



Moral Education in Asia: Pressures, Contradictions and Future Directions

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INTRODUCTION

Moral education is gaining increasing attention in Asia; this was clearly evidenced by those attending the conference of the Asian Pacific Network for Moral Education held at Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China, 12-14 May, 2007.

There were 36 invited participants and 23 presentations. Nations represented included Australia (1), China (13), Hong Kong (7), Korea (4), Japan (5), Macau (1), Malaysia (1), New Zealand (1), Singapore (1), United Kingdom (1) and USA – Hawaii (1).



CONFERENCE THEME

The conference covered a wide range of themes, including:

1. *Social justice, diversity and changing moral values*: the importance of social justice for moral education was deemed to be a key issue throughout Asia. A central concept in Chinese political philosophy is that of harmony, linked to the Deyu curriculum. A survey of Chinese students found they identified with filial piety, honesty, trustworthiness and personal loyalty but, somewhat contradictorily, were less likely to identify with thrift, incorruptibility, public affairs and tolerance.
2. *Life education*: this seems to be an area of ongoing interest in Asia. In Shanghai (China), life education was taught for students to know, cherish, revere and love life in order to build harmonious relations – harmony of life and self which leads to self-identity; harmony of life and society which leads to a well-ordered society; and harmony of life and nature which leads to sustainable human development. In Okazaki (Japan) life education has been introduced to help combat youth crime. More widely, however, life-long learning in Asian nations is being promoted by central means through legislation coupled with decentralised educational administration, and there appears to be competing values at work: enhancing personal development and economic development with the economic over-riding the humanitarian, and democracy and participant citizenship often ignored.
3. *Teaching, learning and the curriculum*: the human genome project has considerable significance in Japan – it is important to take account of scientific logic in textbooks in moral and ethics education and for moral and ethical thinking to be included in science textbooks. In China, moral education textbooks are mainly composed of ideology, politics and character – since 2000 there has been a move away from indoctrination to a more open process of student-teacher dialogue. Meanwhile, in Singapore a new moral education curriculum requires that students should know what good values are, be able to reflect on and understand why it is necessary to uphold these values (moral knowing), have a sincere belief in and commitment to what is right and good (moral feeling), and to be able to put these into practice (moral action) through living a moral life in service to others.
4. *Moral as political*: since 1980, citizenship has received growing attention in China. There has been a shift from developing socialist citizens to cultivating an eligible citizen. Although contained in the Deyu curriculum, citizenship education has not yet achieved independence as a school subject. Part of citizenship education is legal education directed at maintaining social order based on discipline and obedience to the law, protection of people's rights and interests, concern for education and self-protection, promotion of economic and political development, acknowledgement of a qualified popular political participation, and Party and State governance exercised according to the law. However, while genuine development includes both material accumulation and the acquisition of human rights, China has been far more successful in promoting its economy than human rights. Clearly, respect for human rights is one of the critical issues facing China today.

5. *Reason and emotion: justice and care:* the role of emotion in perceiving moral values has started to gain attention, especially in Macau where a revision of a moral and civic education textbook has led to the inclusion of emotion in judgements of good/evil, right/wrong. In Japan, moral dilemma lessons are accepted as an effective method in schools but this emphasis on the principle of justice is being challenged by a virtue ethics based on caring.
6. *Moral context of learning:* the Association for Living Values Education International, dedicated to fostering the acquisition of the values, attitudes and skills needed for life in a global world, has brought to China and Hong Kong a programme in which a culture of values such as respect, responsibility, tolerance, peace and love become the touchstone for behaviour and relationships. In a Shanghai study of moral atmosphere in the school, it was found that for students an atmosphere of care was greater than that of forgiveness and justice which coheres with the move in Macau to give more weight to an ethic of caring.
7. *Professionalism:* the rapid economic growth of Macau has had a significant impact on students and teachers. Many students leave school and enter the casino industry rather than continuing their education. Making money and the material good life is replacing traditional Chinese virtues such as hard work and patience. Teachers have also started to leave the profession to work in the casinos due to challenges from education reforms, long working hours and underpayment, and the opportunity to earn attractive salaries. In Korea, a study on the moral development of professionals found that moral reasoning and sensitivity of students in professional education courses did not improve significantly but actually showed a decline! In short, learning experiences in professional schools can inhibit the development of a moral sense.
8. *Moral education for social and global interdependence:* we live in a complex network of interdependence and this forms the basis for moral education. If teachers take this seriously, they may become more interested in student's relationships with others, and in Japan may come to see the values in the Moral Education Course of Study as a way of improving student's relationships rather than being imposed by the authorities. This is becoming important in Japan, for the Government in revising the fundamental law of education, appears to have lost its way as policy-makers seem more focused on short-term gains rather than having a longer-term concern for the future.

