

# Chinese Moral Education -- Past and Now

Zhuofan Lei

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China

Email: leizhuofan517@gmail.com

**Abstract**—Moral education has been a significant domain in the Chinese education system. With the influence of Confucianism and Socialism, Chinese people have their understanding of morality. From the Qing era to the post-Mao era, Chinese society has undergone a series of dramatic social changes, which also transformed moral education. Based on the Durkheim's theories on the moral education and society, this paper would analyze the moral education in China from the background, contents, methods, and effectiveness in four eras to see the relationship between Chinese moral education and Chinese society.

**Index Terms**—moral education, Durkheim, social process, China

## I. INTRODUCTION

Durkheim once said, "Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity: education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child from the beginning the essential similarities which collective life demands." [1] Education is an eternal topic for developing society. Moreover, moral education, which is an irreplaceable part of the education system, plays a vital role to connect individuals with the state since morality aimed to promote behaviors prosaically among people. It is undeniable that people have different understandings and attitudes towards mortality, but there is a common sense that mortality connects with goodness. Durkheim defines morality to be composed of three vital elements on which it is constructed: attachment, discipline and autonomy. [2] According to him, attachment is the extent to which an individual could commit to a collective group. Discipline is a kind of tool restricts selfish tendencies and impulses, which can control aggressive and egocentric behavior. Furthermore, autonomy is self-responsibility and accountability for one's deeds. The triad relationship among discipline, attachment and autonomy constructs morality, and independent and interdependent actions fulfil them to each other. Moreover, the goal of moral education is making children learn these three aspects. Based on the prerequisite that education is the foundation of morality, morality can be modified by education in order to develop society.

In China, moral education has a long history since Confucianism and Socialism have had a significant influence on Chinese people cognitively and behaviorally. Confucius emphasized the moral values in order to construct a disciplined and stable society when Chinese

social and political conditions were chaotic. His goal of moral education is to help individuals improve moral characters and behaviors to become a virtuous person named "Junzi", and could be ready for being a moral governor in the government. The main contents of Confucian moral education are "Ren", which means the benevolence, and "Li", which is the behavior etiquette and it can express the "Ren". [3] It is the basic idea for Chinese moral education. Moreover, with social changing, new ideas join the Chinese moral education system. The morality of socialism can be summed up into envy and self-sacrifice. The former is the desire to possess other wealth, as well as the desire to see other wealth lowered to the level of one's own. The latter is saying that the common good comes before private good. [4] Chinese moral education changed from a different time due to social and political conditions. Four eras are worthy of analyzing since China experienced a huge historic milestone during these times. They are Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China, the Mao era and the post-Mao era. With the development of the reform and the significant changes during these four eras in Chinese society, moral education changes from the politicizing to the humanizing, from political education to the "grand moral education", from the campaigns to the integration of primary and secondary school moral education, and from the private moral education to the full range of moral education. To analyze the moral education in four eras, it is easier to understand the development of Chinese society.

The following parts would discuss the social background, contents of moral education, the methods to promote moral education, and evaluation of effectiveness. The social background, behaving as the fundamental social basis, influences the people's understanding and attitude to morality. It leads to the contents of moral education. Furthermore, the methods of moral education should be discussed. At last, whether moral education compelling or not during the specific era would be analyzed. In this process, the social reality and Durkheim's theories would be combined, such as social solidarity, conventional norms, etc. Moreover, to evaluate the effectiveness, the researcher is going to use a comparison between the initial goal of moral education and the social results, which is direct and clear.

## II. MORAL EDUCATION IN QING DYNASTY

### A. Social Background

China's Qing Dynasty lasted from 1644 to 1912, and it experienced the glory to decay. For government, the Qing

emperors embraced a labyrinthine bureaucracy. There were six ministries, each of which had two presidents and four vice presidents. For culture, the Qing period brought more growth to the arts and culture. Innovations and literature flourished with the aid of developing publishing industry, prosperous cities, and the adoption of Confucianism. For the social structure, Qing Dynasty reign was strict about its social structure which dictated who has power over whom. This often led to abuses of power and plots to take down those who ruled over the people. As emperor and his advisers staying the highest social ranking, generals, nobles, and workers were in the second rank, then went artists and peasants, the bottom was slaves and servitude. Qing Dynasty began with harmonious society, its economy was fast developed, and its govern stable. However, due to the Seclusion, in the middle of the Qing, Chinese traditional feudal peasant economy began to disintegrate, and the western worlds entered China. In the late Qing Dynasty, China was in turmoil, and the society was in chaos. At that time, China began the modernization process.

