Moral Education of Youths in the Information Age

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Abstract: In Chinese societies, moral education has always been considered the most essential component of education because the nurturing of moral persons is the prime function of schooling. The implementation of moral education has relied on the inculcation of values that reflect moral ideals. The emergence of the Information Age, with a plethora of information and ideas being disseminated instantly through informational technologies, has altered the educational landscape of the world and challenged the conventional approach to moral education. Given this context, we argue that it is important for Chinese educators to find an alternative approach to moral education that can embrace the new realities of our networked world. In this approach, lofty moral ideals should give way to simple and easily understood concepts such as *respect,* information and ideas in the "cyber world" should be exploited rather than shunned, and the genuine interests of children and youths should form the basis of moral education that is at once relevant and enlightening. In proposing this approach to moral education, we also assume that moral educators in Chinese societies, which include school teachers, parents, and organizers of nonformal education programs, would endeavor to understand the complex world of cyber realities and devise feasible ways to suit contextual educational needs.

Key words: moral education; Chinese education; Information Age; children and youths

1. Introduction

The advent of the Information Age, ushered in by forces of globalization, has transformed the way that we learn, work, and live. Scientific, technological and societal shifts have filled the world with expectations of further advancement and with anxieties about the transformation that envelopes human existence.

The major signifier of this transformation is the emergence of "information societies" where people can exploit the abundance and speedy delivery of information to advance their own interests and change the lives of others.[1] As the world's nations scramble to enhance their own competitiveness in the coliseum of global economy, education is expected to produce a new kind human capital[2] --- persons who are schooled in the skills of global communications and cognizant of the corporate style of work and its ethics --- that can contribute to the advancement of the nation's interests.

The development of the "information society" relies on the contribution of independent, creative and thinking individuals who can tolerate differences, be considerate of and work well with others, and be able to learn to function effectively under different circumstances in life and work. The nurturing of such individuals

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1 Leslie N.K. Lo. (2000). *Manpower Requirements of the Information Society*. Educational Research, (11). 8-11

2 Henry Levin. *Accelerated education for an accelerating economy*. Education Policy Series, No.9. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

warrants an educational environment that can readily discern individual strengths and special needs, and can provide adequate intellectual space for them to learn to realize their potentialities to the fullest.

Its many impressive scientific and technological accomplishments notwithstanding, a widespread concern over the Information Age is the increased isolation of human existence and the kind of alienation that human beings experience in the rapidly changing milieus of work and social interaction.[3] Moreover, today's schooling has also lagged behind the development of the Information Age. With its attention being devoted almost entirely to the maintenance of academic standards and student academic achievement, our schools have not been able to address moral education issues seriously and concertedly, neither in the curriculum nor in the pedagogy.

This paper attempts to address important issues in the development of Chinese moral education in the Information Age. Its purpose is to reflect upon the state of affairs in moral education and to suggest possible alternatives to its axiological basis, its mode of delivery, and its overall approach. In this paper, we shall critically examine issues that are related to the conceptualization and developmental direction of moral education. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part sets the stage for discussion by illuminating the characteristics of the Information Age and its influence on moral education. We argue that the major concern of moral education should be to find ways to accommodate diversity and change, which are two most salient features of the Information Age. The second part suggests that moral education should adopt "respect" as the guiding concept for its design and implementation. The third part examines the functions of possible sites for moral education and suggests that the "cyber world" can be one of such sites. We urge moral educators to consider this new possibility rather than shying away from it. The fourth part considers the orientation of three approaches to moral education. We argue that moral education should not be based on fear and control; rather, we advocate an approach that aims to guide and enlighten children and youths in their course of moral education. This paper concludes that an integration of philosophical ethics and moral psychology will be one of the necessary ways to help moral education to retain its vitality and relevance.

