What Is a “Good Child”?

Changes in Family Education in Republican China(1919~1949)

Haolan, zheng
Keio University, Japan
(zheng@sfc.keio.ac.jp)

Introduction

French historian Philippe Aries stated in his 1962 book Centuries of Childhood that the concept of childhood was born after the 17th century. Since then, the history of childhood, as a research field of social history, has developed significantly in Europe and the United States, and substantial research results have been achieved in recent years. However, in China, little work has been done in this field. Although several studies have examined the history of home economics, including women’s viewpoints on parenting and child rearing, the field of the history of childhood as a whole is still not advanced.

The original concept of “childhood” is political, and controversies on “childhood,” along with the cultural and power relationships, always influence the concept. From a historical perspective, the concept of childhood is closely related to the birth of the modern nation-state. To ensure a labor force and military power and to maintain the population’s

---

quality, the nation-state needs to create “citizens” who practice good hygiene, have healthy bodies, and are disciplined and follow orders. The state established child-welfare and related systems such as reducing the infant mortality rate, developing social relief activities for orphans and abandoned children, and implementing compulsory education. In the meantime, the state also intervened in the domestic affairs of the family, such as parenting and child rearing. 

Thus, with the process of the nation state’s construction, children were no longer the personal possessions of their parents but “citizens” belonging to the state. During the May Fourth Movement, theories and modern knowledge of child psychology and education were introduced to China. More and more intellectuals began to criticize traditional family education as harmful to child development, arguing that parents needed modern knowledge in order to raise good children. Starting in 1928, when the Nationalist government was founded in Nanjing, the government tried to institutionalize family education to promote modern knowledge on how to raise a good child.

This paper argues that the discourses of family education changed greatly after the 1930s, particularly after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Before the 1930s, Dewey’s child-centered theory was advocated by many intellectuals, but after the 1930s, the emphasis was shifted from child-centered education to educating children to be disciplined (and obey orders) and nationally conscious. This is a profound transformation in the modern history of childhood in China. Since then, the education of children to obey order and authority has been practiced continuously by the People’s Republic of China, and it still influences Chinese society today.

---

Nevertheless, little attention was paid to this transformation in previous research.  

Colette Plum’s work is a pioneering study in this field. Plum looked at orphanage and wartime childcare facilities to study how the state educated children to become citizens. But orphanage and wartime childcare facilities differ considerably from ordinary family life. In contrast to Plum’s work, this research emphasizes family education and utilizes local newspapers such as Shen Bao and Ta Kung Bao, periodical articles, and the government materials for internal use to examine the definition of a “good child” and the way to raise one. Below is an analysis of discourse since the May Fourth Movement, followed by an examination of the influence of the Sino-Japanese War.

1. The changing way of child rearing after 1919

In traditional Chinese society, children were considered to be the personal possessions of their parents and family, but this opinion was challenged after the start of the Republican era. During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republican China, Chinese students who studied in Japan, Europe, and the United States returned home and founded periodicals like Education Journal and The World of Education to introduce the latest thoughts about child psychology and educational psychology.  

---


Dewey’s pragmatism in particular had a significant effect on the reform of education in China during and after the May Fourth Movement.

As is well known, John Dewey thought that traditional education, with its focus on rote learning and examinations, needed to be changed.\(^8\) His theory on child-centered education emphasized that children were active participants in their own education and development and that children’s interests, preferences, and ideas should be respected and considered in the implementation of instructional practices. Some famous advocates of his theory in China, such as Hu Shi, Chen Heqin, and T’ao Hsing-chi, criticized traditional patriarchal education for suppressing the child’s natural development. They advocated placing a high value on communication between parents and children. As for the parents, instead of coercing children, they needed to learn child psychology and provide an environment in order to raise good children. They also needed to avoid vices such as wastefulness, gambling, slovenliness, and superstition, and set examples for their children by their own actions.\(^9\) In other words, child-centered education emphasized the children’s own natural development and the instructional duties of parents, such as providing a good and clean environment for children.

