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Reflection on Liao Taichu's Rural Education Research from the Perspective of Knowledge Sociology

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Abstract:

Under the effect of sociology of knowledge, this research aims to reveal the generation process of Liao Taichu's rural education research during the Republic of China period and promote the focus on rural education. This study aims to provide the following researchers with ideas for using sociological theory to conduct rural education research. Moreover, this research adopts qualitative methods and a literature study by exploring the approaches adopted in Liao's research, which can be used for collecting data, such as the interview method, observation method, and questionnaire method. This research also presents informative historical materials and methodological enlightenment for modern Chinese rural education research. In addition, there are some limitations to Liao's research. Firstly, the family factor and informal education played essential roles in rural education, which has been overlooked in Liao's research. Secondly, Liao's research does not fully utilize functionalist theories. However, Liao's research is still a landmark work in the study of rural education in modern China. Thence, the reflection on Liao's research may have essential inspiration for the current development of rural education in China. Furthermore, the analysis of Liao's research may provide some highlights and methods for the following rural education scholars. Compared with previous research, this research uses sociology theory about the sociology of knowledge to explain Liao's research. On the other hand, this research discusses Liao's study on the research background, process, and methods rarely mentioned in other studies. Therefore, there is still a need for further discussion about the achievements and shortcomings of Liao's research.

Keywords: Liao Taichu, rural education, knowledge sociology.

知识社会学视角下廖太初乡村教育研究的思考

摘要:

本研究在知识社会学的作用下,旨在揭示民国时期廖太初乡村教育研究的产生过程,促进对乡村教育的关注。本研究旨在为以下研究者提供运用社会学理论开展乡村教育研究的思路。此外,本研究采用定性研究方法和文献研究方法,探索廖研究采用的可用于收集数据的方法,如访谈法、观察法和问卷法。本研究还为现代中国农村教育研究提供了丰富的史料和方法启示。此外,廖的研究也存在一些局限性。首先,家庭因素和非正规教育在农村教育中发挥了重要作用,而这一点在廖的研究中被忽视了。其次,廖的研究没有充分利用功能主义理论。然而,廖的研究仍然是中国近代乡村教育研究的标志性著作。因此,对廖氏研究的反思可能对当前中国农村教育的发展具有重要的启示意义。此外,对廖教授的研究进行分析,或许可以为后面的乡村教育学者提供一些亮点和方法。与以往的研究相比,本研究采用知识社会学的社会学理论来解释廖的研究。另一方面,本研究探讨了廖的研究在其他研究中很少提及的研究背景、过程和方法。因此,廖教授的研究成果与不足,仍需进一步探讨。

关键词: 廖太初, 农村教育, 知识社会学。

1. Introduction

China is a developing country that has many rural areas. The population of rural areas occupies the vast majority of the total population in China. Some scholars propose that education can promote economic development and rural revitalization in China (Li et al., 2020; Sun & Li, 2020; Yuan & Jiang, 2021). Moreover, Chinese rural education could play an essential role in enhancing the quality of urbanization (Xu & Law, 2015). Furthermore, 2020 is the starting year for "the 14th Five-Year Plan" in China. Rural education will also fully enter the new era of educational modernization (Ouyang, 2021). However, in terms of the past research, some scholars insist that previous education studies ignore the rural areas. Rural education could narrate the situation in rural areas of education so that more scholars could realize the critical significance of rural education (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Brenner, 2016). Exploring rural education research is thus an essential matter for current research. In 1935, Liao Taichu issued a book, "Chinese Rural Education in Dynamic Change," after four months of fieldwork in Wenshang County, Shandong Province, China. Referring to the past research about rural education, Liao's research is an essential issue for the following researchers to acknowledge in rural education in modern China. To understand Liao's research, first, we need to identify the definition of "rural area." Defining rural areas is a critical task for rural education researchers, as it has different implications for all phases of a study (Koziol et al., 2015). Researchers have different definitions of "rural area." Most academics define rural areas as being remote from towns and cities (Cheung, 2021). Monk (2007) insists that rural areas are small, far from the cities, and their inhabitants live on agriculture. Therefore, the current researches have a different definition of "rural" because "rural" contains multiple structures that should not be

classified by a single criterion. Thence the researchers should choose one definition but provide clear and detailed information to the readers. Obeying this rule will allow understanding how the rural context is delineated from other contexts (Hawley et al., 2016). Liao's research defines "rural" as having administrative areas below the county level, low population density, and a less-developed economy.