2. Whither is Moral Education Drifting?

Moral education in the Information Age is becoming an increasingly complex project because of the greater diversity of values that are present in our communities, institutions, and life situations. When combined with the rapid pace of change that is characteristic of the Information Age, the variety of values that circulate in the communities and institutions challenge the general and uniformed applicability of moral principles that we have unquestionably accepted as truth. The emergence of values that are akin to the market and the keen competition that it generates, for example, has challenged the authority of certain time-honored values and practices, if not rendered them obsolete. Few moral principles can be exempted from the close scrutiny of moral educators who are urgently exploring ways to sustain the vitality and relevance of their work in the schools and beyond. Without beliefs and principles that are sound and lasting, moral education will have no intellectual and ethical footing. It will drift aimlessly in the sea of irrelevance.

The anxiety of moral educators has to be understood in today's context of cultural diversity and social change. The conception of cultural diversity is no longer confined within the boundaries of a country, for the Internet has quietly but effectively disseminated immense volumes of ideas, images, and artifacts of culture among citizens of any nations that have access to it. Moreover, interaction among people on the Internet presents a kind of social change that challenges our ability to think morally in a real yet imaginary relationship. The absence of physical contacts in the

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[3] Martin Carnoy. (2000). *Sustaining the New Economy: Work, Family, and Community in the Information Age.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation & Cambridge: Harvard University Press, chapter 3

"cyber world" often distorts our views on moral obligation toward others: if we do not even have eye-contact in making the transaction, how can we be obligated toward one another? Thus immoral acts such as the non-delivery of goods purchased, thefts of intellectual properties, intrusion into others' privacy, and even the deprivation of others' right to operate their computers normally, are buried behind a curtain of anonymity in the "cyber world".

Cultural diversity and social change in the Information Age warrants a new kind of understanding of the foundations of moral education.[4] Diversity and change afford an opportunity for us to reflect on the aims of moral education and explore ways to facilitate the attainment of goals. If diversity of values has to be understood in specific cultural and social contexts, and change has become a constant factor in our lives, then it may be tempting to take no moral stance in our judgment and actions and submit ourselves to the command of moral relativism. When this happens, moral education loses it vitality, for it is no longer a principled exercise of our hearts and minds. For moral education in schools, upholding certain defensible moral principles is a particularly important undertaking because it will determine whether moral education can continue to serve its educational purposes.

3. Respect as a Guiding Principle for Moral Education

Fortunately for moral educators in schools, these moral principles can always be found in their schools' missions. While the continual interpretation and refinement of these principles can sustain their endeavors to a certain extent, lofty ideals that defy common wisdom may not be fully accepted by the students and their parents. For this reason, it should be the labor of moral educators to identify and uphold simple and enduring principles that can be readily embraced by all parties concerned. One of these principles is "respect for oneself, and respect for others". "Respect" is a maxim in moral education that has been upheld by Chinese and western educators alike.[5] As an essential element in any healthy social relations, "respect" refers not only to a desirable position toward others but also toward oneself. It affirms a person's worth, dignity, and rights. Because other persons have just as much worth, dignity, and rights as I, then it is reasonable for me to respect others as I should respect myself. As a guiding principle, "do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself" (己所不欲，勿施于人 [*jisuo buyu wushi yuren*]) can be a simple but very useful constraint on one's desires and actions. More positively, "respect for others" provides an essential reference for one's attitude and conduct toward others, especially toward those persons that one does not know, or has no relations with. "Respect" magnifies the worth of a person. At the same time, it affords an axiological lens through which the worth and needs of "others" can be clearly recognized.

The students' capability of handling their relations with others can be enhanced if moral education is based on respect for others. From a social perspective, people's moral conduct is manifested in their relations with others; and moral education can only be effectively conducted with the "I – other" relationship as its epistemological and axiological basis. If our students can consider the dignity, rights, and welfare of others *before* they act, then it is much less likely that their actions would be harmful to others or to the common good. Moreover, if moral education can help the students to cultivate a thorough understanding of the "I – other" relationship and help them to nurture positive feelings toward others, then other important qualities such as compassion and empathy can be further developed. A desirable state in moral development is reached when altruism becomes an integral part of their character.

