Character Education in China Today

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Character education has been a hot topic in the past decade in American public schools. Although many states and schools have initiated character education programs, politicians, educators, social workers, and the public are still arguing whether character education should be conducted in schools and how it should be conducted. China, as a country traditionally emphasizing value/moral education, has recently attracted much attention from researchers both in China and the United States. These researchers delved deeply into the Chinese moral educational system, and some have made critical comparisons of Chinese moral education with that of America. Most of these recent studies are concerned with topics such as a citizen’s moral/political nature, moral education curriculum, moral values promoted in schools, and problems and challenges in moral education today. Very few dealt with what actually is done in Chinese schools to promote character, especially through extracurricular activity, which comprises a large part of students’ lives and plays a very important role in molding character. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how a variety of extracurricular activities are conducted at Chinese schools at all levels to promote moral character. I hope this paper will help American educators better understand Chinese schools, students, and political culture.

Character Education in China

In China, at various times over the last two decades, “character education” has appeared in the curriculum as: moral/value education, civic education, political-ideological education, patriotic education, labor education and skills training, and psychological quality education or quality/competence education.

Unlike the situation in the United States, character education in China has always been deliberately pursued by the government and schools, and overt and strenuous efforts are made to influence the development of desirable character traits among the nation’s young people and to maintain social control. This political feature has led to a specific moral character education curriculum through K-12 and guidelines for college and graduate students. The implementation of the curriculum is carried out through three major channels: moral/ideological education class, other school subjects, and extracurricular activities that attend to achieving the moral/ideological goals.

Character education is essentially integrated into school life at all levels. K-7 character education emphasizes formation of sound character, civilized behavior, patriotism, personal integrity, mastery of basic knowledge and culture. At ages 8-16 (eighth grade to college), the emphasis is more politics/ideology-oriented. All students are expected to observe the “Code of Conduct of Primary School Pupils,” the “Code of Conduct of Secondary School Students,” and “Norms of Daily Behaviors for Primary School Pupils,” as set by the State Education Committee. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has issued more than a dozen documents. These documents set the aims, content, basic requirements, principles and implementation methods for character education.

Sources of Moral Authority

Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong’s writing, Deng Xiaoping’s theory, and Jiang Zeming’s “three representations” serve as the theoretical guidelines of character education, while “Five Loves” (love the motherland, love the people, love labor, love science, and love socialism) form the basic contents of Chinese character education.1 Although the current education reform (a transition from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education) aims to cultivate all-round individuals with initiative, independence, and competitive spirit, the “Five Loves” are still the guiding principles of character education at all school levels. Extracurricular activities can be defined as any kind of activities out of class and school. These activities are often initiated by the government or schools, and supported by students, families, and communities. The goal of these activities generally is to enrich students’ lives and implement the principle of “Five Loves.”

Holiday Activities

Holidays are an opportunity to conduct character education in which the school leadership assumes all-round responsibility and works together with various school departments, the community trade union, the Young Pioneers and Youth League (student organizations at the primary and secondary levels, respectively), as well as parents. The most commonly celebrated holidays and activities widely conducted at Chinese schools are as follows:

Lei Feng’s Day (March 5th)

As a soldier who was diligent, obedient, loyal to the Party, and committed to serving the people, Lei Feng has been used as a role model for socialization and character education in China for forty years. Although students and adults are called to learn from Lei Feng all year long, lots of special activities will be organized at this time. The school leadership, the Young Pioneers, the Communist Youth League, and student associations and communities are all involved in these activities. Cleaning the streets, beautifying the environment, helping the aged and the disabled, visiting soldiers, traffic policemen and families who have members serving in the army, doing good to teachers and classmates, donating money to people in need—these are the most common things most
students will do at this time. Often, “Lei-Feng-like behavior” will be highly praised, while selfish behavior will be criticized. Although Lei Feng has been exaggerated for political socialization purposes, “learning from Lei Feng” activities have indeed inspired young people to be less concerned about self-interests, but think more of the other people and to work for the common good.

Women’s Day (March 8)
On this day, distinguished women professionals such as scientists, lawyers, athletes, and those who achieved great success in spite of physical disabilities are often invited to schools to give lectures about their success. These presentations rouse girls’ sense of self-discipline, self-respect, self-pride, and self-strength, and educate all the students to recognize women’s roles and contributions to society.

