INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will look at how moral education in China transformed from a purely political/ideological form of indoctrination to an increasingly more holistic approach designed to meet changing social needs and to address the problems encountered by more traditional moral education efforts. The current moral education curriculum has been implemented since 2003 in primary and secondary schools according to the Guidelines for Ideology and Morality in Full-time Compulsory Education (PRCMOE, 2003). This curriculum has generally moved in the direction of the establishment of a democratic classroom where students ideally have input into the classroom discourse and are being treated as unique individuals whose perspectives and views need to be respected and heard. As we will see, these changes in the ideas and practice of moral education are helping to meet not only the economic needs of the rapidly changing Chinese society, but also the psychological and developmental needs of adolescents in China. However, these democratic reforms coexist with the retention of more traditional forms of moral and political or ideological education, often in an uneasy and complex relation. We will argue that the kind of democratic moral education efforts emerging in China is consistent with recent and ongoing psychological theory and research that examines how autonomy support and democratic classroom environments promote adolescents’ moral and cognitive development, as well as their psychological well-being. These changes in Chinese moral education programs, however, are also fraught with conflicts, paradoxes, and tensions, as educational systems and schools within China encounter difficulties of various sorts in fully putting these reforms into practice. The issues raised in our review are not wholly unique to China, but have parallels with similar efforts to instantiate a more democratic form of moral education in schools and classrooms in Western societies.
HISTORY OF MORAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

In order to appreciate the current Chinese moral education curriculum, it is necessary to examine the historical, social, and political influences that have molded and shaped its modern form. Throughout most of China’s 5,000 years of history, ideological shifts in conceptions of morality were often accompanied by political policy change and reform. For example, Confucianism emerged as a Chinese philosophy during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history (771 BC–476 BC), and was then regarded as the orthodoxy since the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) up to the Communist revolution. During the period following the Communist revolution, Confucianism was dismantled and replaced by socialist ideology based on Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought, the official Ideology of the ruling Communist Party of China. After Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up” policy at the end of the 1970s, China’s economy started booming as capitalist ideas and materialism took its hold on the country. Material gain and the accumulation of personal wealth became the overarching emphasis amongst the population. These changes further brought to light issues of corruption, often popularized in the growing national media, and similar efforts by the ruling Communist Party to address these pervasive social problems. In this atmosphere, many people started questioning the lack of morality in their day-to-day lives and started turning back to the teachings of Confucianism for answers (Ai, 2008; Yu, 2008). Accordingly, we will attempt to understand how social and political changes in various historical periods have also changed and shaped the form and hence the practice of the current moral curriculum in China.

Reform policy scholars have generally divided the development of Chinese moral education into four periods of development: 1) before 1949; 2) between 1949 and 1966, when the first education reform happened after the establishment of the PRC; 3) between 1966 and 1976 when the Cultural Revolution suspended schooling altogether; and 4) after 1976 when the reform and opening up policy was implemented (e.g., M. Li, Taylor, & Yang, 2004; P. Li., Zhong, Lin, & Zhang, 2004). (New educational reforms begun in 2003, i.e., the “Guidelines,” to be subsequently described, may be considered extensive enough to have opened up a new chapter in the development of moral education in China.) Since the end of the first historical reference point until current times, China has transformed from a closed, conservative, authoritarian society to a more open, diverse, and modern society. Each of these four periods significantly shaped moral education development in China. During the first period following the establishment of the PRC, moral education, or deyu, was a means of political socialization used to uphold the socialist government. Gradually moral education partially delinked itself from politics and currently its focus—at least officially—is to serve the development of students and, by extension, to strengthen society.

Origin of Chinese Moral Education (Zhou Dynasty)

The origins of Chinese moral education can be dated as far back as 3,000 years ago, when Zhou Gong (the Duke of Zhou) initiated the concept of “ruling the country by morality” (P. Li et al., 2004). He is the first person in Chinese history to write a moral text that systematically expounded the ethical interpersonal relationships that should exist between people in a hierarchical society (Yang, 2012). The “Zhou” rite system deals with the basic codes of conduct that govern all aspects of a person’s social life. For example, he established “filial piety” as the core ethical code to regulate the relationships within...
the family and mandate the ethics of “father as the leader” in the family. This relationship framework extended from the father-son relationship to that of monarch-subject. The monarch of the country was regarded as the leader in the political system just as the father was seen as the leader in the family unit. This link between interpersonal relationships and political stability provided the framework for Confucian social morality that was to follow.

Everyone had his/her defining role in society according to his or her respective position in the hierarchy (e.g., parents must provide and children must serve and obey). These hierarchical relationships were mirrored in politics. As a result, few distinctions were made between moral and political principles. This moral system, developed in the Western Zhou Dynasty (eleventh century–776 BC), laid the foundation for Chinese ethical culture/morality and set the tone for moral education that would extend for more than two millennia.