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[4] Caiping Sun. (2004). *Reflections on Moral Education from the Dimensions of Morality: New Thinking for the Study of Moral Education in the Context of Social Diversity*, Journal of East China Normal University (Education Science Edition), vol22, (4).17-24, 37
[5] For example, "respect" is an essential principle in the teachings of Confucius and in western literature on moral and character education. See, for example, Thomas Lickona. (1983). *Raising Good Children: Helping Your Child through the Stages of Moral Development*. New York: Bantam; and Thomas Lickona. (1991). *Education for Character: How Our Schools can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. New York: Bantam

Given the aforementioned observation, the function of moral education is to help students handle their relations with others properly. Moral educators should guide students to appreciate the existence of others, care about their needs, understand their predicaments, empathize with their plight, and respect their rights and values. With this, the students will be able to gradually transcend their own self-interests and to give appropriate attention to matters of public interests. Their participation in the advancement of the common good will be a matter of course.

4. Sites of Moral Education

Many scholars and practitioners in education have assumed that the school is the only suitable sites for moral education. Indeed, as the social institution that is charged with the responsibility of teaching our children the basic literacy and social skills, the school seems to be the natural site for their moral education as well. However, today's formal schooling has lagged behind the developmental needs of the Information Age. This is especially true in terms of its requirements for human development. The examination-oriented pedagogy that is so prevalent in Chinese schools leaves little time and intellectual space for students to develop their social awareness and skills. Operating under the tyranny of an "audit culture" where "value-addedness" and academic achievement are the main concerns, our schools are consumed by the imperatives of performativity. The only emphasis of today's schooling is the demonstrable and measurable outcomes of education. Exploration of the inherent values of education is in large part being neglected by our schools; and, if such values are needed for ornamental purposes, the schools pay lip service to them and to moral education which embodies and expresses them.

Actually, the most natural site for moral education is the family. The family is considered to be the unit that consists of the most significant "others" in the lives of children and youths – their parents. The parents' influence on the moral development of their children is strong and lifelong. It is in the family where parental devotion to the well-being of the child can be considered a given, and where adult-child ratio in the educative process is definitely more favorable than that of the school. The home environment, moreover, affords a context in which intimate thoughts and feelings can be shared readily between parent and child without the social pressure and pretense that are often found in more formal social settings. Thus the family provides a more accommodating setting for moral education which warrants the exchange of ideas and inculcation of values that are personally derived. Among educators, the common concern about the family as a site of moral education is whether parents can truly understand the developmental needs of their children, and whether they are ready to engage their offspring in a knowledgeable and sensible way. Indeed, the needs of children for parental guidance and support differ from one stage of moral development to another. The manners of engagement, whether they are restrictive or supportive, in fact reflect the psychological basis on which moral education is conducted at home.

Other sites that can serve as platforms for moral education are the educational activities that are conducted outside the framework of the formal system of schooling. Rich in diversity, these activities afford a broad educational avenue through which the interests of growing children and adolescents can be served. Out-of-school programs which constitute what is known as "nonformal education"[6] include a large variety of organized social and cultural activities that are organized by institutions and agencies such as youth palaces, cultural stations and museums, and by children and youth groups such as the Boys Scouts and Young Pioneers. In ways that are less rigid but more informal than classroom instruction, these out-of-school programs can be equally effective in inculcating desirable values and attitudes in the students. Their efficacy, however, remains to be tapped by moral educators.

