

Youth Legal Thinking Cultivation: The Function of Legal Education in the Process of Chinese Modernization

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Abstract: *In the process of Chinese modernization, legal education is not only a carrier for transmitting legal knowledge but also a mechanism for cultivating young people's rule-of-law thinking. Youth legal thinking refers to the capacity to understand social relations through legal concepts, evaluate behavior according to rights and duties, respect procedures, reason with evidence, and solve disputes through lawful channels. On the basis of rule-of-law theory, legal legitimacy theory and civic education research, this paper argues that legal education should move from knowledge transmission to thinking cultivation. It performs cognitive, value-shaping, behavioral and governance functions. It helps young people understand norms and institutions, transform legal recognition into rule-of-law conviction, develop lawful habits in daily life, and participate rationally in social governance. The paper also analyzes curriculum integration, case-based teaching, experiential platforms, community participation and digital rule-of-law education. It concludes that the cultivation of youth legal thinking is an important foundation for Chinese modernization, because modern legal institutions can operate effectively only when young people internalize legal rationality and become active participants in rule-of-law practice.*

Keywords: Youth Legal Thinking; Legal Education; Chinese Modernization; Rule of Law; Legal Socialization

1. Introduction

Chinese modernization is not only a process of economic growth, technological upgrading and institutional improvement, but also a process of forming modern citizens who can understand rules, respect procedures, claim rights rationally and fulfill public responsibilities. In this process, the cultivation of youth legal thinking is of special importance. Youth are the most active group in social change. They enter universities, workplaces, communities and digital public spaces at a stage when values, behavior patterns and identity are still being shaped. If legal education stops at the memorization of legal provisions, it can transmit information but may fail to develop the ability to use legal norms to judge problems, resolve conflicts and participate in governance. Therefore, the core task of legal education is to transform legal knowledge into rule-of-law thinking.

Accordingly, this study is closely connected with the modernization of national governance. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China places law-based governance within the overall strategy for building a modern socialist country and emphasizes that the rule of law is a basic way of governing the country. ^[1] The white paper Youth of China in the New Era describes youth as the most active and vital force in society and emphasizes the enabling legal environment for their development. ^[2] The 2024 Resolution of the CPC Central Committee also links further deepening reform with advancing Chinese modernization, which means that legal education must serve a wider institutional agenda. ^[3] These texts show that youth legal education is not an isolated school subject; it is part of the broader construction of a law-based society.

This paper takes "Youth Legal Thinking Cultivation: The Function of Legal Education in the Process of Chinese Modernization" as its theme. It first clarifies the connotation of youth legal thinking and the theoretical logic of its cultivation. It then analyzes the cognitive, value-shaping, behavioral and governance functions of legal education. On this basis, it discusses practical mechanisms and existing challenges, and finally proposes optimization pathways. The central argument is that legal education in Chinese modernization should move from knowledge transmission to thinking cultivation, from classroom teaching to life-wide practice, and from passive rule explanation to active capacity building.

Only in this way can legal education contribute to the formation of young people who know the law, respect the law, use the law and participate in social governance rationally. Methodologically, this study adopts a theoretical and normative approach, synthesizing legal theory, civic education research, and policy analysis to construct a conceptual framework for the cultivation of youth legal thinking in the context of Chinese modernization.

2. The Theoretical Logic of Youth Legal Thinking Cultivation in Chinese Modernization

It should be noted that "youth legal thinking" in this context is not limited to professional legal reasoning; rather, it denotes a form of rule-of-law thinking that integrates legal cognition, value identification, and civic participation. Youth legal thinking refers to a relatively stable mode of understanding and handling social issues according to legal concepts, legal principles and legal procedures. It includes awareness of rules, consciousness of rights and duties, procedural thinking, evidence-based reasoning, equality before law, and the habit of solving disputes through lawful channels. Legal thinking is different from general moral persuasion or administrative obedience. Moral education asks what is good; political education asks what is collective and public; legal education asks what is normative, authorized, limited, responsible and procedurally justified. Theories of the rule of law further show that law must be publicly knowable, institutionally constrained and capable of limiting arbitrary power. ^{[4] [5]}

The cultivation of this thinking is especially necessary in a society undergoing rapid modernization. Modernization brings social mobility, market transactions, new professions, digital communication and diversified values. These changes increase opportunities but also create conflicts over contracts, employment, consumption, intellectual property, privacy, public order and public participation. Young people encounter legal issues not only in textbooks but also in internships, online platforms, campus life, entrepreneurship and community service. If they lack legal thinking, they may either ignore rules because of utilitarian convenience or treat law as a distant instrument used only by professionals. Legal education must therefore make law visible, understandable and usable in daily life.