#### B. Main Contents of Moral Education

During the Qing Dynasty, the moral education still followed the traditional Confucian principles, especially the Neo-Confucianism, and it was more stark and ragescent. Yan Yuan, a scholar in early Qing Dynasty, said that “a virtuous and talented governor can use three things to educate people. And the scholars should learn six virtues, six etiquette, and six arts.” Three things contains manifesting governor’s virtue, making full use of resources and enriching the people. And the six virtues, etiquette and arts contains those like “Ren”, “Yi”, “Li”, “Xiao”, etc. At first, these moralities were regarded as the internal spirits of people, and the moral education emphasize self-discipline and respect for the emperor and nobility. But later, they were considered as the contents in ethic and institutions, which changed the rationality to etiquette (both pronounced “Li”). These virtues and moralities were a kind of inherit of traditional Chinese culture. The feudal system consolidated and strengthened them so that the contents did not changed a lot.

#### C. Methods to Promote Moral Education

There were two main methods of moral education in Qing Dynasty, official and civil. The former contained elite education and public education, which had four kinds of academies: the academy mainly for imperial examination, the academy for Confucian school of idealist philosophy, the academy mainly for abundant practice in textual criticism learning and literature, and the academy for studying the knowledge of modern western science and technology in late Qing Dynasty. While the primary responsibility of the latter one was determined by the “sage” and “senior citizen”, and the extent in close contact with educator and their daily lives. So in Qing Dynasty, government controlled the elite and public schools to spread the moral thoughts and at home, the children were also taught by their parents and elder families. And there were not difficult for government to

do this because Chinese people did not gain the new ideas, and there was no big conflicts between the state-imposed norms and the norms of ordinary people.

#### D. Evaluation of Effectiveness

The goal of moral education in Qing Dynasty was to inculcate the ruling ideology of the Qing Dynasty, shape the moral personality needed by the Qing society, and maintain the ruling of the Qing government. Besides, it also preserved the state power and social hierarchies. On the one hand, the Qing government wants to have a stable regime and to make a harmonious society, so it used moral education to hold Chinese society together. Corresponding to Durkheim’s theory in *The Division of Labour in Society*, humans are inherently egoistic, but norms, beliefs and values form the moral basis of the society, resulting in social integration. [5] Chinese people had a severe collective consciousness, which made them acknowledge and follow social facts like the culture and social structure. On the other hand, the Qing government tries to maintain state power and social hierarchies. According to Durkheim’s view, the extent of the state’s power depends on authorities, and it receives from the conscience collective. [6] In the middle of Qing, moral education did help authorities preserve the State’s power by making people have a collective idea that the imperial power was supreme, and social mobility was hard. Nevertheless, the results of Qing moral education were not favourable. The Qing Dynasty finally fall, and its moral education did make some “assistance”. Qing government failed to change the mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity because its morality did not evolve with the development of society. Furthermore, moral education was not practical to hold Chinese society together. Chinese society changed.

### III. MORAL EDUCATION IN REPUBLIC OF CHINA

#### A. Social Background

After the Qing Dynasty, the formation of the Republic of China (ROC) put an end to 4000 years of Imperial rule. It was almost governed by the Kuomintang (KMT), whose guiding ideology was the Three Principle of People raised by Sun Yat-sen. They were nationalism, democracy, and the People’s welfare. Moreover, after the Chiang Kaishek came into power, the nationalist government united China, and the Republic of China entered the golden decade of its construction, during which the society was stable, education developed steadily and tended to be finalized. The ROC insisted on a republican system of government, and the sovereignty belonged to all citizens. People were more autonomous, and they could choose their lifestyle. The economy developed fast due to the different cooperation with foreign countries. However, at the end of ROC, the people suffered a lot. All in all, during ROC, wars happened so frequently that the current political situation was quite turbulent. China experienced a significant transformation from a closed feudal society to an opened capitalist society.

