



## Social Justice and Moral Education in China

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### INTRODUCTION

Moral education is experiencing a considerable resurgence of interest in Asia, nowhere more so than in China where state involvement, revised curricula, new textbooks and teacher education programmes all converge. The tension is a fundamental contradiction between the political agenda of the Communist Party to mandate a programme of moral education centred on a commitment to nationalism, patriotism, community and traditional Chinese values which contrast markedly with a social/economic policy geared to individualism and capitalism along with the pursuit of Western values by the young (and not so young).

Teachers are the two faces of Janus: required by the government to promote a political agenda which protects the interest of the state while students, heading in a different direction, pursue all that increasing freedom of association, movement and speech bring along with the material fruits of economic liberalisation. The evidence of the social/economic 'reform' is everywhere to be seen. The financial institutions of capitalism abound – Reserve Bank, stock exchange, insurance companies, state owned enterprises and the like; the withdrawal of the state from the ownership and subsidisation of many industries and businesses which are becoming privatised; the socialist redistribution of wealth by an earlier regime is rapidly being replaced by the capitalist accumulation of individual wealth and the private acquisition of material possessions with an ever-widening gap between the very rich (a growing millionaire class) and the very poor along with an expanding middle class.

This economic and social disparity has implications for the moral fabric of China and the moral education of the young. The Deyu curriculum, for example, extols harmony as a political aim for building a harmonious society (Zhang, Li, Zhing & Lin, 2007) but while students do give some weight to such traditional moral values as filial piety, honesty, trustworthiness, personal loyalty, patriotism, justice, fairness and responsibility, they are less likely to identify with thrift, incorruptibility, public affairs, tolerance, collaboration, devotion to one's work and self-discipline while being more accepting of wastefulness, being cool, being unmarried, homosexuality, euthanasia and divorce (Yang & Wan, 2007). Such empirical evidence begins to capture some of the surface and underlying features of the evolving character of life in China and points to the need for social justice to be incorporated into moral education programmes. In considering this, the question I shall address is this: Is a concern for social justice a necessary requirement for being a morally educated person? In

providing an answer I shall do three things. First, an account will be given of the nature of social justice and its importance in human affairs. Second, something will be said about being a morally educated person and why having a concern for social justice is a criterion for being morally educated. Third, consideration will be given to what this might mean for moral education for a just society, and for China in particular.

## **MORAL EDUCATION**

Humans are uniquely placed to make moral judgements about good and bad, right and wrong, ought and ought not, rights and duties, and the like. This capacity to be moral agents may have its source in a genetically acquired preference standard which allows the infant to prefer one thing rather than another, but becoming a moral agent is something we learn through experience over a long period of time.

Moral education is, minimally, concerned with the acquisition of both personal qualities characterised by the possession of virtues (e.g., caring, honest, loyal) and the eschewing of vices (e.g., greed, lust, lying), as Aristotle (1973) held, and understanding how one's conduct is shaped according to moral principles of a more universal nature. In their book *More Than Talk*, which was to have a significant impact on the subsequent development of moral education in New Zealand, Snook and McGeorge (1978) identified five principles so central to morality that abandoning them would lead to the collapse of morality altogether:

1. minimise the harm you cause
2. maximise the good you do
3. be fair to all concerned
4. have some concern with truth
5. do not unnecessarily impede others in their pursuits.

Agreeable as these are, I have always thought something is missing – there is no sense of social well-being underscored by a commitment to social justice. And it is to this I now turn.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Whether or not social justice is a necessary property of being a morally educated person will depend, in part, on what we take social justice to be. In its most basic sense it is about the relationships between groups in nation states in that there are, in some relevant and significant way, differences in their social arrangements such that those most disadvantaged are entitled to appropriate policies and actions which remedy their adverse conditions.

Talk of social justice only gets a purchase when certain conditions prevail. The first requirement is that there be a difference between groups of people. But not all differences are relevant. That some people have black hair

and others brown hair is not a difference which warrants intervention in the name of social justice. So, more is required than difference alone.

A relevant difference must contain some weighting of one thing over another. But not all differentials prompt a call for social justice. Suppose that half of the population each possess 100 books and the other half only have 50 books each. Even if we thought it desirable for all citizens to own 75 books each, with a redistribution of books so that those with more gave to those with less, such that equality of ownership prevailed, it is unlikely that this would be sought out of a commitment to social justice. In our lives, inequalities abound and there is no compelling reason to equalise them out by taking remedying action in the name of social justice.