2.1. From Legal Knowledge to Rule-of-Law Thinking

Legal education often begins with knowledge: constitutions, statutes, rights, obligations, institutions and typical cases. Knowledge is necessary because thinking cannot be cultivated in a vacuum. However, knowledge alone is insufficient. A student may remember articles of law but still be unable to identify legal relationships in real situations. Another student may know that rights are protected but may not understand that rights must be exercised through lawful procedures and with respect for the rights of others. Therefore, the first transformation required by legal education is the transformation from "knowing legal texts" to "thinking through legal norms".

2.2. The Youth Stage as a Critical Period of Legal Socialization

Youth is a critical stage because legal cognition, identity and behavior are still open to guidance. At this stage, young people gradually move from family protection to independent social participation. They sign agreements, choose majors and careers, engage in online expression, consume financial products, participate in campus governance and sometimes encounter disputes. Their first experiences with rules may leave deep impressions. If school rules are arbitrary or disciplinary procedures are opaque, young people may form a cynical view of law. Conversely, if they experience fairness, explanation, participation and remedy, they are more likely to internalize respect for law. Research on legal socialization also shows that children's and adolescents' views of law develop through families, schools and encounters with authority. ^[6]

2.3. Chinese Modernization and the Demand for Law-Abiding Modern Citizens

Chinese modernization requires citizens who can participate in modern social life with legal rationality. The World Development Report 2017 states that governance and law matter because they shape incentives, commitments and coordination in development. ^[7] Although this is a general development argument, it has direct educational implications. The operation of modern institutions depends not only on rules written in documents but also on citizens who understand how rules work. Young people must therefore learn to approach contracts, public services, digital platforms, community affairs and public expression through legal rationality.

3. The Functions of Legal Education in Cultivating Youth Legal Thinking

Legal education has multiple functions in the cultivation of youth legal thinking. Its most direct function is cognitive, because it provides basic legal concepts and institutional knowledge. Its deeper function is value-shaping, because it builds respect for law, justice and fairness. Its practical function is behavioral, because it guides young people to choose lawful methods when facing conflict. Its social function is governance-oriented, because it prepares young people to participate in the building of a law-based society. These functions are interrelated and should not be separated in curriculum design.

3.1. Cognitive Function: Building Normative Understanding of Law and Rights

The cognitive function of legal education is to help young people build a structured understanding of law. This includes the Constitution, basic civil rights and obligations, criminal responsibility, administrative rules, labor protection, consumer rights, network security, data privacy, intellectual property, environmental protection and dispute resolution mechanisms. These contents are not simply a list of provisions. They form a map of social life. Through this map, young people learn which issues have legal relevance, where to find rules, which institutions are responsible, and what procedures should be followed.

3.2. Value-Shaping Function: Transforming Legal Recognition into Rule-of-Law Conviction

The value-shaping function is more demanding than the cognitive function. It asks whether young people can move from external recognition of law to internal conviction in the rule of law. Tyler's legitimacy theory is helpful here: people are more likely to obey law when they believe legal authority is legitimate and procedurally fair. ^[8] For youth legal education, this means that the authority of law cannot be taught only by command. Students need to understand why legal procedures protect fairness, why rights must be combined with responsibilities, and why lawful channels are more reliable than private retaliation or emotional judgment.

3.3. Behavioral Function: Guiding Youth from Compliance to Lawful Action

The behavioral function of legal education is to guide young people to act lawfully and effectively. This includes not only avoiding illegal acts but also using legal tools to protect rights and solve problems. A young worker who understands labor law is more likely to sign contracts carefully and protect wages through lawful channels. A student who understands cyber law is more likely to protect personal information and avoid online infringement. A young entrepreneur who understands contract and intellectual property rules is more likely to operate honestly and manage risk. Legal education thus becomes a form of practical capacity building.

3.4. Governance Function: Supporting a Law-Based Society

The governance function of legal education is often underestimated. Young people are not only future citizens; they are already participants in campus governance, community service, online public discussion and social innovation. If they possess legal thinking, they can participate in public life in a more rational and constructive way. They can distinguish lawful criticism from rumor, rights protection from disruption, participation from disorder, and public interest from narrow self-interest. This capacity is essential for the healthy operation of modern governance.