Confucianism and Moral Education

While the concept of filial piety and its conceptual framework of social hierarchy was first laid down by Zhou Gong, it was Confucius and his writings that propelled it into the forefront of Chinese philosophical thought. Confucius was a philosopher during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history (771 BC–476 BC). During that time, China was divided into several opposing states. War was rampant as these states battled one another. Strangely enough, this was a golden age for Chinese philosophy that became known as the Hundred Schools of Thought (Roetz, 1993). The rulers of each state sought whatever advantage they could over their opposition. Philosophers, thinkers, and scholars were highly valued as advisers who had the potential to tip the scale in their employer’s favor. They gave advice on a myriad of topics including war, diplomacy, economics, etc. Confucian philosophy itself emphasized a variety of moral matters, including governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, and justice and honesty, but it was not particularly influential during his lifetime. Yet his teachings were later translated/interpreted by authoritarian political philosophers into strict guidelines, distilling the complexity of his elaborate system of moral philosophy and political theory into a simple message: obedience (Roetz, 1993). This resulted in a common misconception about the association of Confucianism and immutable hierarchy of authority and unquestioning obedience. In contrast to what many believe, while Confucian prized hierarchy and order, democratic ideals are also present in fundamental Confucian thinking about the ideal state and family (de Bary & Weiming, 1998). Indeed, Confucianism is not only about learning moral values and generally honoring role obligations; it also encourages moral reflection on conventional virtues, and frowns upon blindly following the “right” principles. Confucius believed that blind subservience should not happen within the family or the nation and mere conformity should be avoided (for elaboration of some of these misconceptions, see de Bary & Weiming, 1998; Helwig, 2006a; Roetz, 1993).

During the Han dynasty, Confucianism was adopted by the emperor as the official ideology of the state in order to maintain social stability. Socially conservative interpretations of Confucian teachings were used to achieve this aim. This resulted in a “politicized Confucianism” that dominated the official state ideology of China until it was replaced by the “Three Principles of the People” ideology with the establishment of the Republic of China.
The Establishment of the PRC

In 1949, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established. It was led by the Communist Party of China (CPC) with Mao Zedong ruling the country as Chairman of the CPC. With the establishment of the PRC also came the first restructuring of education in terms of its goals and focus, its organization, curriculum, and the population it served. Universal access to education implied that moral education was no longer solely granted to the privileged few (e.g., advisors to the monarch), but to all people across the country. The aim of moral education was also modified to serve the revolution and the new “democracy” in building a socialist government. With the highly politically-oriented education content focusing on Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought as its guidelines, moral education was often synonymous with ideo-political education. Accordingly, citizenship values, such as patriotism and collectivism, which emphasized the subordination of the individual to the greater interest of the society or the group, were viewed as in accord with national goals and hence were propagandized as part of moral education (Lee & Ho, 2005).

Cultural Revolution

A decade of political, economic, and social turmoil began in 1966 during the socio-political movement known as the Cultural Revolution. In order to impose Maoist orthodoxy within the Party and to enforce Communism to foster social equality in the country, Mao Zedong inaugurated mass mobilization of urban Chinese youth as part of the movement to eliminate differences between town and city, workers and peasants, and mental and manual labor. Schools were closed and students were encouraged/forced to join the Red Guard units, which denounced and persecuted Chinese teachers and intellectuals, and engaged in widespread book burnings. At that time, moral education became a tool for indoctrination. Emphasis was placed on passivity, conformity, and obedience to authority. These values were guided by Maoist doctrine as they were expounded in The Little Red Book, otherwise known as Quotations of Chairman Mao, of which every Chinese citizen was issued a copy. The social movement soon turned into violence and resulted in widespread factional conflicts in all walks of life, especially during 1967–1969. The ensuing chaos paralyzed China politically and significantly affected the country economically and socially. Due to the close association that moral education had with these events during the Cultural Revolution, there was a general sense of disdain towards moral education until its next overhaul in the late 1970s.

Implementation of Reform and Opening Up Policy

In the period following the Cultural Revolution, the development of the education system in China mainly has been oriented to the advancement of economic modernization. In the late 1970s, the Chinese government (under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping) implemented the “reform and opening up” policy. By opening the country to the rest of the world, it aimed to move China towards becoming a modern, more democratic, and developed country (Qi & Tang, 2004). Moral education was viewed as the foundation of the Four Modernizations (agriculture, industry, national defense, science and technology) in China at that time, and vocational and technical skills were considered paramount in meeting China’s modernization goals. Among the notable initiatives to improve the country was a 1985 plan to reform the education system. Nine years of
compulsory education was called for. Aligned with policy change, emphasis was shifted away from politics and towards economic reconstruction. Moral education practices were also shifted/renewed accordingly, to meet this change in policy and social needs. On the other hand, the formation of a market economy in China not only promoted economic growth; it also brought with it an increased exposure to modern ideas, values, and beliefs. Internet and mass media allowed unprecedented levels of communication and promoted the exchange of ideas, especially within urban areas. The rise in popularity of contemporary concepts such as individual rights, freedom, and democracy, interpreted in various ways, was being recognized and revered by many youth. Hence, many of the traditional ideas/values (e.g., hierarchical social system of interpersonal dependence) and politicized moral education were no longer seen as appropriate for the new social arrangements and orientation of values. Instead, modernization called for a reorientation of educational priorities. Emphases were shifted to cultivate personal qualities such as independence, self-motivation, and creativity in students. Moral education was no longer solely a political apparatus. Mottos such as “All we do is for the students and for all of the students” became more common in schools (Qi & Tang, 2004). Taking teacher-student relationships as an example, dialogue and discussion gradually permeated the classroom, replacing the traditional authoritarian and hierarchical classroom (Qi & Tang, 2004). At the same time as the modernization and marketization of the country was underway, there appeared an “ideological vacuum” and a decline in morality. Contemporary problems of corruption and a widening gap between the standard of living of modern, urban centers and rural areas exacerbated the sense of crisis. Neo-conservatives saw the need to turn “back to tradition” and called for reinstating Confucian traditions, especially its sense of social responsibility and focus on moral virtues, as a foundation on which to rebuild Chinese cultural identity (Chen, 1997; Lee & Ho, 2005).

