-6 (2024).
4. Y. H. Chang. On the Transformation of Intellectual Images in Ye Shaojun's Works: Ni Huanzhi. AHL (Second Half of the Month), (06): 168(2008).
5. Y. Q. Ren. On Chen Zhongshi's Early and Middle-Period Novels. Qingdao University, (02)2020.

6. Z. H. Wang. The Decline of Confucian Culture Reflected in Mr. Zhu's Image in *White Deer Plain*. CCC, **(14)**: 125-126 (2021).
7. H. T. Yuan, and G. D. Wang. Educational Novels and the Modern Transformation of the Intellectual Class: Focusing on *Ni Huanzhi*. SDSS, **(12)**: 86-94(2022).
8. R. Z. Li. The Epochal and Ideological Significance of Ye Shengtao's Educational Novels. MC, **(03)**: 48-50 (2006).
9. X. F. He. Ye Shengtao's Educational Complex and Ni Huanzhi's Spiritual Changes. J XHNU (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), **(02)**: 64-68 (2005).
10. X. Y. Kong. Further Discussion on Mr. Zhu in *White Deer Plain*. CCF, **(05)**: 67-71 (2016).
11. W. C. Wang. The Living Conditions and Spiritual State of Rural Teachers in the Republican Period: Focusing on the Protagonist of *Ni Huanzhi*. JHSNU, **(03)**: 68-70 (2015).