4. Practical Mechanisms for Cultivating Youth Legal Thinking

To realize these functions, legal education needs practical mechanisms. The basic principle is to integrate knowledge, experience and reflection. Knowledge provides concepts and rules; experience provides situations in which rules become meaningful; reflection helps young people connect individual experiences with public norms. Comparative evidence from the IEA ICCS 2022 study shows that civic knowledge and participation are shaped by curriculum, school climate and engagement opportunities. ^[9] Specifically, the study found that students with higher levels of civic knowledge were significantly more likely to expect to vote in elections and to support equal rights and environmental protection. ^[9] At the school level, 78% of students across participating countries reported having voted for class representatives, while 40% had taken part in decision-making about school governance;

furthermore, students who had experienced structured participation at school demonstrated higher civic knowledge and stronger expectations of future engagement.^[9] However, the data also reveal a concerning trend: between 2016 and 2022, the proportion of students achieving at least Level B on the civic knowledge scale decreased from 70% to 64% across comparable countries, and no participating country recorded a significant increase in average civic knowledge during this period.^[9] These findings suggest that legal and civic education must move beyond knowledge transmission toward integrated practice, as experiential engagement at school is positively associated with both cognitive outcomes and participatory dispositions.

4.1. Curriculum Integration and Case-Based Teaching

Curriculum integration means that legal education should not be limited to one general course. It can be integrated into ideological and political courses, general education, professional courses, career education and innovation and entrepreneurship education. For example, engineering students need legal education on safety responsibility, environmental regulation and intellectual property; medical students need informed consent, privacy and professional ethics; business students need contract law, competition rules and compliance; art and media students need copyright, personality rights and platform responsibility. Such integration makes law relevant to students' future professions.

Case-based teaching is an effective method because legal thinking develops through problem analysis. A good case should contain facts, conflicting interests, relevant legal norms and possible solutions. Students can be asked to identify legal relationships, evaluate evidence, compare different remedies and explain their reasoning. This method changes students from passive listeners to active reasoners. Dewey's view that education grows through experience and inquiry supports this method.^[10] Cases should be close to youth life, including campus injury, online speech, consumer fraud, labor internship, data privacy, copyright, traffic safety and community disputes.

4.2. Experiential Platforms and Community Participation

Experience is indispensable to legal thinking. Moot courts, mock mediation, legal clinics, campus hearing procedures, community legal service, visits to courts and procuratorates, and participation in public legal education can all help students experience the operation of legal norms. For non-law majors, such activities should be simplified and adapted, but the core should remain: students must learn to listen, present evidence, reason according to rules and respect procedures. This process builds procedural awareness more effectively than lectures alone.

4.3. Digital Rule-of-Law Education and Intelligent Governance

Digital society creates both opportunities and risks for youth legal education. On the one hand, online platforms, micro-courses, virtual courts and intelligent question-answering systems can make legal resources more accessible. On the other hand, digital life exposes young people to cyberbullying, rumor spreading, privacy leakage, algorithmic manipulation, online fraud and intellectual property disputes. UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation links education with peace, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, global citizenship and sustainable development, which suggests that digital legal education should also combine rights, responsibilities and public ethics.^[11]

5. Main Challenges in Youth Legal Thinking Cultivation

Although the importance of youth legal education is widely recognized, its practical effectiveness is constrained by four interrelated challenges. These are not merely technical problems in teaching; they reflect the formalism of knowledge transmission and publicity, the fragmentation between legal cognition and practice, the tension between uniform curricula and diverse youth needs, and the disruptive impact of digital culture and plural values on rule-of-law thinking. If these structural gaps remain unaddressed, legal education may exist in name but fail to cultivate legal thinking effectively.

5.1. The Formalism of Knowledge Transmission and Publicity

The first challenge is formalism. Some legal education activities focus on slogans, publicity weeks, examinations or one-way lectures. They can increase visibility but do not necessarily change students' thinking. Formalism appears when the success of education is measured by the number of activities rather than by students' ability to analyze and solve legal problems. It also appears when legal

education is separated from students' actual concerns. To overcome formalism, legal education must return to real questions: What legal problems do young people face? What capacities do they lack? What experiences can help them internalize rule-of-law values?

5.2. Fragmentation between Knowledge, Value and Practice

A second challenge is fragmentation. Legal knowledge, value education and practical training are sometimes arranged separately. Students may learn provisions in one course, discuss moral values in another and participate in social practice without legal reflection. As a result, knowledge does not become conviction, and conviction does not become behavior. The cultivation of legal thinking requires continuity. A topic such as online privacy should include legal rules, value discussion about dignity and autonomy, case analysis, risk identification and practical methods for rights protection. Only this chain can form stable thinking.