CURRENT CURRICULUM ON MORAL EDUCATION IN CHINA

The rapid modernization, socioeconomic development and globalization, together with increasing implementation and practice of “quality-oriented education” brought about further educational reform (Zhan & Ning, 2004). The latest Guidelines for Ideology and Morality in full-time compulsory education (PRCMOE, 2003) were fully implemented nationally in primary schools headed by Prof. Lu Jie and in junior high schools headed by Prof. Zhu Xiaoman in Fall 2006. In this reform, while the collective and social dimensions (ideological and political elements) were still very much upheld, much emphasis also was placed on the development of personal moral qualities and moral judgment abilities, and the psychological health of the students as individuals. These changes addressed the needs of educating young citizens in order to develop personal qualities that would match the features of Chinese market economy. Hence, the focus of moral education shifted from political socialization to the promotion of individual growth. In order to meet these ends, the new curriculum promoted a learning style that was characterized by “autonomy, co-operation, and exploration.” It addressed the deficit of the previous curriculum, namely the lack of relevance in students’ lives and attempted to increase students’ motivation for the subject matter by emphasizing active learning about matters that were practical and pertinent to the students (Lee & Ho, 2005; Zhan & Ning, 2004). Being student-centered was the core concept of the new curriculum. The curriculum also adapted its teaching content according to the students’ cognitive and
moral development, gradually expanding the consideration of the life world relationships of the students—e.g., from the Growing Self, to the Relations between Self and Others, and then to the Relations between Self, Collective, State, and Society (Zhan & Ning, 2004). These themes were integrated with the four subject areas, namely Mental Health, Morality, Law, and National Conditions Education, and were implemented in every grade.

While Guidelines expounded an idealized vision of the new moral education curriculum, turning theory into practice and bringing the essence of the curriculum into play in the classroom is a task with many difficulties and obstacles. This is particularly the case for teachers who have not received training to better understand and utilize the skills that are needed to deliver the new curriculum. Instead, many maintain a traditional teacher’s role and continue with an indoctrinating approach that only allows unidirectional knowledge transmission in the classroom (Zhu & Liu, 2004). Moreover, despite the emphasis on balancing knowledge and practice, many teachers keep devoting the majority of their time to textbook knowledge versus real-life practice. There is also a downplaying of moral education by teachers or parents, as the educational system in China is heavily geared toward preparing students for the national standardized examinations that determine students’ eligibility for university, and moral education is not part of the subject matter of these exams (Zhan & Ning, 2004). As argued long ago by Dewey (1916), democratic education must be a part of the whole school climate, but attempts by educational innovators to give full life to the democratic spirit of the new curriculum are often greeted with great suspicion. One example is the citizenship training program in Shenzhen Nanshan Affiliated School, which was initiated by the principal, Li Qing-ming. He pushed for the idea of Equality and Respect, launched an “Election Month” for students to learn about elections, and set up monthly meetings to allow teachers to listen to students’ questions/criticisms so that students could have a channel to express their views and learn about public affairs participation in action. However, his approach has been questioned and criticized by many parents and educators (Liu & Lin, 2010). He was publicly known as a controversial person and was often seen by education leaders and colleagues as “strange” (he was often referred to by them as “madman”). One of the criticisms leveled against him was that he did not use his time properly to teach, and instead used it to make things “messy.” Parents expressed worries that letting their child participate in these activities (e.g., being a representative in the students’ association) would affect their academic performance and hurt their chances of getting into a good university.

An additional issue concerns the enormous complexity of the curriculum, and at times, tensions within parts of the new curriculum itself. The current moral education curriculum is extremely heterogeneous, and draws on both “newer” democratic values as well as more traditional values, sometimes in an uneasy mixture. For example, the new curriculum includes a combination of values drawn from the older ideological approach to moral education (e.g., patriotism, collectivism, and socialism) as well as traditional Chinese moral values of honesty, respect for others, self-discipline, and even “knowing shame” (Fung, 1999), along with “modern” values such as open-mindedness and a pioneering spirit (Zhan & Ning, 2004). According to Zhan & Ning (2004), the goals of the new curriculum are to help students to be “independent and critical in thinking and questioning” and to establish in the classroom a democratic environment in which students can “exchange their own ideas.” Yet, in addition, other goals of the new
Democratic Moral Education in China are: to teach students to “cherish the collective interest,”
to “habitually follow the law,” to show “filial piety to parents,” and to “increasingly love
the Communist Party of China and the motherland” in order to “make them understand
that, led by the CPC, the route to socialism with Chinese characteristics will improve
people’s living standards and make possible personal goals” that are also “in agreement
with the common ideal.” By any measure, this is a rather tall order for any moral educa-
tion program to carry, with a lot of potential contradictions to resolve in practice and
for a complex and changing social reality as in China today (M. Li, 2011). Cheung and
Pan (2006) have described the current situation in China as essentially one of “regulated
individualism,” in which a much larger space has been granted by the State for individual
autonomy in the personal sphere and, as we have seen, in school classrooms, however,
“when individuals exercise their autonomy, they are not expected to challenge the social
and ideological basis of the collective” (p. 47). Other Chinese educational theorists (P. Li
et al., 2004) have noted that moral education remains in a complex and changing rela-
tion with the official political ideology and its aim of political indoctrination. How these
tensions ultimately may be addressed for China’s future social and political development
remains to be seen.