In 1935, Liao Taichu (1910–2000) received a Master's degree from Yenching University. When studying at Yenching University, Liao was strongly influenced by Wu Wenzao's (a famous sociologist in China) sociological theory and began to use anthropological research methods to study Chinese rural education issues. Under the inspiration of Wu Wenzao's sociological theory, Fei and other students from the sociology department at Yenching University began to explore survey methods to understand Chinese society. Fei believes that Liao's research about Chinese rural education is one of the representatives (Fei, 2009). Moreover, sociology of knowledge emphasizes the forming process of knowledge and observing the society from the view of sociology (Ritzer, 2018). From Liao's research, the following researchers may acknowledge how Liao finished the research on rural education in modern China.

In terms of the context of rural revitalization in China, rural education needs a new concept of revitalization (Sun & Li, 2020). However, the research about rural education is ignored and has attracted more attention (Xu & Law, 2015; Salamondra, 2020; Lei, 2019). Sociological research on rural education in China pays more attention to the multiple institutional logic of rural education change and its sociological consequences, providing a more appropriate answer to whether rural education in China will end (Yao, 2017). Thence, it is necessary to learn from the past research in rural education. "Chinese rural education in dynamic

change" has become important literature for scholars studying rural education issues in north China and modern China. There are some scholars reviewing this research, such as Chen (2016) and Wang (2015), but these reviews have some gaps. Therefore, there is still a need for an in-depth discussion on the book's research methods, primary research materials, academic contributions, and shortcomings. In recent years, in-depth analysis of the survey literature about the Chinese national government from the knowledge production process has become the leading research approach to promote related rural education research. For example, the Dingxian (Li, 2008) and the Qinghe surveys (Hou, 2018) can be regarded as the rural education research models. In sum, this research, inspired by these research articles, may explore the formation of the book from the knowledge production process and explore the value and limitations of Liao's research about Chinese rural education.

2. The Importance of Fieldwork in Liao's Research on Rural Education

2.1. *The Fieldwork Scope of Rural Education Research*

In the 1920s and 1930s, most pedagogical achievements were satisfied with the introduction and imitation of research models in Europe and the United States, which were inconsistent with the actual situation in China. Liao (1936) thought that most educational researchers only used their total effort to think about the 'how' and forgot the 'what is now'. Therefore, Liao (1936) believed that the top priority was to grasp the truth through scientific field investigations. Liao's research method is consistent with the survey methods used in the current research. An investigation is crucial in research because it can quantitatively describe the research objects' characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes (Walston et al., 2017). Unlike most anthropologists who only considered villages as research fields, Liao chose counties as the research unit. Liao (1936) explained that the research on western learning (In the late Qing Dynasty, western learning included western natural science and sociopolitical doctrines) organizations needed to consider the county as a research unit as the county was an important area of education and administration in China. All western learning organizations were based on the county government, which directly controlled the enforcement of laws, the provision of funds, and the supervision work. Western learning organization was a special organization controlled by the government that was different from old-style private schools (In ancient Chinese society, a non-governmental educational institution was established in the family, clan, or village.).

2.2. *The Challenges of Fieldwork and Solutions*

While the new forms of rural schools are alienated from the vast rural areas of China, old-style private

schools have still been prevalent in rural China (Borthwick, 1983). As a manifestation of educational modernity, the changes between the new and old school systems have led to the game between "old-style private schools" and "western learning" in rural schools (Yao, 2017). What to do to solve the challenges in the fieldwork investigation of old-style private schools? Liao mostly used the official status to overcome these difficulties. In the beginning, Liao was kind to the local people and persuaded them to talk to old-style private schools. However, because of the ban by the county government, these local people were not willing to talk about old-style private schools. Because of the protection of the rural social network, old-style private schools have become hidden (Scott, 1990). If the local people refused to participate in the interview, Liao would use official power to pressure the local people. Through these measures, local people could become research participants, and the researchers could get the research data. In addition, Liao sometimes wore the clothes of ordinary people to collect research data. In order to seem like a local person, Liao would take off the black uniform of the county government and then put on robes and jackets. With the help of this, the local people could easily talk with Liao. However, this measure was not often taken because Liao thought it wasted too much time and energy (Liao, 1936).