It must be noted that, when “child-centered education” was introduced to China, it was not considered as education to meet children’s individual needs and concerns. Instead, it stressed children’s characteristics as a whole. For example, in 1923, Shen Bao published an article introducing children’s social and non-social characteristics. In this article, competitiveness, being fond of one’s group, sympathy, and playfulness were

---


thought of as social characteristics, whereas non-social characteristics were fear, anxiety, excitability, love of food, and inquisitiveness.10

What is the definition of a good child? In traditional Chinese society, good child-raising means training children to follow the Confucian order, such as “three principles and five virtues” (三纲五常, Sāngāng Wǔcháng)11, and get a high social position as a government official in the future by passing the imperial examination. According to this Confucian understanding, a good child is someone who has good intellectual ability and obeys his or her parents and other authorities. As mentioned, such traditional education was thought harmful to children’s development during the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republican era. More and more intellectuals began to emphasize that not only intellectual ability but also children’s physical health and social morality were important for children’s development. The most popular of those educational theories was “three-aspect education” (三育論).

The concept of “three-aspect education” (intellectual, moral, and physical education) was created by English philosopher Herbert Spencer and was introduced to China by Yan Fu in the late Qing Dynasty. In 1895, Yan Fu published an article titled “Original Strength” in the Tianjin-based newspaper Zhi Bao to introduce and advocate Spencer’s theory. Yan Fu claimed that a child who had intellectual ability, physical health, and social morality was a good child. Moreover, he thought that inculcating physical health and good character in children was good not only for the family but also for the strength of the nation.12 In other words, upbringing

10 “Gailiang Jiating Jiaoyu de Wojian”, Shen Bao, 1th October 1922.
11 “Three principles” refers to “son follows father, wife follows husband, minister follows ruler”. “Five virtues” refers to “benevolence” (rén), “righteousness” (yì), “propriety” (li), “wisdom” (zhì) and “fidelity” (xīn).
based on three-aspect education was no longer about domestic family life; it became part of public life, related to the formation of the modern state.

According to the education guideline promulgated by the Ministry of Education of the Beiyang government, “to foster a healthy personality and the Republic’s spirit” was one of the basic principles of education. 13 The “healthy personality” refers to the idea that “the state shall teach citizens to develop the habit of self-governance, and furthermore to take social and national responsibility,” which was also considered to be a civic virtue. The guideline also stressed that children should be guided to form good habits in daily life to foster their virtue. For example, an article about family education was published in Shen Bao on September 24, 1922. It pointed out that diligence, endurance, cleanliness, and obedience of rules and orders were “good habits” required to be a citizen of a modern nation-state. 14

2. Child-centered or state-oriented

As noted above, after the May Fourth Movement, the theory of “child-centered education” became prevalent in China. As a consequence, a group of intellectuals endeavored to disseminate knowledge on family education. For example, Chen Heqin formulated the curriculum for Gu Lou Kindergarten of Nanjing City, in accordance with child-centered education theory. With the help of other intellectuals, Chen also organized an NGO named China Childhood Education Organization. 15

---

14 “Gailiang Xianjin Jiating Jiaoyu de Wo Jian”, Shen Bao, 24th September, 1922.
15 “China Childhood Education Organization” was a civilian group that focused on children education in family, kindergarten and elementary school. The group was established in 1929. It published a monthly periodical of Children Education. See
However, it is worth noting that “child-centered education” ideas did not reject child discipline. Concerning the specific contents of child discipline, compared with physical training, based on respect of the children’s mentality, advocates of child-centered education paid more attention on parents’ efforts to improve family environment and educate children to form their good habits. Family education theory in this period emphasized respect for the child’s natural traits and the necessity of parents’ democratic attitude toward children, but still maintained child discipline as an essential aspect.

Child-centered education was definitely not the dominant discourse of family education. In fact, in the 1920s some nationalists rejected it on the grounds of maintaining rule and order. They argued that education should primarily serve the national interest. Such voices became more and more powerful with the coming of the 1930s. On April 22, 1930, Hu Hanmin, a powerful politician in the Chinese Nationalist Party, gave a speech at the Fifth National Education Conference. He claimed that Dewey’s theory was not appropriate for China:

> With the spread of pragmatic education and child-centered education in China, I am saddened to see students preferring a free atmosphere to shout slogans about abolishing examinations. Education must be carried on strictly. John Dewey and Spencer overemphasize freedom and turn it into anarchism, which does not suit today’s Chinese society.  

Hu Hanmin’s speech was referring to the fact that some students had

---

16 “Hu Hanmin Yanshuo”, *Shen Bao*, 23th April, 1930.
started a self-governance movement under the slogan of “child-centered education.” But it seems that few changes were made in the education system. In 1930, Hu Yishu investigated the conditions of student life in the primary school affiliated with Nanjing Female Middle School and made the following statement:

> Despite the spreading of the child-centered view to schools, there has been little influence on ordinary children. Schools have embarked on a few reforms, but nothing has changed. … self-governance turned into tools for giving lessons and was separated from “childhood life.”