Other tensions involve how notions of individual rights and personal freedoms are
being incorporated and theorized within the curriculum and elsewhere (e.g., within
societal institutional and legal reforms). Within official Communist Party ideology, indi-
vidual rights and freedoms are seen largely conditionally and in utilitarian or instrumen-
talist terms, for example, as a means to create citizens who will have the characteristics
necessary to strengthen the State and improve the economic development of society
(Cheung & Pan, 2006; Peerenboom, 2002). This utilitarian and conditional approach
to autonomy, however, may be in tension with the new emphasis in the Chinese moral
education curriculum on self-development and psychological health. As we will see later
in the chapter, autonomy may be more than an historical or social fact emerging out of
changing societal conditions; rather, autonomy may be a universal human need that is
importantly related to individuals’ psychological health and well-being.

Finally, the official moral education curriculum itself is not the only way in which
morality is socialized and taught within the schools (Zhu & Liu, 2004). Extracurricu-
lar activities also play a major role, and these activities are often designed to enhance
group solidarity and to inculcate associated values, such as patriotism, through means
such as routines, modeling, and rewards. For example, Zhu and Liu (2004) describe the
morning meeting ritual in Chinese schools in which the national flag is raised every
Monday. During this meeting, three students who are believed to have “well-rounded
development” are selected to raise the flag. These students announce to other students
the reasons they were selected in order to encourage others to behave well so that they
may also gain such an honor. Following this, the principal or sometimes another student
makes a patriotic speech. In other such activities, student groups, such as the Youth
League or Young Pioneers (student Communist Party associations), organize class activ-
ities that also have moral and patriotic educative functions, sometimes incorporating
rewards, medals, and other honors associated with demonstrations of virtues or desir-
able characteristics. These approaches, and the social hierarchies they may create, typi-
cally involve “heteronomous” moral education methods that, although consistent with
the older ideological moral education, may run counter to the principles of equality
and critical reflection meant to form the heart of the new, democratic moral education
curriculum (P. Li et al., 2004). In reality, Chinese students thus experience a diverse range of moral education efforts in schools, each with varying views of the agent (active versus passive, students as equals versus as subordinates) that may not always be consistent in underlying philosophy or values.

CONFLICTS, TENSIONS, AND HETERODOXY: PARALLELS WITH WESTERN MORAL AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

In the previous section, we have provided an overview of the historical development of moral education philosophies and practices in China from Confucianism through the Maoist Communist era to the more recent period of “opening up” characterized by enormous economic and cultural transformations. The contemporary state of Chinese moral education can be described as one of complexity, heterogeneity, and even contradiction, with more traditional practices and philosophical approaches enduring and coexisting alongside more recent democratic and child-centered educational innovations. Indeed, many parallels may be drawn between this state of affairs and that of contemporary moral and civics education efforts in the West. Western educational theorists have frequently drawn a contrast between character and civics education (e.g., Osborne, 2004; Sears & Hughes, 2006), each having a different perspective on the overall aims of education and on the child as a moral agent in this process. Character education has traditionally been concerned with instilling in the child those traits deemed morally desirable by society, such as honesty, compassion, duty, loyalty, love of country, and a good work ethic. As Osborne (2004, p. 13) states, the character education approach has “equated the good citizen with the good person, the man or woman who helps others, respects other people’s rights, obeys the laws, is suitably patriotic, and the like.” In accordance with this approach, there is an emphasis on molding citizens to become productive contributors to the workplace, and the emphasis is on duties and responsibilities over rights. The pedagogical model implicit and sometimes explicit in this approach is a top-down emphasis on fixed social traditions and values transmitted to the child through routines, habits, role models, and repetition (Schaps, Shaeffer, & McDonnell, 2001). In contrast, civics education emphasizes the rights and duties of democratic citizenship, with the goal of helping children to become critical and reflective citizens who can contribute to public democratic institutions and themselves help shape social change. Within this perspective, children’s own rational autonomy is given center stage, and moral education efforts accordingly stress “open ended” problems, deliberation and debate, and the need for active participation in democratic social life.

Given the democratic political culture of Western societies and the emphasis on personal autonomy and rights, it might be expected that civics education would be the dominant approach in moral education in North America, but many reviews over several decades have suggested otherwise (Helwig & Yang, in press). Berman (1997) has noted that much of what is taught in civics classes in the United States and Canada consists of dry, disembodied facts and definitions, usually centering on the structure and workings of government. Controversial issues and conflicts tend to be downplayed or even avoided, and the role of the citizen is largely relegated to voting (Caroll et al., 1989). In both elementary and secondary schools, lectures followed by recitation or individual work comprise the main form of civics instruction (Berman, 1997). This state of affairs is not limited to North America. Strikingly, a survey of 90,000 students in 28 countries
found that only 16% of students stated that their civics teachers sometimes allowed class discussions (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001). The prevailing approach to civic education in many countries, including Western democracies, appears to be ill-suited to stimulating students’ critical thinking and reflection and engaging their actual moral reasoning.

Western educational theorists have cited several reasons for the failure to adopt a more constructivist and democratic form of civics education, and these reasons are strikingly similar to those proffered by Chinese educators in discussing problems with implementing the new moral education curriculum in China (Zhan & Ning, 2004). First, many teachers and administrators themselves may hold a more traditional view of education focusing on the need to prepare students for conformity to adult roles and institutions, rather than instilling a critical or democratic consciousness. Teachers and administrators may fear ceding control of the classroom to students and the ramifications of this for maintaining classroom order. There is also a tendency for teachers to avoid controversial issues because of fear over retribution from parent organizations or administrators (Berman, 1997). Time pressures and a focus on standardized tests and “objective” outcomes may work against implementing more student-centered teaching methods. And finally, many teachers may feel ill-prepared to handle constructivist methods in their classrooms, having little experience or training with such methods themselves (Helwig & Yang, in press).