Social justice can only be invoked as a ground for policy and practice if a difference leads to an inequality which in some fundamental way offends against a principle deemed to be constitutive of a just society. Hair colour and books possessed do not meet this requirement. On the other hand, lack of sufficient money to provide for the basics necessary to exist on or above the minimum standard of living a society sets for its members, as a consequence of government economic policies, does have a tendency to intensify calls for raising the well-being of those least advantaged by social arrangements. Or the discrimination against one group by another, women by men, employees by employers, homosexuals by heterosexuals, often leads to a demand for the government to intervene by legislating the discrimination to be unlawful and equality to prevail. So, where difference and inequalities have a significant, serious and harmful impact on citizens, such that their material, psychological, personal and interpersonal welfare are placed at a disadvantage, then social justice becomes a guiding principle for social policy and intervention/actions.

This leads to consideration of the just society, for social justice is lost without such a society. Or, to put it another way, an unjust society leads to calls for social justice. So, what is a just society? The New Zealand Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988) held that five standards ought to be used to judge whether a society is just or not. There must be:

1. dignity and self-determination for individuals, families and communities.
2. maintenance of a standard of living sufficient to ensure that everybody can participate in and have a sense of belonging to the community.
3. genuine concern for all people, of whatever age, race, gender, social and economic position or abilities, to develop their own potential.
4. a fair distribution of the wealth and resources of the nation, including access to resources which contribute to social well-being.
5. acceptance of the identity and cultures of the different people within the community and understanding and respect for cultural diversity.

If we work from this account, how does social justice connect with being a morally educated person?

## **MORALLY EDUCATED PERSONS**

A morally educated person is someone who has the following qualities. First, a person is one who, having been born a human being (with all of the human rights that go with being such), learns to become a person by acquiring a self-concept in relation to others which allows for the formulation of evolving life plans and the means of achieving these through rational reflection and strength of will. Such a conception, of course, includes the likes of Hitler and others of his ilk, so something more is required if we are to separate good from evil persons.

All persons learn, for learning is part of the human condition. But not all learning is of a kind, for some learning seems to bring about desirable persons and other learning appears to do otherwise. How we might become the former and avoid the latter lies precisely in the educational value of their learning, for it is this learning which brings about an educated person.

An educated person is one who can: add to and draw from a wide and deep body of understanding to both have experience and give meaning to experience; rationally and critically interrogate and revise their understanding and experience; appreciate both the intrinsic intellectual value and the extrinsic use value of their learning which enhances their personal and material autonomy; make sound aesthetic judgements of appreciation beyond merely liking; reasonably control their emotions such that their display is appropriate to the occasion; and to think and act in morally justified ways. More could be added, but this will do.

It is the last of these, morality, which is of particular interest. What makes for a morally educated person? If being morally educated is bounded, in part, by what it is to be educated, then it follows that the various qualities of being educated, previously alluded to, shape up the characteristics of moral education itself. So, a body of understanding is required, critical rationality is essential, and sound judgement is necessary, all three of which are directed at the moral realm in order to engage in moral thought and moral conduct.

When talk of moral education is at the level of individuals it is all too easy to limit the scope of moral education to the personal qualities such individuals must possess and display. The virtues are par excellence in this respect. The more universalisable moral principles certainly extend the range of moral considerations but still leave the analysis at the level of individual relationships.

But moral conduct is not simply nor solely a matter of individual virtues or personal relationships of how one ought to behave in relation to others. Rather, morality is also very much a social activity where the actions of individuals, when taken collectively, may result in some acting unjustly and others being treated similarly. Such collective conduct can be either individuals acting in concert (i.e., an organised group whose activities are systematically planned to bring about social injustice – an example would be the Nazi party's attitude to and treatment of the Jew's prior to and until the end of WW2) or holistic (i.e., while individuals may act independently of one another rather than as an organised group, the effect of these individual acts, when taken as a whole, results in injustices being cemented into wider social structures – for example, the way one man unjustly treats his wife may be a candidate for legal remedy in a court of law but would not lead to a call for social justice. On the other hand, if

men in a particular society generally treat their wives in unjust ways, such that the women hold themselves to the subjects of unfair treatment and so seek remedy, this would be a call for social justice with a legislative rather than a judicial resolution).