Tree-Planting Day (March 12th)
This holiday is to rouse people’s awareness of protecting the environment. Every year at this time, millions of Young Pioneers (ages 6 to 14), the Youth League members (over 14), and college students will be either organized by their schools and their class committee or volunteer individually to go to parks or specific places to plant trees. Supported by schools, parents, and communities, many students actively get involved in the “Yellow River Foresting Program” and similar land protection-and-beautification programs and donate money to the program. These activities help young people to develop the sense of protecting the environment. At the same time they learn to love manual labor and cherish the fruits of their work.

Youth Day (May 4th)
This is a time when young people are encouraged to demonstrate their patriotic behavior. Every year at this time, thousands of young people join in the Communist Youth League or the Communist Party, pledging allegiance to the Party and the motherland. Speech contests, singing and dancing, poem recitations, and “giving a loving heart to society” activities are held at all school levels and strongly supported by the school, family, and communities. The themes of all these activities are about patriotism and about how young people should contribute to the society.

Labor Day (May 1st)
On this day, model workers including scientists, teachers, workers, peasants, medical workers, soldiers, and people in all walks of life are honored. Many of them are set as role models and are made known to all Chinese people through the media. They are invited to schools to give reports, or students will be organized to visit these people at their workplaces to see how they make great contribution at their ordinary posts. Millions of young people participate in these activities.

Children’s Day (June 1st)
This is a great time for pre-K to sixth grade children to have fun, but it is also an occasion for children to be aware of their responsibility, to start to study hard “for the country,” and to be ready to be citizens with high ideals, morality, integrity, and knowledge. Every year on this day, millions of students across the country join in the Young Pioneers and pledge allegiance to the Party and to the country. Singing, dancing, drawing, and various activities held on this day all intend to strengthen students’ patriotic sentiments and to cultivate in them good habits in study and life. Children’s Day activities in China usually involve the participation of almost all students, teachers, and parents.

Communist Party Birthday and “Hong Kong Return” (July 1st)
On this patriotic day, thousands of young people who have performed well politically and academically join in the Communist Party. Speeches, singing and dancing performances, art shows, and exhibitions are held everywhere on campus from primary school to college. These activities are often organized by the school Party
leadership, student associations, or class committees. The contents of these activities are usually about the past and present China and how young people should engage in the great cause of reunifying and invigorating China.

**Teacher’s Day (September 10th)**
This is a day when the whole society shows its gratitude and respect to teachers. Usually students will send thank-you cards to teachers and volunteer to do something for their teachers as well as their families. Students often perform short plays and songs praising the teachers. Schools are trying to create a climate where students respect the teachers and the teachers care for the students.

**The National Day (October 1st)**
This is the most important patriotic holiday which celebrates the achievements of the country. On this day, young people are urged to show care and love for their fellow citizens and to strengthen their will to contribute more to the society. Most schools will use this opportunity to hold poetry and singing contests, speech contests, and art shows to help students identify their values and strengthen their patriotic spirit. Students also visit a revolutionary history museum, heroes and martyrs cemeteries, or historical sites, to strengthen their patriotic spirit. Students will also be organized to see exhibitions about the achievement of the country.

All these holidays are celebrated on a nationwide scale, and although quite often the activities held on these days have a strong political sense, they have been very effective in helping students develop a strong sense of responsibility to their families, schools, communities, and the country.

**School Rituals and Interest Groups**
The development of a sense of responsibility toward the larger society often begins with various activities at school. Almost all Chinese schools engage in certain forms of ceremonies or rituals, which are used to help students grow in morality, conduct, discipline, and “life attitude.” Patriotism is seen as the crucial element of moral character education. A flag-raising ceremony is held every morning, when all the students and teachers stand solemnly in the schoolyard singing the National Anthem and saluting the flag.

School assemblies and class meetings are held once or twice every week, at which students who perform well are publicly praised or rewarded, and problems are discussed. Students are constantly reminded of their responsibilities and encouraged to be good and helpful to others.

Morning exercise is a required school activity. Regular physical exercise contests will be held between schools, grades and classes. This is a time for students to refresh themselves from study, to strengthen their body, and to build up their collective spirit.

Many schools have enrollment ceremonies for new students, coming-of-age ceremonies for fourteen- and eighteen-year-olds, graduation ceremonies, and “Three-Good-Students” reward meetings. The latter reward is an honor given to students who have good health, good grades, and have performed service to their class or school. These ceremonies often greatly inspire students to develop a strong love for their school, a strong sense of social responsibility and a strong will to better the country.