### *B. Main Contents of Moral Education*

There was no doubt that the Chinese traditional moral education had been challenging during ROC due to the turbulent situation. The idea of freedom, democracy, and equality showed up in people's daily life. Different from what praised by Confucianism, the moral education in ROC firstly put forward the conception of bourgeoisie civic moralities in China, which had the purport of freedom, equality, and Caritas. Besides, during that time, aesthetic education was put into the education system as well. What's more, because of the wars, moral education consisted of the Three People's Principles, the thoughts of KMT, military training, etc. However, the contents of moral education changed frequently just as the changing of the social environment. The traditional moralities had been weakened.

### *C. Methods to Promote Moral Education*

The methods used to do moral education differed from a different period of ROC. Mainly speaking, the implementation of moral education in this period was carried out through teaching discipline, military education, sanitation and health training and the infiltration of moral education in other subjects. The teaching disciplines was much more like the moral education we talk now. It presented diversity due to the different purposes of government. Moreover, military education trained the students to be prepared for the war. So did health education. And in ROC, the mixture of moral education and ordinary curricula. The Chinese, history, and geography all contained the thoughts and disciplines of the KMT. Besides, the moral education net had been set up. There were different education branches in different regions, which were in charge of the Educational Department. Furthermore, all middle schools and primary schools had moral education under different management branches.

### *D. Evaluation of Effectiveness*

The moral education in ROC was aimed at cultivating a large number of fully developed people. These educatees were obedient to the governors and the nation. This kind of moral education did cultivate a group of patriots, but their morality was full of ROC characteristics. To some extent, moral education in ROC was useful because it met its goal and drove social development. Besides, it was the time that Durkheim's educational theories were introduced to the Chinese education system. Durkheim's moral education theory was characterized by its vigorous promotion of secularization of moral education, namely its separation from religion, and its attempt to establish a "scientific" moral education theory by using empirical sociological methods. Although the ROC's moral education was not direct to Durkheim's moral education, from the contents, it was clear that moral education was social-oriented, which corresponded with the essence of Durkheim's theory. Social order and integration were Durkheim's research topics. He thought the social facts had an independent existence more significant and more objective than the actions of the individuals that compose

society.[7] It was not determined by individuals but by society. So for him, an essential element in the conception of social organizations and groups was the nation. Moreover, that could be seen in moral education since the ROC era. Besides, Durkheim holds an opinion that in the process of moral education, people should pay attention to the distinction between moral content and moral form. The former can be changed due to social changes, but the latter was unchanged, because the moral form reflected the moral spirit, and people had to follow the moral spirit no matter when and where in order to maintain the authority of morality. It can be seen that Durkheim's theory of moral education focused on maintaining the authority of social morality and emphasized that the morality and education of any society play a proper role of "guiding" or even "forcing" on people, which to some extent is relevant to moral education in ROC. Therefore, in ROC, Chinese moral education-focused and imitated more of western moral theories. It did make significant progress, but it did not change and refine in time to conform to social reality. The People's Republic of China finally replaced the ROC, and Maoist China began.

## **IV. MORAL EDUCATION IN MAO ERA**

### *A. Social Background*

During Maoist China, the society transformed from semi-colonial, underdeveloped to socialism. The People's Republic of China (RPC) adopted a strategy of self-reliance during the early Mao era in order to create an alternative "socialist world market" with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. By 1957 China's urban economy and population were mainly organized along state-socialist lines. State-owned and collective enterprises were embedded in a Soviet-style planned economy. By contrast, rural China under Mao was never more than semi-socialist. Attempts to eliminate private property and native village boundaries failed spectacularly during the Great Leap Forward, forcing the CCP to allow mixed ownership structures in the People's Communes and to distribute plots of land for private use to peasant families in 1961. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution also made a considerable impact on Chinese society. Chinese society experienced the happiness of the establishment of a new government, but it also suffered a lot by some irrational movements.

