

Speech at the National Higher Education Conference

(1950, June 8)

Zhou Enlai

I heard that the National Higher Education Conference went very well. Education experts from across the country gathered to make decisions through extensive discussions, and I believe the decisions made will be practical. Now, based on the educational policy outlined in the CPPCC's "Common Program," I would like to raise three questions about education for discussion.

I. New Democratic Education Policy

The first article of the "Common Program" specifies what we oppose and advocate. Our new democratic education is consistent with the overall program of new democracy, both opposing imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. Therefore, we need to eliminate feudal, comprador, and fascist ideologies in education. This task cannot be accomplished overnight. "Haste makes waste." If we rush, it may seem like we've cleared the forms, but the essence will persist. Therefore, we must adhere to the new democratic education policy in principle and gradually seek its implementation in specific steps.

What do we advocate? The "Common Program" is clear: new democratic education is national, scientific, and mass education.

Our education is mass-oriented, serving the people, and this is the direction of our education. Now is the era of the people, and our education should be beneficial to the people. Who are the people? At this stage, the people include the working class, the peasant class, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie. These are the people we serve. Our country is a people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants. Therefore, our higher education must first open its doors to workers and peasants, cultivating a new type of intellectual from their ranks. In the past, if one was not the offspring of feudal landlords or the bourgeoisie, there was little chance of receiving a university education. Even today, the composition of university students has not changed much. This situation does not meet the requirements of our new democratic education policy. However, cultivating intellectual workers and peasants cannot be achieved overnight; it requires planned and step-by-step efforts, especially given the difficulties faced by the working masses who were exploited and oppressed for a long time and had high illiteracy rates. Despite these challenges, it is essential to awaken the attention of university educators. We must cultivate a large number of new intellectuals from the labouring people within several years. The goal is not to exclude existing intellectuals but to add new blood while uniting and transforming the existing ones.

Our education is scientific, meaning it should have scientific content. Science is systematic knowledge derived from practice; it is objective truth. Some claim that China had no science in the past, but this is incorrect. Regardless of the natural world or human society, every phenomenon has its own objective laws of existence and development. The issue lies in whether people can scientifically explain them. Modern natural science began in the West, while the scientific explanation of the development of human society started with Marx. However, it cannot be said that there was no science before that. In China, with thousands of years of history and a population of 475 million, capable of resisting enemy invasions and overcoming various natural disasters, it indicates that our nation had an understanding of the laws of certain objective things and, therefore, had science. The problem is that we did not explore and study it well. Scientific theory elevates practical experience to

a rational level, guiding practice in return. Labor creates the world, and science is the product of both physical and mental labor. We should use scientific theory as the content of education. However, this cannot be achieved overnight and requires step-by-step planning.

Our education is national and should have a national form. Universal truths apply to all nations, but there may be different manifestations in different nations. The Chinese nation has its own traditions and customs, which are always expressed in national forms. Education with national forms is more likely to be accepted and loved by the people. If education neglects national characteristics and forms, it will not work. Our country is a multi-ethnic nation, and we must pay attention to the characteristics and forms of each brotherly ethnic group. Brotherly ethnic groups should also learn from each other's strengths, enabling the delivery of scientific content to people of all ethnic groups and ensuring the success of education.

II. Consistency of Theory and Practice

The "Common Program" stipulates that our education should adopt a method that is consistent with theory and practice. I would like to elaborate on this issue. Theory is derived from practice and guides practice. We cannot treat theory as dogma. If we disregard the actual situation and use theory indiscriminately, it will inevitably lead to failure. At the same time, practical work needs theoretical guidance to avoid blind and aimless actions. Acting without theoretical guidance may result in finding some truths through failure, but the process is painful. Our education should avoid the dogmatism of departing from reality and should not fall into the errors of empiricism without theoretical guidance. This approach will help youth avoid detours and minimize obstacles. This is the responsibility of educators.

The depth of theory varies. The depth and shallowness are not contradictory but interconnected. Theory should develop continuously from shallow to deep. Even someone without education will have some knowledge and some rudimentary theories. For example, farmers, despite lacking systematic scientific knowledge, understand production and have some methods to resist natural disasters, indicating that they grasp some basic principles. However, further education is necessary. We cannot deny the need for further education.