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[6] For example, see, UNESCO. (1982). *Nonformal Education in Asia and the Pacific.* Bangkok: UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and Pacific; and N.J. Colletta. (1994). *Formal, Nonformal, and Informal Education.* in T. Husen & T.N. Postlethwaite, eds., *International Encyclopedia of Education.* 2nd edition. Vol.7. Oxford: Pergamon. 2364-2369

Another possible site for moral education is the neighborhood. Compared to the schools and nonformal education programs, the neighborhood is much less structured. Compared to the family, it is more public; but for the social development of children and youths, it potentiality for their exploration and understanding of the "I – other" relations should not be underestimated. The neighborhood is where children and youths spend most of their time besides their homes and schools. Unlike homes and schools, which are highly controlled sites, neighborhoods are much less restrictive on behaviors. Thus whether neighborhoods are sites of opportunities for exploration and discovery or danger zones for indulgence and debauchery depends very much on the kind of activities that children and youths participate in. This in turn depends on the kind of peers that they choose to keep. Research has shown that risk-taking activities are more prevalent among youths in poorer neighborhoods in densely populated urban areas.[7] Research has also shown that youths, because they "inhabit a transitional middle-ground somewhere between childhood and adulthood", are excluded from many physical and social space in the community.[8] For the purpose of moral education, the neighborhood can be a site where "respect for others" can be understood and practiced. If appropriate activities can be arranged, children and youths can practice neighborliness through participation in community service and observe first-hand the effects of their own contribution to the well-being of others.

5. The "Cyber World" as a Site of Moral Education

A site for moral education that is unique to the Information Age is the "cyber world" that embodies numerous networks which serve to facilitate instant communication among users of information technologies. For moral educators, the emergence of the "cyber world" can be unsettling because of all the "demons" that lurk within a world that we cannot see. There can be little protection of the young minds if the corrupting effects are not readily discernible from their behavior. This kind of disorientation brought on by the presence of the "cyber world" poses the most serious challenge to moral education, regardless of its sites of application. This is because the "multidirectional networks" are transforming the structure of our economic and social institutions[9] and our established system of beliefs and values would have to be able to maintain its validity and relevance in order to survive. The challenges to the established system will be multidimensional, intense and swift, because the global onslaught of axiological persuasions is projected through so many powerful lenses of informational technologies. Our world is now connected in global networks of the information and images that travel throughout the world instantly. Without a clear and strong epistemological and axiological anchor, moral education will drift in the sea of contentious ideas and values.

If we accept that moral education is an enterprise that should undergo constant review and revival, then the waves of new information that are generated from the multidirectional networks should not be feared; that is, if we can derive wisdom and insights from them. As a matter of fact, it is in this newly found wisdom that we can identify the impetus to the constant revival of moral education. New information and ideas challenge us to reflect on our own values; and if we can develop new notions of justice, rights, fairness, equity and harmony that we can uphold, then we can confidently use them to guide our children and youths through the stages of their development with renewed interest and relevance. Moral educators should embrace the current phenomena of uncertainty and attempt to negotiate new notions of morality and education so that they do not fall too far behind

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[7] J.G. Dryfoos. (1990). *Adolescent at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention.* New York: Oxford University Press

[8] S. Weller. (2003). *"Teach Us Something Useful": Contested Space of Teenagers' Citizenship.* Space and Polity, Vol.7, No.2. 153-171

[9] Manuel Castells. (1999). *Flows, Networks, and Identities: a Critical Theory of the Informational Society*, in Manual Castells, Ramon Flecha, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Donaldo Macedo & Paul Willis, *Critical Education in the New Information Age.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 48

the developmental needs of our children and youths. In fact, educators in other areas are attempting to do just that. The efforts of language educators to derive new meanings of literacy from the Internet,[10] for example, should serve as a useful reference for moral educators if they indeed wish to reestablish their bearings and resituate notions of morality in the realities of the "cyber world".