### *B. Main Contents of Moral Education*

Different from the moral education in Qing and ROC era, the two principal characteristics of moral education in Maoist China were its intimate relationship with politics and its commitment to collective behavior. It praised the person of honesty, integrity, industry, patriotism and class consciousness. The contents of moral education during that time were full of Socialist characteristics. They contained the thoughts of serving the people willingly, Socialism, Communism, and Marxism. All these constructed an ethnic, scientific and democratic moral education system. For example, the moralities carried stable Chinese national features. It

denied the conception of class difference but inherited Chinese traditional virtues. “Huimin”, “Renai” were the origin of “serving the people willingly”. The scientific moral education stressed the combination of theories and practice. Moreover, the democratic point emphasized to stand with people.

### C. *Methods to Promote Moral Education*

The Communist Party used both formal and informal teaching and movements to teach people its ideology and morals in Mar era. The first was teaching by exhortation. The quotation from Marx and Mao Tse-tung displayed in classroom and factories on pamphlets and posters. The second was teaching by example, that models of exemplary behavior were thought and spoken highly of, like the campaign of learning Leifeng, which made an example of calling for people to learn. The third was teaching by experience. Practical experience was used in moral education in various ways; for example, the combination of productive labour with the work of the school. By using these methods, the youth were made vitally aware of the merits of patriotism, revolutionary struggle, political consciousness, class consciousness, and the virtues of productive work and collective life.

### D. *Evaluation of Effectiveness*

The aim of moral education in the Mao era was to produce the collective man, who identifies himself with the welfare of his group and is honest, upright in promoting the interests of his comrades. Moreover, the political aim or the fundamental goal was to learn for Mao and to have a further revolution. What were the social results? China made progress, and everyone united together, but the disadvantage was evident that society would suffer due to the wrong thoughts of the leader. The old social hierarchies were broken down by moral education, but it also harmed social stability at the same time. In Maoist China, society was under mechanical solidarity. According to Durkheim, in mechanical solidarity, people are self-sufficient, there is little integration, and thus there is the need for the use of force and repression to keep society together. Also, in such societies, people have much fewer options in life. This kind of group is generated from "similarity", that is, the so-called "homogeneous" society. The primary task of the group is to make its members respect the beliefs and traditions, that is, to maintain a shared consciousness and to maintain unity. It could be seen in Chinese society in Mao era, the leader tries to inculcate conventional norms and his thoughts among the population for maintaining social solidarity, and the leader did not vary the content of moral education between the society and regimes. It was a common and popular moral system that combined with politics to have a collective society. However, after the death of Mao, Chinese moral education changed with social change.

## V. MORAL EDUCATION IN POST-MAO ERA

### A. *Social Background*

After Mao died in 1976, China was led by Deng Xiaoping and the Chinese Communist Party. The new

pragmatic leadership emphasized all fields of social development and renounced mass political movements. In 1978, the leadership adopted economic reform policies aimed at expanding rural income and incentive, encouraging experiments in enterprise autonomy, etc. It brought significant improvements in the standard of living, especially for urban workers and for farmers. Literature and the arts blossomed, and Chinese intellectuals established extensive links with scholars in other countries. At the same time, however, political dissent as well as social problems such as inflation, urban migration, and prostitution emerged. Furthermore, it ended with the 1989 student movement at Tiananmen Square. During that time, Chinese society tries to improve and develop in a particular way, and it finally achieved.

### B. *Main Contents of Moral Education*

The moral education in the reform and opening-up was to rectify the chaos and restore moral education in the Cultural Revolution. The moral education was regarded as a social ideology, emphasizing the importance of moral education for grasping the political direction and restoring the social order. Furthermore, the contents contained the Four Cardinal Principles and fundamental Marxist theories. Then for the transition of the party's principal work, the moral education stressed the importance of productive labour and moralities. Deng Xiaoping points out that the all-round development of morality, intelligence and physique should serve as the standard of talent cultivation. It also derived from politics and combined with traditional Chinese moralities.