ILLUMINATING THE TENSIONS: RECENT RESEARCH ON AUTONOMY, DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOMS, AND STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES IN CHINA AND IN WESTERN CULTURES

These tensions between the different philosophies and approaches to moral education evident in both China and the West probably reflect the inevitable differences among the perspectives of the various stakeholders in educational systems (e.g., teachers, students, administrators, governments). Teachers and authorities may be more concerned with transmitting specific content or with maintaining order, whereas students may be eager to try out their developing sense of autonomy in educational realms, including in engagement with relevant but at times controversial moral or social issues. In support of the latter, research on conceptions of moral education among North American students has found that, beginning in the elementary school years and increasingly with age, students tend to prefer constructivist methods (e.g., class discussions) to top-down or teacher-centered approaches such as lectures (Helwig, Ryerson, & Prencipe, 2008). Furthermore, students who experience more democratic classrooms (those with greater opportunities for student involvement and choice) have been found to have fewer symptoms of anxiety or depression and exhibit less conduct problems than those who are taught in a more authoritarian or traditional manner (Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007).

This process appears to reflect an extension into the educational sphere of a more general developmental phenomenon in which children’s desire for autonomy expands in tandem with their developing competencies and abilities (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Helwig, 2006b; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2011). Some theorists have proposed that autonomy is a universal and basic psychological need, necessary for optimal human flourishing and functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2011). Autonomy here is meant to involve the exercise of will and choice, along with the autonomous endorsement of the choices one makes, rather
than “independence” from others as it is sometimes characterized (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Thus, individuals can be both autonomous (having opportunities to exercise their will and choice) and interdependent and therefore connected with others; indeed, optimal human flourishing and well-being is believed to be associated with the satisfaction of both needs for autonomy and relatedness with others (Ryan & Deci, 2011). When both needs are supported and met in social and institutional settings, the character of interpersonal (including student-teacher) relations becomes more one of mutual respect (Piaget, 1932), a cornerstone of democratic social systems (Dewey, 1916; Helwig & McNeil, 2011). Seen in this way, calls for greater acknowledgment of children’s autonomy and participation in moral educational settings voiced by both Chinese and Western educational theorists (and attempts to instantiate it in the new curriculum in China) may be interpreted to reflect an emerging recognition of the importance of children’s autonomy by educators and policy makers in diverse cultural settings, and the necessity of coordinating these psychological requirements with complex institutional goals and values.

This conclusion, however, is likely to be at odds with certain popular social scientific theories that have maintained that cultures have widely varying notions of self and morality that may be fundamentally incommensurable (Haidt, 2012; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987). In particular, the cultural universality of autonomy and rights, along with their meaning and implications for social and moral development in diverse cultural settings, have been the subject of recent debates in social scientific circles. For example, some theorists working within a perspective known as “cultural psychology” have emphasized the cultural shaping of human conceptions of self and morality and their concomitant variations across cultures (e.g., Miller, 1994). With regard to autonomy, some have argued that autonomy follows a different developmental pathway in different societies, with individual choice, equality, and personal decision making a hallmark of children’s development and socialization in “Western” or “individualistic” societies, whereas in other societies (including non-Western cultures such as China) autonomy is believed to be realized through increasing conformity to received social duties, the dictates of authorities, and the desires of groups to which individuals have strong identifications (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003). The conclusion that human autonomy in the form of personal choice is universally valued, for example, has been argued to be a product of a particular focus in psychological research on samples from Western, highly educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies (or “WEIRD” peoples, see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). In contrast, individuals in the rest of the world are believed to prize social harmony, adhering to received social duties and following the group, in accordance with a more sociocentric or interdependent self (Markus & Kitiyama, 1991—but see Miller, Rekha, & Chakravarthy, 2011, for a recent “middle” ground that acknowledges universal needs for autonomy along with cultural variations in how these needs may be expressed). Following this line of thinking, then, the importance of acknowledging and incorporating student voices and the emphasis on student autonomy and rights that underlies constructivist moral educational approaches would be seen as a largely “Western” conception of education that would not be expected to be valued highly in traditional and collectivist societies such as China. If these notions are now being incorporated into Chinese moral education, as we have seen in our historical overview, this may only be due to the external influence of forces of Westernization as China has opened up to the world and (perhaps inadvertently) allowed these ideas to seep into its educational systems.
We do not, however, believe that the conflicts and tensions that we have identified within Chinese moral education can be explained away as merely the incorporation of foreign ideological perspectives (“ideological pollution”). Rather, we believe that they have their source in indigenous conflicts and tensions of the same general sort that underlie similar debates and disagreements in Western educational contexts. First of all, we note that many Chinese students expressed very positive views about the new curriculum in the initial trial experiments conducted by Chinese educational researchers before its general implementation (An, 2004; Zhan & Ning, 2004). Second, as in the West, there remain many conflicting perspectives within China on the new role of students and teachers, with similar reservations about the degree of teacher preparedness and concerns over the inclusion of controversial topics as documented in Western educational settings (Zhu & Liu, 2004). In devising the new curriculum, Chinese educators looked to a variety of societies (Western and Asian), with the goal of taking from each what they felt was useful in addressing perceived problems and deficiencies with the existing Chinese moral educational system. Although student autonomy was expanded and incorporated, often in original and even radical ways, at the same time, indigenous Chinese ideological systems (e.g., Deng Xiaoping and Marxist Communist thought) were retained and also given prominence, especially in regard to political education. Rather than reflecting ideological colonization by Western theorizing, these reforms may be seen as arising from indigenous issues and problems (new and old) that the previous moral educational system was perceived as failing to adequately address.