It is in this sense that morality arises above the individual to beam in on collective conduct. It is not about how I as an individual ought to conduct myself in relation to others. Rather, it is to do with how we (however the 'we' is defined on any particular occasion) ought to conduct ourselves in other-regarding ways. It is about how, for example, we men as a whole, through our individual actions, relate to and treat women, as a whole, albeit with individual women, governed by an over-arching commitment to working towards achievement of a just society and all that this entails. And for men and women we could substitute various other unjust social relationships, such as heterosexual/homosexual, parent/child, ruler/ruled and so on. In this way, then, is social justice bound into morality such that moral education must, of necessity, place it at the very centre of children learning to become morally educated persons.

## **MORAL EDUCATION FOR A JUST SOCIETY**

If schools are to provide a form of moral education which contributes to the development of a just society, then young people need to acquire an appropriate set of concepts in order to place their experience within wider global concerns. Increasingly, as globalisation exerts its influence across economies and social institutions, the distribution of resources becomes ever more unequal with the gap between rich and poor widening and the degree of social injustice deepening. The effects of globalisation are many, but of particular significance for moral education is the breaking down of traditional values, social arrangements, institutional practices and family relationships as 'western' capitalist values of material acquisitions and consumption replace that held dear by older generations. In an age of individualism, ethical egoism ('what is good for me') stands in stark contrast to more communitarian conceptions of the good life where moral conduct is shaped by a practical interest in justice, fairness, equality and tolerance towards others, especially the least fortunate members of one's society (Rawls, 1971). As the powerful forces of the media (e.g., tv, youth magazines), internet and other technologies (e.g., mobile phones/text messaging) take a hold of the imagination of the young, with the constant and appealing reinforcement of material self-interest, moral education becomes increasingly problematic. In a way, young people are heading in one direction, lured by all that emulation of western capitalism can provide, while parents, bureaucrats and teachers embrace a rather different moral tradition which, rather unhappily, finds no place in the lives of many of the young who so enthusiastically embrace all the virtues (and also the vices) which increasing economic liberalisation and social freedom brings in its wake. Attracted by personal wealth, social status, international career opportunities and the like, there is an increasing tendency for youth to accept a competitive drive at the expense of a more co-operative ethic.

But there is an assault on social justice from a second front. Social justice is built on a platform of human rights, of that which all humans, by virtue of being born as human beings, are entitled to. Here one thinks of, for example, the right to life, the right to sufficient material provision (to be fed, clothed, etc.),

the right to free association, the right to education (of the kind alluded to earlier), and so on. The greatest threat to humans exercising such rights as these lie in the policies and practices of governments and agencies of the state which, in protection of their own power and privilege, deny citizens of that which is their birthright to possess. There is a fine balance to be sought between the individual good of each citizen and the collective good of the community: too far in the direction of the individual has a tendency to promote self-interest at the expense of the wider good of others; too far a drift towards the nation state may, in the Kantian (1949) sense, reduce citizens to means for achieving state ends rather than being treated as moral ends in themselves, and so are left extremely vulnerable to persecution and worse.

How might moral education for social justice gain any purchase when confronted by such powerful contrary economic and political forces? The time-honoured practice of parents and teachers passing on certain values has some merit, but is surely limited in its effectiveness with children whose moral understanding is more likely to be shaped by what they experience than what adults attempt to formally instil in them.

A second task, via the curriculum, textbooks, other audio and visual material, internet, and the like is to introduce children to the experiences of others: how other children live, how are they treated (or exploited), whether this is fair to them, and so on. Awareness is one thing, and important as this is, it is not sufficient. More is required, namely, the ability to make sound moral judgements which, in justification, appeal to the sorts of moral principles listed earlier.

A third move is for schools and classrooms to embody the very conception of social justice they are seeking young people to commit themselves to. School authorities, principals and teachers, on this account, must hold up as an ideal, and certainly built into their professional practice, social justice as a guiding principle by which adults and children in schools and classrooms live by. As learning communities, schools and classrooms must organise and structure social and personal relationships according to an ethic of community well-being so that each individual is able to appreciate that while the good of each child is of equal worth this only exists in the context of the good of the wider community within which each individual's welfare is located. Such, then, is the move towards children seeing themselves as citizens of a community by participating in a school which, itself, is a just community.

The concept of citizenship consists of more than membership of a community alone. It has, for its full instantiation, a requirement to be a participant in the life of the community, to contribute to its general well-being and the well-being of the citizens who constitute it.