### C. *Methods to Promote Moral Education*

The moral education in post-Mao era combined the theory and practice. It was also implemented much in schools, and it adopted targeted moral education. It varied to different education forms for different students. Besides, it discarded aggressive movements and robust enforcement. It tried to use direct education and guidance instead. What's more, the moral education interacted with the CCP's work, social practice and school culture. The CCP's thoughts were the discipline which helped to guide the education, while the social practice could make students learn moralities in reality, and school culture could lead to different forms of moral education. At last, moral education was put into the laws as well. [8]

### D. *Evaluation of Effectiveness*

The goal for moral education in the post- Mao era was to train builders and successors who were well developed morally, intellectually and physically. It wants to create a peaceful political environment and make people work hard on the development of China. For the social results, we could see that most of the people under that kind of moral education possessed valuable qualities. China made massive progress during and after that time. From Durkheim's moral theory, China can be enlightened in the modernization transition. On the one hand, in terms of cultivating and promoting individual's moral literacy, a single individual in the process of receiving education

needs to have dynamic self-cognition and practice ability, namely the ability to continually re-recognize him/herself and construct self and realize the self. Durkheim attached great importance to the ethics of vocation and the improvement of the moral literacy of citizens. On the other, during that time, Chinese society evolved from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. [9] In organic solidarity, people are much more integrated and interdependent, and specialization and cooperation are extensive. Besides, Durkheim criticized egoism by discussing the relationship between the individual and society. He believed that society is not composed of isolated atomized individuals, not a simple collection of individuals, but a community composed of elements interacted and interlinked with each other. Moreover, we could see that in the post-Mao era, people made their efforts to achieve their goals and at the same time, they had an idea to develop the country so that the individuals could use unit together and that constructed the society.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Durkheim first made a clear distinction between rational moral education and religious, moral education and sorted out the relationship between the two, and then established the foundation of moral education entirely based on children's rationality, thus replacing religious doctrines and methods. Secondly, contrary to the subjective method of traditional morality, he adopted the empirical method of sociology to analyze those natural elements of virtue from the historical and realistic facts, and thus concluded that the spirit of discipline, spirit of sacrifice and free will must be subject to the moral law. Finally, on this basis, he further discussed how to cultivate children's various virtues through teaching. Durkheim's theory of moral education changed the individual that had been formed for a long time in European history. All these made a significant influence on Chinese moral education system. In the Qing Dynasty, Chinese moral education just inherited the traditional Confucian's ideas, which was too old and rigid to help China stand out during that time. And then, with the introduction of western ideas, moral education changed in the ROC era. However, it could not serve ordinary people and Chinese society. In Maoist China, the united moral education made Chinese people work together, but it also made China suffer due to the leaders' mistakes. So in the post-Mao era, the moral education corrected those mistakes and developed scientific and Chinese characteristic moral education, which combined the traditional Confucians good ideas and Socialism, and made the theories integrate with practice. China went on the right way to develop fast. Nevertheless, it seems that the primary purpose of Chinese education still includes the preserving of social stability, state's power and social hierarchies.

There is no doubt that the fulfilling process of modernization transformation of traditional moral

education is the process to create a moral education and to form a modern new moral education of China. Chinese nowadays, moral education still have some aspects of improving.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhuofan Lei did the literature review about Durkheim's theory about moral education and social process. He also wrote and revised the paper to make the final version.

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**Zhuofan Lei** born in mainland China on May 17<sup>th</sup> 1997. In 2020, Zhuofan finished his MSc degree at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, the School of Humanities and Social Science. His researches focused on the global China studies and education, especially moral education. During undergraduate study, Zhuofan received his BA degree at Sichuan University at Chengdu, China. He studied English pedagogy and intercultural communication, which targeted to foreign language education and ethnic identity of multicultural students. Zhuofan took part in different teaching experiences at different countries, such as Sri Lanka, Italy, Japan, and China. Recently, Zhuofan has assisted one of research teams at Peking University to investigate different rural junior high school students in China. The research project aimed at the educational policy, rural school facilities, and development of junior students. He had passionately interest in educational psychology, moral education, and international education. Email: [leizhuofan517@gmail.com](mailto:leizhuofan517@gmail.com)