Leaving aside the students’ self-governance movement, let us go back to the change of family education discourse. Hu’s aforementioned speech raised some important counterarguments. A few intellectuals pointed out that Hu misunderstood “child-centered education” and claimed that there was no contradiction between “child-centered education” and state-oriented education, because the former was just one of the methods of the latter. But such opinions were increasingly ignored after the Mukden Incident, especially after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.

Under the crisis of territorial sovereignty, “child-centered education” received many severe criticisms, and the view that education had to serve the interest of the state and society became the dominant discourse of family education. Some previous supporters of “child-centered education,” such as Zhang Xuemen, started to support nationalist education theory. Zhang was well-known as an advocate of “child-centered education.”

---


18 The Makden Incident was an explosion plotted by the Japanese military as an excuse to invade northeastern China in September 1931. The invasion led to the establishment of a puppet state of Manchukuo in following year.
education” in the 1920s. Based on this theory, he drafted the “Kindergarten Curriculum of Republican China” and participated in the process of reforming the educational materials and methods. But after the Sino-Japanese War broke out, Zhang began to renounce “child-centered education,” claiming that it could not address the real needs of Chinese society. He made the following statement about the reform of early childhood education:

The idea of education must be reformed. From the current kindergarten curriculum, it is quite clear that early childhood education cares about nothing but the child’s physical health and mental pleasure... Our country is now resisting imperialist aggression and fighting against the feudal forces; thus we should not adhere to outdated child-centered education theory. 19

Zhang Xuemen believed that during the fight against the Japanese invasion, the child existed only as a part of the state and the nation. The aim of education was not to develop the child’s nature but to guarantee the security and development of the state and the nation. This nationalist argument became mainstream after the Manchurian Incident.

3. To be a “good citizen”

In 1934, regarding the definition of a “good child,” 18 criteria were mentioned in Shen Bao: (1) loyalty; (2) simplicity and austerity; (3) resilience; (4) affability; (5) respect; (6) bravery; (7) punctuality; (8) protecting order; (9) good manners; (10) diligence; (11) keeping things tidy and in order; (12) agility; (13) prudence; (14) public virtue; (15) group

consciousness; (16) obedience; (17) an enterprising spirit; (18) independence. These 18 criteria were a response to the “militarized life” publicized by the New Life Movement Promoting Association. In 1934, Chiang Kai-shek launched the “New Life Movement” and tried to mobilize citizens to live a militarized life based on four principles: (1) military spirit and patriotism; (2) ability to act rapidly and in unison; (3) living an austere and simple life; (4) forming the habit of obeying disciplines and orders. By the same token, childhood education was supposed to pay attention to the training required to create “citizens.”

The national-oriented education aiming to form a “good citizen” was enhanced after the Sino-Japanese War began in 1937. Article 29 of the Guidelines of the War of Resistance and State Foundation, issued in 1938, stated two wartime guidelines of education: that “the educational system and the textbooks should be revised to emphasize national values in wartime,” and that youth, professionals, and women should be trained. In this guideline citizen virtue was emphasized, whereas “child-centered education” was no longer mentioned, meaning that the guideline turned completely toward national-oriented education.

Under the war regime, individualized family education was rejected. The collective aspect of “family education” was promoted as a basic national policy in the interest of the state. In other words, the goal of family education was not to preserve the qualities of the family or children’s happiness but to raise the child to serve the country. Therefore, parents needed to teach their children not only good manners and habits but also the bravery to resist the Japanese aggression.
In 1938, the nationalist government issued the “Regulation Regarding the Implementation of Family Education in Middle School and Below,” stipulating two methods to promote family education as follows: (1) all of the middle schools, primary schools, supplementary schools, and civil schools should implement family education on Sundays and other holidays; (2) all mothers should join the family education associations held in neighboring schools. The regulation also provided eight concrete goals for family education: (1) To improve family hygienic conditions; (2) To do housework; (3) To save family possessions; (4) To improve family relations; (5) To protect children’s health; (6) To improve children’s habits; (7) To nurture children’s learning desire; (8) To nurture the national consciousness of children. 24 The children’s education was not the entire contents of the family education in this regulation; it aimed to build a “good family” that was able to contribute to the wartime regime. To build a “good family,” parents needed to achieve the following 10 goals. 25

(1) To have national consciousness and patriotic spirit;
(2) To have the confidence to win the War of Resistance;
(3) To unite to fight against common enemies with animosity;
(4) To have a good personality;
(5) To keep a regular schedule;
(6) To keep neatness and order;
(7) To know that parents’ behaviors have an influence on children;
(8) To have knowledge of childhood health care and childhood psychology;
(9) To know methods of education;
(10) To avoid bad habits.