Rural education follows the logic of acquaintance society in China (Yao, 2014). Entering the investigation site, Liao (1936) emphasized that the researchers may need to live there for a long time to become familiar with the environment and communicate with residents. The researchers could truly acknowledge the research field by participating in the research site. Creswell (2002) also believes that participants' perspectives provide excellent opportunities. If researchers only observed something once, they could not get accurate research data. After living in a place for a long time, the researchers become familiar with the environment and research participants. Liao also believed that learning the native language was crucial to familiarity. If the accent of the investigators was a bit wrong, there would be no residents communicating with these investigators. Therefore, the investigators had to use the local dialect. Liao (1936) also insisted that the native language represented the most authentic thing and the exact meaning of the research participants, which would increase the accuracy of the data (Hou, 2018). Liao replaced "schools" with "western learning," which was entirely meaningful. This is because people only knew western learning, just like foreigners, which gave people a weird feeling (Liao, 1936). During that time, "western learning" represented that the feelings of ordinary people were far from it, and they refused these western learning organizations. As a result, the new academic system of "western-style" courses and foreign teaching methods sacrificed the appropriateness of the old-style Confucian education (Liao, 1949).

3. The Methods of Liao's Research on Rural Education

3.1. Interview Method

Creswell (2002) believed that the interview method was prevalent in qualitative research. Furthermore, there were more participants and open-ended questions in qualitative research. In China, researchers also have the same research concept as Creswell. When the researchers go somewhere, they will try to communicate with local people intimately and frankly. The researchers will not start discussing, making observations, and checking with the participants until the participants are willing to talk about the relevant research topic. Through this measure, the researchers could collect the data they hope to obtain. For instance, to study old-style private school teachers' states of mind, Liao bluntly adopted the interview method. During the researcher's contact and conversation with old-style private school teachers, Liao found that most of them still had "Emperor Dreams" (when the Qing Dynasty fell, people still believed that the Qing Dynasty would be restored), and there was no trace of the Republic of China (Liao, 1936). Liao also adopted the interview method to understand the living conditions of elementary school teachers. After Liao communicated with these teachers, Liao learned that the living conditions of these people were poor.

Liao often quoted daily dialogues of ordinary people in the research, which certified that research data was collected by interview. For instance, when referring to the common people's lack of interest in studying and literacy, Liao used some daily dialogues. These daily dialogues could show that the researcher was interviewing the participants. Discussing the teaching measures in old-style private schools, taking the primary measure of beating and scolding, Liao also used some daily dialogues. Although Liao did not explicitly adopt the interview method, the original daily dialogues were obtained through interviews. The use of native language injects context into related topics as if a series of genre paintings with strong voices and emotions emerge in front of the readers.

However, the interview materials are not entirely reliable and require comprehensive analysis. For example, old-style private school teachers often attacked western learning. Liao said that western learning was simply an undesirable thing. Some naughty children and poor children did not study well. Besides that, the books are full of deceptive tricks (Liao, 1936). The western education of schoolteachers also attacked the children in old-style private schools. However, Liao believed that the reason for the conflict between western education and old-style private schools was the conflict of economic interest.