To cultivate a sense of responsibility and love of labor, Chinese schools require everyone, including primary school students, to do a certain amount of manual work each week. Students are expected to erase the blackboard for teachers and clean classrooms and the schoolyard. Also, many schools organize students to participate in a few weeks’ military training to help students develop a sense of national defense and build a strong character.

Today, various interest group activities, organized by schools and the Youth Palace (which are community youth centers), formulate a large part of students’ lives at and after school. Interest groups such as orchestra, band, chorus, dancing, arts, calligraphy, writing,
These activities prove to be very effective in improving students’ academic performance as well.

**Cultural and Sports Activity**

Chinese schools usually will try to create a school climate that will involve all students in participation and foster in them a sense of collectivism. At Chinese schools, there is a recess of ten or twenty minutes between classes and a two-hour lunch break at noon. Since most schools have a schoolyard or playground, students have much time to communicate with each other and this gives them great opportunities to conduct various sports activities or arrange cultural activities. These activities are initiated by the school, homeroom teacher, or class committee. (In China, each class has a class committee that is responsible for academic work, sports games, and cultural activities.) These activities, no doubt, greatly help develop and strengthen students’ friendship and enrich student school life.

In China, character education is not only for primary and secondary school students, but permeates into college life as well. Campus cultural and sports activities are a very important part of school life as well as an effective way to develop the sentiments of “Five Loves”.

**The Neighborhood**

Most students live close to schools; therefore, students have many opportunities to involve themselves in the school activities. Schoolwide sports meetings are held twice a year, and sports activities are on school playground everyday. A great variety of cultural festival activities are rich in content and form. Most schools, from primary school to college, exhibit students’ artwork, calligraphy, handicrafts, and photography. Speech contests and singing and dancing performances are frequent. All these activities are intended to enrich students’ lives and cultivate in them a love for the country and pride in being Chinese. This is a time to demonstrate personal ability and intelligence, but also collectivist and positive life attitudes. The basic themes of these activities are to rouse young people’s awareness of their social responsibilities, to encourage them to participate actively in the socialist construction, and to celebrate the great achievements of the country.

To enrich students’ extracurricular activity and to strengthen their sentiments of “Five Loves”, many schools, Youth Palace, Children Center, Children and Youth library initiate extracurricular reading activity. Students are encouraged to read at least “one hundred outstanding books” of the kind that will inspire them to work hard for the country and grow intellectually, physically, morally, and mentally.

**Social Service Activity**

Social service is an important activity that at once strengthens young people’s sense of serving the community and deepens their understanding of social reality. Students are organized by the Young Pioneers, the Youth League, the Party, and students associations to participate in various social practices and community service to develop social responsibility. Many students, from primary to graduate level, participate in “Project Hope” (helping kids who drop out of school because of poverty), the “Give-Off-Your-Loving-Heart” activity (offering money or help to the needy), “Hand-in-Hand” activity (helping school children from poor areas), and other volunteer services. Students are encouraged to donate their pocket money and books to those who are the same age but cannot afford school or to help girls who drop out school because of poverty and gender prejudice. Volunteer projects include providing physical and financial support to the aged, the disabled, welfare institutions and orphanages; publicizing regulations and laws; and visiting impoverished areas to teach farmers advanced agriculture techniques. These activities help close the distance between students and society and help students grow into a citizen with responsibility and morality.

**Challenges of Character Education in China**

A typical student in China today is an only child, because the government encourages parents to have only one child as a means of population control. Many of these young people are getting more concerned with their own interests and the pursuit of external pleasures as opposed to intrinsic rewards. Many students find the values they learn at school are not in accordance with what many adults actually practice. This has caused some confusion in students.

In the long run, character education in schools seems effective in fostering in students the desired character traits, such as responsibility, collectivism, and respect and love for the people and the country. The challenge today, however, is that quite often this education and its activities seem far from students’ practical life, especially when commercialism and individualism are having so much influence on students.  

**Note**

1. The Five Loves posters are part of the International Institute of Social History (IISG, in Danish) Stefan R. Landsberger Collection, on the web at www.iisg.nl/~landsber. Dr. Landsberger is at the Sinological Institute of Leiden University, The Netherlands. Used by permission.

**Selected References**


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