

Speech

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Rationale

Aiming at the whole population of educators in traditional Chinese schools, the speech argues that Chinese teachers should concentrate more on the intellectual growth of students instead of “drill and kill” style of teaching, and only through reform can we build a more human-centered educational system. Teachers in traditional Chinese schools are characterized by their sole focus on students’ final grades instead of their learning process. By referring to jests among teachers, classical Chinese poems and sensitive topics like the Great Cultural Revolution, the speaker employs distinct languages in this audience community and sharply points out the underlying issues of Chinese education.

Throughout the speech, ethos and pathos are skillfully employed. In terms of ethos, the speech begins with recounting the speaker’s personal experience to strengthen her credibility. Ethos also recurs as various quotes and examples are used in the speech, such as the victory of machines and Gauguin’s painting. Pathos, easily found as exclamation marks, are often used for expression. By using the pronoun “we” and simple sentences most of the time, the speaker manages to relate and convey concise information to her audience. Moreover, by emphasizing the significance of valuable education to the future generation and the nation as a whole, the speech evokes the sense of responsibility and stimulates the audiences to think about the essence of education.

When it comes to rhetorical devices, parallelism is abundantly used, say, grammatical parallelism and anaphora, invoking a strong sense of empathy in her audiences. By repeating the same idea in different ways, the message delivered is reinforced. In this way, the main idea of the speech is conveyed more efficiently even though it is delivered orally. Besides, rhetorical questions are used to encourage the audience to ruminate on this issue.

[word count: 292]

Speech

Good afternoon, all teachers and educators! It's a great honor for me to speak here.

I had always been in traditional Chinese schools before I come to Pearson in Canada. In these years, I have gone from underdeveloped rural schools to competitive international institutions; from conservative schools to one of the most diverse ones in the world. Therefore, I've experienced many different educational systems and various types of exams, Zhongkao¹, TOEFL, SAT, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, I felt puzzled sometimes, especially when I was able to achieve the highest score in a Chinese school yet had no idea how to use a balance in a hands-on physics lab.

I realized suddenly that regardless of the variety of educational systems, I'd never got rid of the Chinese way of education.

A few years ago, I took a traditional school English class. The teacher talked about Mr Lin's comprehension of Jia Dao's poem “松下问童子，言师采药去²”，mentioned Mr Xu's translation of “寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清”³, and described Mr Wang's distinct interpretation of Youth by Samuel Ullman. This content was completely irrelevant to the syllabus. Why did he mention them? Isn't it a waste of time? He perplexed the whole class.

Now in Canada, however, we learn about Quantum mechanics instead of Newton's laws, the Great Cultural Revolution instead of the Reformation and Opening-up Policy⁴, and comic books instead of grammars. We learn for self-enrichment instead of exam results. We get a comprehensive view of what we are learning and how we should learn. Thus, when I look back to that English class now, I come to understand how wrong I was. The teacher was inspiring us to think instead of preparing us for exams.

Today, standing here as a student, I wish my teachers would not just teach us the theoretical knowledge but also inspire us and let us understand what we are doing.

¹ Chinese national high school entrance examination.

² Mr. Lin Yutang translated the poem as, “I asked the boy beneath the pines, / He said, ‘The master gone alone, / Herb-picking somewhere on the mount, / Clouds hidden whereabouts unknown.’”

³ This is from poem written by Li Qingzhao, and is famous for its reduplicated words. Mr Xu translated it as “I look for what I miss, / I know not what it is, / I feel so sad, so drear, / so lonely, without cheer.”

⁴ Cultural Revolution is considered as a big mistake by Chairman Mao and is avoided in Chinese schools because of its sensitivity. Reformation and opening is always viewed as the greatest success in Chinese textbooks.

Firstly, humanity has long been defeated in terms of theoretical knowledge reserves. In 1997, Deep Blue defeated the chess world champion Kasparov. 20 years later, AlphaGo beat the 9-dan world master Lee Sedol.

As a result, we hear these conversations frequently — “Chinese and History? All information is available online.” “Math and Physics? AI⁵ calculates way faster than we do.” “Foreign languages? Translators know all the languages.” “And education? What is that for?”

“Not teaching theoretical knowledge,” I asked myself, “what is education for?”

The question kept haunting me when I come to the international school, where I was asked to choose the IB subjects myself. I was somehow lost: it seems that I’ve been good at math and physics; I love arts; literature seems to be interesting too. So what should I do in the future? I had no idea, because for the past fifteen years, I’d never pondered upon these dormant questions. We kept studying all day long. But what do we study for?

The question didn’t get answered until I encountered the prevailing Duanzi⁶ online: “the reason for education is that when seeing a flock of birds flapping over the river, you can recite ‘落霞与孤鹜齐飞’⁷ Instead of complaining about the noise the birds are making; when traveling in a desert, we could chant ‘大漠孤烟直’⁸ Instead of groaning about how sandy it is.” Most people see it as a ridicule, but in it lies the key implication of education. Education is not simply passing knowledge down, but for us to enhance cultivation, understand and improve ourselves. That is what education is for.

That was my first time in life paused from homework and exam paper, thinking about my ten-year-long educational journey. For ten years, teachers had been teaching us. For ten years, we have studied so hard yet so aimlessly. For ten years, we didn’t know what we studied for. As Gauguin wrote in his painting, “D’où Venons Nous Que Sommes Nous Où Allons Nous,”⁹ the reason for our bemusement lies in the fact that we don’t even know who we are. This reflects the great loss of our education.

Throughout the history, all powerful nations pay lots of attention to education. In Germany, education is free at all level; in Japan, students study tea culture as serious courses. “For what?” I asked when I first heard about it. My Japanese roommate said, “They are just part of our education. They tell us about our cultures.” I chewed upon that for a while. If we don’t even know our own culture, how can we know about ourselves? If individuals don’t know what to do, how would a country know? Then how come German’s and Japan’s rebirth after World War II?

⁵ Artificial Intelligence.

⁶ Duanzi, used to be a terminology in cross-talking, now refers to a memorable short story, usually a jest or a horror.

⁷ An ancient poem describing the beautiful scene of birds returning to nests against the sunset.

⁸ A famous ancient poem describing the lonely smoke rising from the vast desert.

⁹ French. It means “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”

China, as one of the oldest civilizations with a history of five thousand years, used to pay so much attention on education. We deified Confucius as our culture totem at the origin of our civilization, we established the first imperial examination¹⁰, we kept our faith even during the toughest era of the Great Cultural Revolution¹¹. Education had never been abandoned. But what is happening now? When German students are studying their classical musics, no one knows Chinese traditional painting; when Japanese students are visiting jinjya¹², we see anything related to the ancient China as old-fashioned. How could we possibly know about either ourselves or cultures in this way?

All in all, What is education for? It helps us to know about ourselves and our culture. It is the Sukhavati of our soul. It is the first step to take for a thriving civilization.

Years later when my kids enroll in school, I wish they could hear again the teacher spending five more minutes on Mr. Lin, Quantum Mechanics, or Gauguin's painting. Don't worry about that the loss of time, because in those five minutes, we're not cultivating excellent test takers, but making a real education for our future generations.

Thank you all for your listening.

[word count: 999]

¹⁰ Chinese imperial examinations were created in Imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy.

¹¹ During cultural revolution, everything related to literature and science was destroyed, including both materials and scholars.

¹² Japanese temple.