3.2. Observation Method

Observation is an essential method in research,

which can help the researchers to receive first-hand information from an open research site (Creswell, 2002). Liao used the observation method, studying teaching facilities and conflicts between old-style private schools and western learning organizations (These schools provide disciplines different from traditional subjects in old-style private schools.). As a result, in the process of observation, the scholars can play different research roles and efficiently collect data (Spradley, 2016). The teaching equipment in the countryside was extremely simple. For instance, Liao observed that there were old and shabby facilities and equipment in schools. Most rural schools were rebuilt from temple properties in the Republic of China, and some schools still had temple functions, which had a significant impact on teaching in schools. While the students are listening to the teacher giving a lecture, the old ladies are kowtowing, burning incense, and chanting words at the same time and place (Liao, 1936). To study conflicts between old-style private schools and western learning organizations, Liao also adopted the observation method. All these conflicts were seen by Liao, who cited a case in the research, "Both Ma Village Primary School and an old-style private school are located in the Yan family shrine. The house located in the west is the primary school, and the house located in the northeast belongs to the old-style private school" (Liao, 1936, p. 35).

3.3. Questionnaire Method

Liao was skeptical of official statistics and believed that the primary function of official surveys was to deal with official affairs. Therefore, Liao dared not determine how effective these official statistics were (Hou, 2018). When analyzing the situation of old-style private schoolteachers, Liao designed the questionnaire and surveyed the rural schools. A total of 600 questionnaires were issued, but because the survey coincided with the holiday, only 197 questionnaires were returned, less than one-third of the total. Given the number of questionnaires returned, the questionnaire was unsuccessful. Firstly, the survey was conducted in rural schools, and participants thought the questionnaires were perfunctory. When the researchers handed out questionnaires to the teachers, the teachers in rural schools did not seriously answer these questionnaires. Therefore, Liao concluded that the questionnaires were unreliable and could only be used as a small reference (Liao, 1936).

When analyzing the teaching difficulties of teachers, Liao also used the questionnaire method. On January 4-13, 1935, Wenshang County government hosted a seminar for primary school teachers. After the seminar, Liao asked 136 participating teachers to answer the questionnaires. The theme of the questionnaires was about some difficulties when the teachers were working in elementary schools. Liao (Liao, 1936) conducted a statistical analysis of the returned questionnaires and concluded that the biggest problem reported by 70 teachers was insufficient funds and uncertain salary.

Furthermore, the questionnaire also reflected that these teachers' writing skills were limited. In the one-hour answering process, Liao noted that only 56 people could gain 65 points or more, accounting for about 1/3. Some of the submitted questionnaires were only ten or twenty words. Some teachers could not answer questionnaires and handed in blank papers (Liao, 1936).

Overall, Liao is more cautious about the questionnaire, which is consistent with the view of Creswell. Creswell (2002) believed that the responses of the questionnaire approach might not be plenty and exhaustively describe the collected database in qualitative research. Liao (1936) insisted that questionnaires were beyond the understanding of farmers and led to suspicion. In addition, it was not easy to quantify the social facts in rural areas. This view is consistent with other scholars. For instance, Hou (2018) also believed this kind of survey could be said to work hard in quantity but forget quality. Research needs life, accuracy, and all aspects of life, not fragmentary records. Liao also insisted that the actual situation of social surveys and farmers' psychological and material lives could not be satisfied by just looking at the numbers. Therefore, the questionnaire method was not the primary research method in Liao's research.

3.4. Other Data Resources in Liao's Research

Moreover, Liao also used the county government's archives, local chronicles, folk songs, and other materials in his research. All these materials constructed a solid foundation for Liao's research. In the following parts, the content will refer to these.

Liao used county government archives, local chronicles, and other materials to conduct the research. All these materials are public and private documents for qualitative researchers. The documents could be classified into newspapers, the text of policies, letters, etc. (Creswell, 2002). Although Liao believed that these were dead materials, the focus of the problem was not here. Liao still used these materials to sort out the history and development of Wenshang's "old-style private schools" and "western learning." The analysis of some archival materials is worth noting in the book. In November 1929, the Wenshang County Education Bureau issued a ban on old-style private schools, but Liao believed that the effect of this ban on the number of people who knew that the ban was still in effect was small (Liao, 1936). In conclusion, it seemed that the researchers should pay attention to the archive text and need to consider the practical effects of the archives. When analyzing the age and resume of the old-style private school teachers, Liao used the official statistics of "the form of Wenshang County Teacher Qualification" but also paid attention to mutual confirmation with the registration form of the junior elementary school teachers' seminar. Besides, Liao (1936) attached great importance to folk ballads. From the content of this research, it seemed that Liao had collected the ballads of Wenshang County. The use of

ballads is also more common in the book. For instance, some ballads reflect the poor lives of elementary school teachers (Liao, 1936).