The most pressing task for moral educators in the Information Age is to facilitate an understanding of our networked world to nurture respect for others who are connected to that world, *i.e.*, that others have just as much worth, dignity, and rights as we, even if we cannot see them. This is particularly difficult for children and youths who are being taught to respect those with whom they have certain established social relations. The task of helping students to develop respect for others in the "cyber world" will be equally difficult for the moral educators because they were taught to believe the same thing as their students. For both educators and students, then, their imagination would have to be stretched dramatically. Cases of respect for intellectual properties, for privacy, and for others' rights to use their informational technologies would have to be established, accumulated, stored, and tapped purposefully. Moral educators would have to be both knowledgeable and empathetic in their teaching and in their sharing of views. The purpose of teaching our children to live in the networked world is not to make them afraid of the "demons" therein, but to allow them to function as responsible "netizens" so that they can benefit from what it has to offer and to develop into a moral person in the Information Age. The "cyber world" is a useful site for moral education only if we can use it wisely and courageously.

In addition to the conventional sites of moral education, then, the "cyber world" has emerged to offer an unprecedented opportunity for us to enter an entirely new stage for moral education. Whether moral educators can embrace the uncertainties of a new age by reconstituting a body of principles that can make sense of the constantly changing landscape of morality and education depends very much on their intellectual prowess and educational commitment. Moreover, successful implementation of moral education will warrant the choice of an approach that is appropriate to the requirements of the Information Age. As is clear from the following discussion, it would render moral education a futile effort if it is based on fear and control.

6. Three Approaches to Moral Education in Chinese Societies

Against the backdrop of the Information Age, the limitations of moral education in Chinese societies are obvious. Moral educators are unable to transcend orthodox values that have hampered its development in the first place. Moral education is rigidly designed and conducted in a draconian manner. The purpose of moral education --- a loosely constituted assortment of political education, civic education, and moral education in the Chinese Mainland[11] ---is little more than an effort "to control and scare students so that they won't get into trouble" ("把学生管住、吓住，不出事就可以了"). In the process of moral education, teachers impart and mold, and students receive and conform. An example of this kind of methodology is the existence of a course in schools called "Psychological Health", which is taught rather than experienced.

Our observation is that moral education is based on *fear* : fear of deviation, fear of losing control, and fear of our children growing up too fast. The rigidity inherent in contemporary thinking of moral education is reinforced by *fear* of the "cyber world" --- with all its "demons" --- that haunts concerned Chinese educators and parents.

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[10] For example, see, Todd Taylor & Irene Ward. (1998). *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Columbia University Press

[11] Shizhong Du. (2004). *The Ten Major Contradictions in Contemporary Moral Education in Schools*. Reference of Education, (11). 21-24

From the above observation, two approaches to moral education, based on *fear*, can be discerned.

The first such approach advocates prohibition.[12] The aim of the prohibition approach is to put students under the control of principals and teachers in schools and parents and elders at home. Prohibition and restrictions are established through the execution of rules, regulations, and the application of any other methods of intimidation, indoctrination, and "contrived fraternity" that seek to undermine the freedom of students. While the professed aim of this approach is to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youths, it has in fact done so at the expense of their exploratory spirit. In the restrictive environment of prohibition, youths find ready allies in their like-minded peers. Together they can form a disruptive force that teachers and parents have to contend with. The effects of deprivation and constraint, as well as the perceived hindrance to the development of inquisitive minds, cannot be underestimated.

The second approach advocates prevention. The professed aim of this approach is to shelter students from harm, to provide a safe environment for their pursuits, and to ensure that "they won't get into trouble". A variety of means are employed to guard against unacceptable practices and deviant behavior of students. This is done in the name of protecting students and not letting them go astray. Effects of the preventive measures, if they were allowed to dominate school and home practices, could retard students' intellectual curiosity and imagination. The liberal application of preventive measures will cause students to accept the dregs of fear as an integral part of their lives. Timidity that is bred from such upbringing will further test the ingenuity of any character-building efforts.