We believe that this interpretation also is more consistent with the growing body of moral developmental research that has been conducted in China over the past decade or so (see Helwig, Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2014, for a review). The picture emerging from this body of research is that Chinese children from a variety of settings within China, in both urban and traditional rural environments, develop ideas about personal autonomy and rights, and use these notions to define the boundaries of legitimate regulation between the individual, authorities, and the group. For instance, Yau and Smetana (2003) examined Chinese adolescents’ and their mothers’ views about familial conflicts and disputes in Hong Kong and a mainland Chinese city (Shenzhen). Chinese adolescents not only experienced frequent conflicts with parents (often over issues such as schoolwork, chores, and interpersonal relationships) but also differed with parents in their perspectives on these disputes. Chinese adolescents frequently supported their positions with references to the importance of being able to pursue their desires and choices and exercise their freedoms. Parents, on the other hand, frequently appealed to authority or family rules or conventions, or concerns about children’s safety (prudence), whenjustifying their perspectives. These patterns were replicated in a subsequent study (Chen-Gaddini, 2012) that included a sample from a rural Chinese community. In addition, Chen-Gaddini (2012) asked adolescents about how such disputes were settled, and found that adolescents were more likely than parents to report that disputes were settled in a unilateral way, with the parents’ views prevailing. When disputes were settled unilaterally (by parental authority), rather than through negotiation and compromise, Chinese adolescents were more likely to judge the resolutions as unfair. Moreover, both studies (Chen-Gaddini, 2012; Yau & Smetana, 2003) found that Chinese adolescents’ appeals to autonomy and personal choice increased with age. These studies are consistent with developmental theories (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 2011) that suggest that the expansion of autonomy in adolescence is a universal process and that this process is regulated through reciprocal interactions, negotiations, and conflicts with
parental or other authority figures. They are not consistent, however, with the view that autonomy takes a different form in “collectivist” or non-Western cultures or that adolescents within these societies simply conform to authority or existing social norms or expectations in an uncritical fashion.

Perhaps most striking in this regard was the finding that appeals to autonomy and personal choice were greater in the more traditional rural setting (Chen-Gaddini, 2012). Although rural settings have changed less than urban settings, both economically and culturally, and have much less exposure to Western influences (Tang & Parish, 2000), adolescents within these environments not only develop notions of autonomy based on personal choice and freedom, but appeal to these notions in instances of disputes or conflicts with parents even more than those who are socialized in more modern, urban (and possibly more “Westernized”) settings. This finding is consistent with the notion that a heightened sense of autonomy may arise when cultural practices place too many restrictions on people’s basic needs for autonomy and personal choice (Helwig, 2006b; Lau, 1992; Lo, Helwig, Chen, Ohashi, & Cheng, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that autonomy is not something that is simply absorbed directly from cultural practices but is constructed out of the complex interplay of individual psychological needs and how these needs may be met or thwarted in different societies and in more proximal environments within societies such as the family or school (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001).

As noted, the new curriculum within China reflects the incorporation of greater student choice and involvement, and more room for class discussions, including even over social issues that may be considered controversial. Thus, the form of autonomy instantiated in the new curriculum reflects a recognition of children’s “intellectual rights” (Moshman, 1986) to freedom of expression and belief. These particular rights are often characterized as “Western” notions more associated with liberal democratic political systems. However, recent research has shown that Chinese adolescents also understand and apply these rights when reasoning about conflicts with authorities in school and family settings. For example, Lahat, Helwig, Yang, Tan, and Liu (2009) investigated urban and rural Chinese adolescents’ conceptions of various “self-determination” rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and privacy, as well as other rights associated with children’s psychological and physical well-being. With age, Chinese adolescents in both urban and rural settings increasingly affirmed children’s self-determination rights to freedom of speech (e.g., whether it would be acceptable for a school principal to prohibit a high school student from publishing an article in the school newspaper critical of the school rules) and freedom of religion (whether a child’s parents, who are atheists, could prohibit a child from belonging to a religion of the child’s choice). In supporting these rights, Chinese adolescents appealed to individual rights, autonomy, and universal freedoms. These findings show that Chinese adolescents understand personal choice and freedom as extending to freedom of conscience and expression, key foundational concepts for a truly democratic civic and moral education.

Other recent research on Chinese adolescents’ concepts of democratic decision making has yielded some interesting findings directly relevant to curricular issues in school settings. In one study (Helwig, Arnold, Tan, & Boyd, 2003), Chinese adolescents from three settings (a rural village, a small city, and a large, modern city) were asked about different ways to make decisions in a variety of settings, including the peer group, family, and school. The specific decisions were varied, and adolescents were asked to evaluate the acceptability of making decisions in a purely authority-based fashion (teachers or
Democratic Moral Education in China • 413

parents decide unilaterally), by majority rule (a vote, with children having equal say as adult authorities) or by consensus (everyone, adults and children must agree). One of the decisions concerned whether parents should require a child to take special tutoring on weekends to boost the child’s grades in school. This is a common practice in China, where parents are typically highly involved in decisions over academic matters. However, it was found that most Chinese adolescents from all three settings rejected parents making this decision alone. Many of them endorsed consensus because it would require the child’s assent. In their reasoning, Chinese adolescents appealed to the child’s right to make the decision and to the negative effects of coercion upon the child’s motivation, psychological health, and well-being. Here are two examples of characteristic responses (both from senior high school students):

“Tutoring will only be effective when the child wants to learn. Also, the child has the right to arrange her own time. Parents should give the child the right to veto [if parents make the decision unilaterally].”