4. Limitations of Liao's Research

4.1. Lacking Family Life's Components

In sum, Liao's research also has some shortcomings. The survey objective is limited to schools, and the lack of family life surveys affects some opinions' accuracy. Fei (2009) pointed out that Liao did not have the opportunity to observe the family lives of these students, so all the arguments did not appear to be sufficient. Therefore, there is still a doubt whether these opinions are accurate. Taking Shandong, for example, Yang (2012) believed that schools (western learning organizations) were desirable for students. On the contrary, most students did not like old-style private schools. Therefore, whether schools (western learning organizations) are popular with rural people is closely related to the specific conditions of the regional society. These topics still need to be further explored.

4.2. Lacking Informal Education's Components

The objective of the research is limited to formal education, and a lack of research on informal education affects the depth of some discussions. Liao (1936) also thought his research was limited to "formal" education. As for education in a broad sense, it includes the entire course of life. From the moment of separation from the mother's womb to the end of life, everything about food, clothing, daily life, and farming is education. The scope of Liao's research is limited to school education. However, in modern rural areas where the problem of food and clothing is difficult to solve, if there is no research on informal education, it will inevitably restrict the in-depth study of formal education. Liao also recognized this shortcoming and expanded on this topic in subsequent research. Liao believes that the family education between rural boys and girls is significantly different. Boys get field education, and girls get housework education. Both are family education and livelihood education. The pressure of survival restricts the development of formal education. In this context, Liao even believed that the vast fields of informal education were especially valued by researchers (Liao, 1936). However, the discussion about informal education is still sparse, and the following researchers need to explore this topic further.

4.3. Lacking Explanation of the Functional Theory

Furthermore, Liao misunderstood the functional theory's basic terms and did not fully apply it. Liao (1936) compared the community with the county government, thinking that the old-style private schools are based on the community and western learning is based on the county. According to the functionalists, it is a community from a country to a village. The county can also be a community, so the county government cannot be opposed to the community. Through the

content of this book, the relationship between the old-style private school organization and other parts of society should be addressed as a problem that should be addressed. However, Liao's use of functional theory is not shown in the book. In subsequent studies, Liao drew a table with education as the center to explore the influence of various cultural aspects on groups and individuals, which could be seen as a continuation of this topic. Therefore, the scholars may do further in-depth research.

5. Significance of Liao's Research on Rural Education

Liao's research provides informative historical data for modern Chinese rural education research. Liao's research revealed the marked differences between western learning and the old-style private schools in the 1930s. Few rural teachers had a modern education. Consequently, these old-style private school teachers favored traditional texts, which still carried great authority and status among rural parents. The physical plant of the rural school, the schedule (both seasonal and daily), and the curriculum were still traditional (Buck, 1975). It means that Liao's research presents the facts about rural education in the past. Liao referred to the purpose of his research as putting the facts obtained by fieldwork before the audience (Liao, 1936). Liao's goal has been achieved, which provides us with precious historical data for understanding the situation of rural education in China during the 1930s. The "social survey series in the Republic of China," edited by Li (2014), is a compilation of social survey data that has significantly influenced academic circles in recent years. The "cultural and educational career volume" contains 35 survey reports, and only one "Shanxi rural education survey" is the subject of rural education, which is only 22 pages long. "Cultural and Educational Career Volume" contains 142 survey reports. The survey of Liao (1936) is the one on rural education, and its length is 67 pages. To a certain extent, few research articles reflect the lack of modern rural education surveys and then highlight the significant historical value of the book. In the 1980s, the return to anthropology in the 1930s became a critical research trend in the new generation of anthropology. Some scholars separately completed the representative results of the "revisit to anthropology." In the field of pedagogy, other scholars also proposed learning from the "other's vision" of anthropology and community research methods to reveal the relationship between rural education and people's lives. Liao's research results and other historical materials from Wenshang County could be used to study the education history of Wenshang County in Shandong Province over the past 100 years. All these indicate that in the new academic trend, Liao's research will attract the attention of academic circles.