5.3. Tension between Uniform Content and Diverse Youth Needs

A third challenge is the tension between uniform content and diverse youth needs. Young people are not a homogeneous group. University students, vocational students, rural youth, urban youth, employed youth and platform workers face different legal environments. Students in different majors also need different legal capacities. Uniform legal education can provide a common foundation, but it may not respond adequately to specific risks and development needs. For example, vocational students may need stronger labor and safety law education, while digital media students may need copyright and data compliance education.

5.4. The Impact of Digital Culture and Plural Values

A fourth challenge comes from digital culture and plural values. Young people receive information from short videos, social media, online communities and algorithmic recommendations. Legal opinions may be simplified, sensationalized or commercialized. Some online narratives encourage emotional judgment before evidence, public shaming before procedure, and private traffic before public responsibility. These tendencies can weaken procedural thinking and encourage legal cynicism. Legal education must respond to this environment rather than pretend that the classroom is the only source of knowledge.

6. Optimization Pathways for Legal Education in Chinese Modernization

To improve the cultivation of youth legal thinking, legal education should be redesigned from the perspective of Chinese modernization and youth development. This requires an integrated system that combines national requirements, educational principles, youth needs and social participation through four interrelated pathways: constructing a curriculum system with staged objectives, building a student-centered and problem-oriented teaching model, strengthening collaborative education among school, family and society, and improving evaluation of legal thinking cultivation. Rather than simply adding more legal content, this system should improve the quality of legal learning and make rule-of-law thinking an integral part of young people's everyday judgment.

6.1. Constructing an Integrated Curriculum System with Staged Objectives

The first pathway is to construct an integrated curriculum system. Legal education should have clear objectives at different stages: basic rule awareness in compulsory education, rights-duty and procedural awareness in secondary education, professional and civic legal capacity in higher and vocational education, and lifelong legal learning in the workplace and community. Within universities, legal education should be connected with major-specific training and student affairs. Curriculum standards should specify not only what students should know, but also what they should be able to analyze, judge and do.

6.2. Building a Student-Centered and Problem-Oriented Teaching Model

The second pathway is to build a student-centered and problem-oriented teaching model. Teachers should begin with real youth problems: What should students do when personal information is leaked?

How should they respond to online violence? What are the legal limits of part-time labor? How should campus disputes be mediated? By starting from problems, teachers can lead students back to legal concepts, procedures and institutions. Hess and McAvoy's work on democratic classroom discussion also reminds educators that deliberation needs evidence, equality and ethical guidance.^[12]

6.3. Strengthening Collaborative Education among School, Family and Society

The third pathway is collaborative education. Schools provide systematic teaching, families provide early rule awareness and moral support, legal institutions provide professional resources, communities provide practice scenarios, enterprises provide compliance experience, and online platforms provide digital governance environments. These actors should form a cooperative network. For example, courts and procuratorates can provide case resources and open-day activities; judicial administrative organs can support legal service practice; communities can organize youth participation in mediation and public service; enterprises can provide compliance education for interns and new employees.

6.4. Improving Evaluation of Legal Thinking Cultivation

The fourth pathway is evaluation reform. If evaluation only tests memorization, teaching will focus on memorization. Legal thinking requires evaluation of understanding, reasoning, application and reflection. Assessment can include case analysis, scenario judgment, legal document reading, mock consultation, group discussion, project reports and reflective journals. Students should be evaluated on whether they can identify legal issues, find relevant norms, distinguish facts from opinions, respect procedures and propose lawful solutions.

7. Conclusions

Youth legal thinking cultivation is an essential part of legal education in the process of Chinese modernization. Its significance lies in the fact that modernization requires not only modern laws and institutions but also modern citizens who can understand, respect and use law. Legal education performs cognitive, value-shaping, behavioral and governance functions. It helps young people know legal rules, identify with the rule of law, act lawfully in daily life and participate rationally in social governance. These functions together support the building of a law-based society.

The cultivation of legal thinking cannot be achieved through formal publicity or knowledge transmission alone. It requires a systematic transformation of legal education. First, education should move from legal knowledge to rule-of-law thinking, emphasizing normative, procedural, rights-duty and responsibility reasoning. Second, it should move from classroom teaching to integrated practice, connecting cases, campus governance, community participation and digital life. Third, it should move from single-subject responsibility to collaborative education among school, family, society and legal institutions. Fourth, it should move from memorization-based evaluation to capacity-based evaluation.

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