“Many things, such as natural inclination, creativity, and freedom, are strangled because of this.”

A second example from this research pertained to how the school curriculum (what the child learns in class) should be decided. Although the curriculum in China is decided centrally (by educational authorities), Chinese adolescents nonetheless tended to prefer democratic decision making (such as by consensus or majority rule) because it would lead to overall agreement and stimulate children’s learning and motivation. Many of them explicitly took a critical perspective on curricula decided solely by educational authorities, as reflected in the following examples:

“Education authorities’ decisions are only based on examinations, and make us learn the boring texts. As to today’s education, it develops one’s interest. No to education authorities’ decision!”

“This [authority decides] will make kids passive in action…. When kids want to learn a subject, they must be interested in it. As it goes, interest is the best teacher. This way [majority decides] will make them learn actively.”

This study (Helwig et al., 2003) was conducted before the new moral education curriculum was implemented and was directed at the curriculum in general (not moral education in particular), so we do not know how these adolescents might have responded to the newer educational reforms. However, these studies reveal that Chinese adolescents clearly value their own autonomy and personal choice, recognize the importance of intellectual freedoms such as freedom of expression, and endorse more active, autonomy-supportive forms of teaching over rote memorization or traditional, top-down approaches. These findings also suggest that the curriculum reforms discussed earlier have arisen in response to long-standing issues and problems recognized by stakeholders (e.g., Chinese students themselves) and also by many progressive Chinese educators who are concerned with incorporating students’ perspectives and voices (M. Li, 2011; P. Li et al., 2004).
Other research on Chinese children’s conceptions of moral education practices used in the family suggests that Chinese children take a critical perspective on more traditional Chinese socialization methods based on shaming or “psychological control” (Barber, 1996). For example, Helwig, To, Wang, Liu, and Yang (in press) examined urban and rural Chinese children’s and adolescents’ (7–13 years of age) judgments about a variety of hypothetical moral socialization practices used by parents when a child commits a moral transgression (i.e., hits another child and takes the child’s possession). Overall, in both urban and rural Chinese settings and in a Canadian comparison sample, children preferred parental use of what Hoffman (2000) has termed “induction” (or parental reasoning accompanied by encouragement of perspective taking and the child’s consideration of the consequences of their actions on others) over other socialization practices such as parental shaming involving negative comparisons with other children (e.g., appeals for the child to be more like other children who behave better), appeals to group-based social shame (e.g., the family “losing face”), and love withdrawal (explicit withdrawal of affection), despite the fact that rural Chinese children saw these other types of parental practices (shaming and love withdrawal) as much more commonly used by parents than did Canadian children. Across both settings, when asked to justify their evaluations, children, with age, increasingly viewed shaming and love withdrawal as psychologically harmful forms of discipline and they preferred induction or reasoning because of its perceived ability to stimulate moral reflection, empathy, and understanding. Chinese children did not support the types of shaming practices used and endorsed by parents in ethnographic and observational studies, frequently argued to be a part of traditional Chinese moral socialization (Fung, 1999), although they sometimes recognized that parents used these practices because they might be effective in achieving immediate compliance. These findings illustrate the necessity of tapping into children’s own views about different types of moral education (rather than merely “what is done”) in order to gain a complete understanding of how cultural practices may be assimilated, evaluated, and sometimes critiqued by those occupying different positions in social hierarchies (Turiel, 2006).

**AUTONOMY, DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING**

The research discussed so far has shown that Chinese adolescents develop views about the child as a rational moral agent that need to be adequately incorporated into moral education efforts, whether in the family or the school. Chinese adolescents also endorse and apply democratic concepts such as freedom of expression and active participation in decision making that form the core of a truly democratic education (Dewey, 1916). As noted earlier, research in the West has found that educational environments that incorporate these elements are associated with more positive psychological outcomes in students, such as less depression or anxiety or conduct disorders (Way et al., 2007). Do these relations also apply in a non-Western society such as China, especially in more traditional, rural settings? Recent research suggests that they do (Jia et al., 2009; To, Helwig, & Yang, 2012). For example, To et al. (2012) examined democratic climate, defined as school or family environments that allow for greater opportunities for student involvement in decision making, and authority support for students’ freedom of expression and due process rights, and how these perceived features of school classrooms or families...
Democratic Moral Education in China

relate to a variety of dimensions of adolescent psychological well-being, including anxiety, depression, and overall life satisfaction. Adolescent perceptions of democratic climate in both family and school settings was found to be positively related to adolescents’ self-reported psychological well-being (i.e., predicted lower levels of anxiety and depression, and greater overall life satisfaction). Furthermore, these relations between democratic school and family environment and psychological well-being were just as strong (correlations in the range of 0.2–0.4) in the more traditional rural setting (in a Northern and mountainous area of Guangdong Province) as in the large, modern city (Guangzhou), so they could not be accounted for simply by level of modernization or “Westernization.”