Liao's research also provided methodological

enlightenment for the following researchers to study modern Chinese rural education. Liao believed that educational research should not be limited to the scope of education but should be used to comprehensively grasp the relationship between education and society. Besides that, research about education found it was never suitable to isolate the education system from the entire organization of society (Liao, 1936). The book's framework does not seem to deviate from the scope of education, but in the specific topics, Liao also paid attention to the connection between education, society, and politics. For example, Liao was concerned that the function of some old-style private schools was not limited to education and that they dealt with daily affairs in the village. Old-style private schools have become the base camp of rural forces. On the contrary, the difficulty of the school's opening in the countryside was closely related to the weak county government of the Nanjing National Government. The county government and rural schools seemed unrelated (Liao, 1936). In addition, Liao also analyzed the social factors of the lack of female students in school. Liao used the theory of functionalism as a reference and used rural education to see the relationship between the country and society, which greatly expands the research horizons and provides methodological enlightenment for rural education researchers.

Liao's investigative spirit of fearlessness is worth inheriting and carrying forward. Due to inconvenient transportation and the frequent disasters of modern times, rural social surveys are a challenging undertaking. Liao (1936) encountered many difficulties in the investigation. For instance, Liao walked about seven to eighty miles against the wind in the icy and snowy countryside. However, Liao finally overcame the difficulties and contributed an extremely rare field record of modern rural education to the academic circle. Nowadays, field investigations have gradually become more popular and essential for scholars to obtain information. Moreover, the conditions of investigation have also been greatly improved. The following researchers should inherit and carry forward Liao's investigative spirit.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals the generation process of Liao's research with the sociology of knowledge by investigating rural education in Wenshang County, China. Although sociology of knowledge has been proposed for a long time, it is still a new theory used in current research and can provide researchers with a new research perspective. From the perspective of knowledge sociology, Liao's research about rural education is closely related to China's social and cultural background at that time. Moreover, there are some insufficiencies in various research methods. The analysis of this research about Liao's research method can help other scholars reasonably adopt interviews, observation, and questionnaires to collect data. Overall,

the returning visits or historical perspectives in rural education studies are all trying to let us see the process of events. Only this process can constrain the structure and its transformation form, which may have real practical significance. Therefore, Liao's research is a landmark modern rural education research work. Liao's research can be seen as an essential research contribution when researchers do some research about rural education in China.

Moreover, even though this article has explored the research background, research process, and research methods, it is still necessary to probe the study on Liao's research, which is not referred to in this research. Furthermore, there is still a need for further discussions about Liao's research on the sociology of knowledge. This article emphasizes the formation process of Liao's research and ignores the full explanation of the theory of sociology of knowledge. Then, the following researchers can use the theory of knowledge sociology to do rural education research. Furthermore, future research should focus on reality, not appearance. Research about education should also include all aspects of the whole life and link other disciplines' research together.

Finally, there is a gap between urban and rural educational resources. The Chinese government has continuously tried to solve this problem. Thence, exploring rural education in the past may provide some measures for the current rural education and the development of rural areas. Moreover, the author feels that if there is a way out for Chinese rural areas, it must be rooted in rural education. If there had been more attention from the government and other social sources, rural education might have been better developed. Moreover, through the above analysis, rural education still needs to be further explored. Besides that, the discussion about informal rural education is still sparse, so the following researchers need to explore this topic further.

Authors' Contributions

Zhang Huanmin is the principal author. She reviewed Liao Taichu's research in depth and explored the strength and improvement potential of Liao Taichu's research. Credny Tan Yen Teng is the research supervisor. She provided insightful comments and guidance throughout the research process. S'ng Lin Yee is the research assistant. She assisted in searching for academic support for Liao Taichu's research.

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