The Ministry of Education issued “The Temporary General Regulation of Organization of Family Education Associations in School” and “The Temporary General Regulation of Organization of Family Education Associations of City and County” in 1941. The government acknowledged that family education was the foundation of all education and that parents should foster children’s good personalities by creating a scientific and healthy family environment. Here, “scientific environment” meant that all family members—parents and children alike—needed to act by obeying rules and orders. “Healthy environment” meant that all activities, including house cleaning, meals, and sleeping, had to follow a schedule. 26 To achieve these goals, there was no doubt that the government and educational institutions had to train parents.

The government mentioned the following four instructions to train parents:
(1) To establish the General Family Education Promotion Association at the central level and Branch Family Education Promotion Associations in the respective provinces and counties. These governmental organizations were the centers for popularizing educational knowledge and training housewives; (2) To establish a department of family education in normal schools and female normal middle schools to train professionals in family education; (3) To implement family education in school. In particular, the curriculum of university and middle schools needed to include family education courses, and local primary schools and civil schools needed to develop training programs for housewives; (4) To collaborate with social organizations on family education, especially housewife discussions and meetings to share experiences and to improve family education. 27

Needless to say, these instructions were not always carried out. As Helen M. Schneider pointed out, wartime family education in China was premised on an unequal gender order that overemphasized the role of mothers in family education\(^{28}\). In the same period, another related question was that there was a huge gap between urban middle-class families and poor families in terms of childhood education. Middle-class children might have their own room with toys to play with and children’s books to read, and their parents also had an opportunity to get information on family education. But for factory workers and other poor families, family education appeared irrelevant. In such families, children were always used as labor, and if unplanned children (especially girls) or sickly children were born, they were likely to be abandoned or killed by their parents.

Questions such as these still need to be studied further to understand fully the reality of family education. This research explains that the state began to intervene in family education by using state authority to deal with this issue, which was previously a private space, after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Besides children, the wartime family education aimed to transform parents into wartime citizens. Everyone, children and parents alike, was supposed to become a docile “citizen” obeying ideology, rule, and order, and having ethnic and national consciousness.

**Conclusion**

This paper shows that the definition of a “good child” is closely related to politics. In 1920s China, a healthy and clean child with good life habits was considered a “good child.” At the same time, “child-centered education” seeking not to suppress but to respect the child’s nature was the

\(^{28}\) See note 2.
mainstream theory in educational circles. However, the concept of “child-centered education” in China at that time stressed the child’s collective character rather than the individual one. As Margaret Tillman mentioned in her research, intellectuals in East Asia tended to borrow Western concepts to serve their own purposes.\(^{29}\) The acceptance of “child-centered education” in China was deeply influenced by cultural and social conditions.

After the Manchurian Incident, the idea of “child-centered education” declined, while state-oriented education theory became predominant. It caused dramatic changes in the perception of what made a “good child.” Instead of concentrating on the development of children’s nature, discipline, obedience, patriotism, and having good habits were emphasized. To be a “good child” meant being a good citizen who served his country and had the character traits mentioned above. In my opinion, this was a big change in children’s history in 20th-century Chinese society.

The rise of state-oriented children education continued to be influential after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. After the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the state intensified its complete control over the society through numerous political movements such as the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries. As the anti-American fervor increased, the periodical *People’s Education* rejected “child-centered education” for lacking either a political standpoint or an interpretation of class struggle. As a key advocate of the theory, Chen Heqin conducted self-criticism in the *People’s Daily* in October 1951, insisting that “child-centered education totally ignored the needs of the state and society and numbed children’s revolutionary consciousness.” This shows that

“child-centered education” was completely abandoned after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and that the state monopoly of childhood education was reinforced during Mao’s era. Today, when we consider how to raise good children, we should not forget that our perceptions of what constitutes a “good child” were formed in history and influenced by politics.
Helen M. Schneider (2012), *Keeping the Nation’s House: Domestic Management and the Making of Modern China*, University of British Columbia.
Thomas D. Curran (2005), *Educational Reform in Republican China: The Failure
of Educators to Create a Modern Nation, Lewiston, NewYork: Edwin Mellen Press.