To be sure, good citizens are, in the main, law-abiding, seeking to attain a measure of social justice through legal means. This is all the more achievable when the community is democratic, for the proliferation of ideas about what a just society consists of is more likely to lead to reasoned debate about the good life and the means of achieving this (Mill, 1956). Free elections are more likely to produce governments committed to social justice than are despotic regimes. But even democracies pass bad laws, one party states more so, with both tolerating and promoting policies and practices which infringe upon human rights. Education may not be enough to rectify such abuses; since morality trumps the law (morality can judge a law to be wrong but the law is never a

source of moral authority), then on occasions a breach of the law, on moral grounds, may be justified by citizens motivated by a deep commitment to social justice, and when this brings citizens into direct conflict with the state and its protective agencies (police, judiciary, military) then, from within virtue ethics, there can be no higher moral conduct than that which is truly courageous.

## **WHERE TO FOR CHINA?**

The structure of Chinese society is fractured along several dimensions which has, over the recent past, warranted closer attention to the resultant inequalities and the need for social justice to remedy them. Two of these are gender and ethnicity.

Girls and women, as a social category, fare less well than boys and men. As babies, boys are often preferred over girls and female infanticide is not an uncommon means of families gaining their preferences; women, as wives, play a subservient role in the affairs of the family by occupying a lesser domestic position. The other schism is along ethnic boundaries, for China is composed of many distinct cultural entities, some majorities and many minorities, and it is by no means evident that this complexity of multicultural layering is grounded in equality of citizenship. These two longstanding ruptures have been joined by a third, and one likely to have profound consequences for Chinese civil society. The once 'classless society' has been transformed into a country of class segmentation: at the apex is a small but growing millionaire class, an expanding middle class occupies the centre ground, and at the base is to be found the mass of the population including the rural poor and impoverished urban workers.

The city of Guangzhou (10 million) and its surrounding hinterland is a case in point. The palatial highrise apartment towers along the Pearl River serve as a proxy for those who, through one means or another, have acquired immense wealth; the congested inner city roads crowded with private cars on the move coupled with the growth of expanding businesses and services along with comfortable housing reflects the material advancement of a burgeoning middle class which increasingly is placing great store on a university education to secure professional careers for their children; and then there are the urban poor who, in their working lives labour away at menial tasks and in their private lives inhabit far less salubrious apartment quarters in residential blocks stretching in all directions for as far as the eye can see, while those destined to a life of rural impoverishment toil for long hours, and may well reside in dwellings often lacking even basic amenities.

This growing gap in wealth has aroused official concern. A 2005 Zinhou News Agency Report identified some disturbing statistical evidence which caused the government to take the disparity seriously, given the rising level of rural violence. The wealthiest 20% of the population earn 50% of the total income while the bottom 20% earn just 4.5%. Whereas annual urban incomes averages US\$1000, rural incomes average \$300.

These days, the wealth gap is evident everywhere, from elderly citizens digging through downtown trash bins for plastic bottles to recycle to migrant shacks squeezed between luxury villas in Shanghai's suburbs. Amongst the wealthiest are private business owners whose fortunes were built on hard work and talent... and those whose riches stem from corruption and crime. Meanwhile,... nearly 30 million Chinese live in absolute poverty, meaning that by local standards they lack enough food and clothing. Another 60 million have incomes below... \$100 a year, well below the \$1 a day that the World Bank takes as its standard. (Kurtenback, 2005, p. 1)

Responding to this situation, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wan Jiabao have made calls for a 'harmonious society' (which chimes with the focus of the Deyu curriculum) while the Standing Committee of the People's Political Consultative Conference, one of China's two legislative bodies, has declared that the widening income gap "is the most cause of disharmony" (Cody, 2005, p. A16). Such action as the government has taken has been minimal: removal of taxes for the rural poor and reduced taxation of the middle class will do little to alleviate the social and economic disparities in the face of a continuing commitment to economic market liberalisation and globalisation.

In the face of the unrelenting forces of 'modernisation' promoted by the government which generate disharmony, and the contrary education policy aimed at the creation of a harmonious society, teachers are bound to experience a bitter tension between what their political masters demand of them and that quite different moral life sought by those they teach. All the moral education mandated by the government to achieve a harmonious society will come to little if its own economic policies produce such disparity of wealth that disharmony on a good scale prevails. Such is the fundamental contradiction that China must confront if it is to avoid a massive upheaval in the future in the form of another cultural revolution and all that this would entail for the rich and poor, urban and rural, teachers and students, and for China as a power in the world. It is still not too late to reverse the economic direction, but is anyone in China really listening to the moral education message for social justice for those who are becoming most disadvantaged and increasingly alienated from the very society they are citizens of? It seems not.



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