There is a difference of opinion on whether there should be more or less practice in school education. Some advocate more, and some advocate less. It is acceptable to have less practice for quick results, but for a better grasp of theory, more practice is necessary. Learning theory requires repeated practice to master it accurately and understand it deeply. Therefore, neglecting the practical aspect or opposing theory and practice is incorrect.

Our universities are meant for learning theory, but what we need to learn is theory that has been tested through practice, aiming to further guide practice and better serve the people. This approach is in line with the needs of practical work. Those who believe that universities do not need to study more profound theories are mistaken. All national higher education institutions must emphasize practice and raise the level of theory.

Most of China's higher education in the old days was disconnected from theory and practice. Even today, if we say that our university theory and practice are completely consistent, it does not align with reality. As experts present are aware, many teaching methods in our higher education are disconnected from theory and practice. Many areas need reform. How to connect theory and practice? This requires discussion, experience summarization, and continuous improvement, ranging from textbooks and classroom teaching to experiments and internships.

Someone mentioned the issue of generalists and specialists at the meeting. Whether generalists or specialists, both need to be connected with theory and practice. Generalists and specialists are not opposites; they only differ in the scope and degree of knowledge, not in the principle of connecting theory and practice. Therefore, opposing the connection of theory and practice or advocating less connection is incorrect. On the other hand, excessively emphasizing practice, neglecting theory, and reducing universities to the level of vocational schools is also incorrect. There is a difference between universities and vocational schools. Universities should be more extensive and profound, with more theory.

Currently, our country's economy is in the recovery stage, urgently needing "experts" and "specialists." This is a fact. To facilitate connection with reality and meet construction needs, organizing short-term training courses or vocational schools by the industrial sector is necessary and reasonable. However, this does not mean that various universities are handed over to the leadership of industrial sectors, with the Ministry of Education not being involved. To adapt to needs, technical schools can be established, and the duration of professional studies in universities can be shortened. Still, the policy of educating high-level construction talents through university education cannot be abandoned. To cultivate professionals with higher theoretical levels who can better solve practical problems and meet long-term needs, it is necessary to improve existing universities. Currently, the expansion and development of universities cannot be massive but must align with the development of our economy.

III. Unity and Reform

Last year, the National Education Work Conference was held, followed by the National Higher Education Conference. In the future, there will be conferences on primary and secondary education, as well as the establishment of a national education union. The purpose is to better unite national education workers and achieve the tasks of educational reform outlined in the "Common Program." Except for a very few reactionary elements, we should unite all education workers. Everyone who politically opposes the three major enemies and supports new democratic education should be united. This is an affirmative and unchangeable policy.

The recent higher education conference made several decisions, some of which are to be implemented immediately, some to be tested in some schools, and some are only for reference by various schools. This approach is good. We should carry out the reform of cultural education systematically and step by step according to the "Common Program." Chairman Mao advised us to be cautious. Educational reform cannot be unplanned, hastily implemented, or arbitrarily carried out. We need to distinguish between the importance and urgency of various issues and conduct staged, step-by-step reforms. We must be patient in some cases. Cultural education is both the political vanguard and the rear guard. Educational reform is a relatively long-term task, requiring systematic and step-by-step implementation. However, it cannot be stagnant. It is incorrect to delay reform when conditions are ripe and to verbally agree to reform while not implementing it in practice. Waiting may be appropriate only when there are objective difficulties or insufficient subjective understanding of the situation, but waiting does not mean delaying. On the other hand, reckless actions, excessive impatience, and attempts to carry out reforms with crude methods are also incorrect. For example, on issues such as materialism vs. idealism, atheism vs. theism, and teaching methods, we cannot force others to accept our opinions in a hasty manner. Otherwise, although it may seem like they agree on the surface, the problem is not actually solved. In summary, we must

guide education workers gently, make them willingly accept, and use this spirit to unite education workers nationwide.

In education, we must also "consider both public and private interests." The recent higher education conference had representatives from many private schools, which is good. Today, private schools are in a difficult situation. Previously, their economic sources mostly depended on warlords and the bureaucratic bourgeoisie, which is no longer the case. Land, during the land reform, was also distributed. The government should take care of these difficulties. After the religious schools cut ties with foreign countries, they faced significant financial difficulties, and the government should also take care of them. The Ministry of Education needs to consider how to solve the problems of private schools. This is also the concern of the schools themselves. Now, the national economy is in the process of recovery, and everyone needs to think of ways to get through the next one or two years.

Based on "Selected Works of Zhou Enlai," Volume II.