But one theme stood out – the tension between so-called Asian and Western Values, especially in China. The party/government/state appears to have embarked on a two-pronged policy of social/economic modernisation including capitalism (an English language paper in Guangzhou had an article on the economy which made reference to the Stock Exchange, Reserve Bank controlling inflation and State Owned Enterprises) while at the same time making moral education a compulsory, timetabled school subject aimed at promoting patriotism (criticise the party etc and you are criticising the country so are not being patriotic!).

Young people in particular have embraced many opportunities this increased freedom has given them, and the good life is measured by the acquisition of material goods and all that the West has to offer without any of the attending vices (good luck!). Moral education programmes unashamedly promote harmony, chastity, and an acceptance of human rights consistent with the Chinese view of the world.

SOME IMPRESSIONS

An amazing amount of personal freedom, young people using mobile phones, typical heavy city traffic but rural/smaller cities empty of vehicles, all sorts of 'western' goods available, westerners not a 'curiosity' at least in Guangzhou, a growing gulf between wealthy (fabulous river-side tower apartment blocks) and poor (shanty neighbourhood) and a growing middle class.

A curiosity! One evening, while walking along the river embankment, we came across large rings of people watching others. In the first were young people dancing to western music. In the second were older people doing exercise in unison. The third fascinated us. With Waltz music and a chant of 'one two three' we watched perhaps a 100 couples learning to Waltz – 10.00pm at night, under the stars, in 28°C heat, and so unself-conscious. This seemed to epitomise the extent to which personal freedoms have been extended to individuals to pursue their interests by comparison with the Mao era.

China seems to be a mass of contradictions which at the moment seem to be playing out in ways which appear to be managed without too much overt tension; but can it last as citizens enjoy the fruits of modernisation? Many now travel overseas for study, holidays, work, etc. One casualty is the family. Whereas once the young lived near parents to support them in their older years, now many young people either live far away in other parts of China for work/study or live overseas.

While there are increasing freedoms in some spheres of life in China, in others there is not. There is considerable freedom of association to engage in approved social activities. Commercial life on the city streets seems to be driven more by capitalist motive than socialist conviction and this is clear from the goods on sale, the rise of a growing middle class and the existence of a millionaire class residing in palatial apartments. Economic development, however, is also widening the already large gap between the very rich and the very poor. The media certainly appear to have a degree of freedom – for example, TV channels range from those conveying traditional Chinese family life and social values to raunchy youth music programmes. The young appear to be heading in one direction: western clothing, mobile phones, material possessions such as cars, and earning high incomes in order to live the good life.

This rampant individualism is matched by a government heading in a different direction: the centrality of the Party in the creation of a harmonious nation, a commitment to patriotism to China, and an emphasis on traditional Chinese values. Caught in the middle are teachers who have a responsibility to engage children in moral education programmes where what is taught, as mandated by the state, is so much at odds with the lives of the young who seem to be willing to embrace all that individualism, capitalism and western values have to offer them.

But these are some dark clouds on the horizon. The young may have substantial social and economic freedom but of the political, there is little. Come the 2008 Olympics, once China has showcased itself to the world, will the Party begin to reassert itself and return China to a more conservative time of greater central control and a moral education to match, or will the forces of globalisation continue to transform it into a capitalist society with all the virtues and vices this entails? Only time will tell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Clark (far left) is an Associate Professor in the School of Educational Studies at Massey University. He is a philosopher of education and has published on a wide range of topics in a variety of international journals.

[Attendees from left to right: John Clark; Monica Taylor (University of London Institute of Education, editor of the *Journal of Moral Education* and conference co-organiser); Kohtaro Kamizono (Professor, Nagasaki University, Japan); and Jane Zhang (Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, P.R.China and conference co-organiser).]