SOME LESSONS FOR THE WEST FROM CHINA

These findings from cross-cultural research are broadly compatible with the highly positive student survey findings generated by Chinese education researchers who investigated the reception received by the new, more autonomy-supportive moral education curriculum (An, 2004). To be sure, these changes in the Chinese moral education curriculum incorporating student autonomy exist alongside the retention of other, more traditional educational practices, and so the transformation of Chinese moral education is piecemeal and remains in relations of tension with other aspects of the curriculum (and there are undoubtedly local variations in how well teachers have adhered to these changes or in the extent to which they have wholeheartedly put them into practice). We stress, however, that our argument should not be misconstrued to suggest a straightforward, historical progression, with China at an earlier “stage” and now only beginning to incorporate, in fledgling fashion, practices long in use in Western education settings (although this may be true in some instances). Instead, our intention is to argue that the need for student autonomy in moral educational settings is universal (despite divergences in cultural values and historical patterns) and that its actual incorporation into educational practices and settings inevitably will occur in different ways in different societies at different times.

Indeed, China currently may be in a rather unique position as a society with a centralized government heavily invested in the moral education of its citizens and where educators thereby have the resources and opportunities to experiment on a large scale with a greater variety of curricular practices than their counterparts in Western societies. China may even be seen as a hotbed of moral educational theorizing and innovation, when compared to the highly politicized and sometimes even ossified educational climate found in some Western countries. And so there may be many opportunities for Western educational theorists to learn from Chinese moral educational innovations as the democratic values long-prized in the West are tested and evaluated under very different cultural circumstances.

Perhaps strikingly, the new Chinese moral educational curriculum may sometimes incorporate student autonomy, reflection, and democratic processes in ways that may be considered radical or daring even within Western educational systems. As an example, consider the following take-home exercise incorporated in the new Chinese moral education curriculum designed to foster greater understanding and communication between students and their parents (Zhan & Ning, 2004). In this exercise, children and their parents are given different hypothetical types of relationship styles between children and parents.
to evaluate (e.g., ranging from strictly controlling to democratically negotiating), and they are asked to express agreement or disagreement with one another’s choices, to state their reasons, and then to engage in a subsequent discussion about the points of agreement and disagreement. As a moral education exercise embodying constructivist developmental principles, one could hardly imagine a practical application that is more in line with both the spirit and the findings of developmental research conducted in North America on familial discussions and their important role in stimulating moral development (e.g., Walker, Hennig, & Krettenauer, 2000; Walker & Taylor, 1991). But it may be amusing and perhaps even humbling for the Western reader to contemplate the reception (politically, and by local school boards and parent-teacher associations) that such a pedagogical exercise would likely receive were it to be mandated on a national basis and carried out by the public schools within a society such as the United States. The Chinese “experiment” in the new moral educational curriculum may afford an opportunity for Western educational theorists to reflect on the shortcomings of their own social institutions, including ways to remove institutional inertia or other impediments, in order to reinvigorate efforts to foster democratic schools and families in Western societies. The ultimate lesson of these contrasts may be that democracy is something that is lived “in the trenches,” within schools and families, in ways that often bring it into tension with authority and received social hierarchies; it is not to be gauged merely by a simple analysis of the contrasting features of political systems (e.g., China versus the US).

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, we argue that human autonomy is a universal psychological need whose instantiation is directly relevant to democratic moral education efforts such as those found in China and elsewhere. At the same time, there are complexities and conflicts inevitably encountered in any attempt to realize this need within diverse educational settings. Although the particulars of the cultural and historical contexts are certainly different, some universal processes appear to be at work in both Chinese and Western moral education efforts, and the parallels here are worth restating. First, conceptions of moral education are naturally heterogeneous as they are often based on incompatible fundamental assumptions about the particular values that should be taught or instilled as well as the process by which moral education is best realized. One approach, associated with traditional moral education in both China and the West, emphasizes inculcation of a particular set of moral values or character traits, such as patriotism or group solidarity, often through mechanisms such as extrinsic rewards and routines (e.g., the recitation of the US Pledge of Allegiance; the Chinese “flag raising ceremony”). The emphasis here is on creating a well-behaved citizen, one who replicates societal values and fits in to the existing social order to lead a productive life (often seen from an economic point of view but also understood as in service of the group or society). The other approach sees moral education as founded on the recognition of student autonomy (expressed in accordance with developmentally appropriate capacities), and prioritizes the cultivation of moral reasoning and reflection capacities. This may involve the formation of a critical consciousness that can be applied by students to help them to navigate a complex and often changing social reality, like that confronted by China today. The latter approach recognizes that students themselves construct their social worlds and are often charged with the difficult task of negotiating, or even resolving,
received contradictions in societal values, priorities, and goals. The main purpose of a truly democratic moral education, then, is not to provide students with a particular set of values (although some values may be better suited to this purpose than others), but to give students a set of skills that will enable them to function autonomously in a democratic social order that includes opportunities to exercise their voice to help shape their society (and not just being shaped by it).

Of course, the democratic approach to moral and civic education is never easy to implement, and in diverse cultures (China, North America) it confronts many similar institutional pressures such as standardized testing and an educational system that prioritizes “results” or social utility over student engagement, not to mention educational authorities who themselves may differ in their commitment to democratic education and their willingness to put this model of moral education into practice within their schools or classrooms. As we have seen, these tensions may raise questions over how to cultivate student motivation, and concerns over student perceptions of the relevance or irrelevance of moral education to their lives. Ultimately, students’ willingness to accept or to reject the different types of moral education efforts that they experience may rest on how these tensions are resolved. As the emerging research on psychological outcomes suggests, democratic moral education may not only be an ethical imperative valued and endorsed in its own right by many people in diverse cultures. In China as elsewhere, it could well turn out to be an important means of achieving individual—and by extension societal—health and well-being.

REFERENCES


Democratic Moral Education in China • 419


This page intentionally left blank