The above two approaches find easy resonance with the widespread concern over the effects of Internet use on the psychological well-being of children and youths. Concern over undesirable content leads to prohibition and censorship, and that may breed a continuous dependency on adults to detect danger signals in the "cyber world". Concern over indulgence leads to tight control of time spent on informational technologies, and that may breed anxiety, deceit, and a sense of deprivation. Concern over risk-taking on the Internet leads to tight surveillance, and that may retard the youngsters' curiosity and imagination. Thus far, evidence from empirical research on the effects of Internet use is inconclusive, and finer distinction has to be made for such consideration as the social and recreational roles of informational technologies vs. conventional after-school activities, the intellectual role of the Internet, connectivity with strangers and connectivity with school-based peers, and the relationship between time spent on-line and psychological well-being.[13]

We argue that while the application of restraint and prevention is a necessary evil in the case of Internet use, any moral education endeavor will be constructive and liberating if we can move away from prohibition and prevention as much as possible. An approach that takes into consideration the genuine interests of youths and serves their exploration through constructive guidance and ready enlightenment should be an attractive alternative to the aforesaid methods. The aim of exploration is to construct a thorough understanding of the "I – other" relationship so that an altruistic tendency can be nurtured as an integral part of a person's character. Such an approach emphasizes trust and well-being, and attempts to channel the youths' energies surely and positively. It stresses healthy diversity in the activities that youths engage in and assumes the existence of a variety of recreational outlets and learning opportunities that are at once meaningful and attractive. The adoption of such an approach will be enhanced by developing habits in delayed gratification[14] and training in time-management. By

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[12] Leslie N.K. Lo. (2002). *The Development of Youths: Discussion on the Educational Role and Functions of Out-of-school Education.* Youth Studies, (7). 29-38

[13] See, for example, Elisheva R. Gross, Jaana Juvonen, and Shelly L. Gable. (2002). *Internet Use and Well-Being in Adolescence.* Journal of Social Issues.Vol.58, No.1. 75-90; For an interesting argument against the common concern over the ill-effects of such technological invention of video-games, see, Steven Johnson. (2005). *Everything Bad is Good for You.* New York: Riverhead Books

[14] See, for example, Daniel Goleman. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It can Matter More than IQ.* New York: Bantam Books

proposing this alternative approach, we also assume that teachers and parents are equipped and ready to engage their students and children. Such engagement, based on enlightenment, is essential to the youths' travels along the "super-highway" of the Internet.

7. Concluding Remarks

The Information Age presents a new set of human resource requirements for education. For moral education, the Information Age definitely requires more than an understanding of moral principles and the construction of a strong and flexible knowledge base that can facilitate such understanding. It requires moral education to instill a spirit of exploration in our youths, which can only be sustained by intellectual curiosity. It also requires that they develop an altruistic outlook in life, not just for those people that they know, but also for "strangers" with whom they have no personal contact.

For moral education to be effective in our rapidly changing times, it should be rooted in simple but generally attainable principles rather than lofty ideals. Among these principles, we think that "respect" – respect for oneself, and respect for others – can serve as one of the guiding principles for the design and implementation of moral education. This is because, for younger learners, "respect" is something that can be easily understood and applicable. It is through the understanding and application of "respect" that our children and youths can grasp the meaning of "I – other" relationship and develop their own expression of altruism, preferably under the guidance of their teachers and parents.

Rather than worrying about the challenges posed by the Information Age, moral educator should seriously look at the new opportunities that it affords. An example of this is an examination of the possible sites for moral education, which should include the "cyber world". While there exists a strong tendency for moral educators to view the "cyber world", and what it embodies, with apprehension and caution, consideration for moral education in today's world simply cannot be divorced from the realities of the "cyber world". The real challenge is to search for an educational approach that is appropriate to the developmental needs of youths that are engaged in the broad spectrums of activities on the Internet.

In their search for an appropriate approach, moral educators in Chinese societies should first be aware of the limitations of their own approach, which is mainly based on fear and control. The approaches of prohibition and prevention which are habitually adopted by Chinese parents and educators, are clearly inadequate in satisfying the demands of the Information Age. While we advocate a moral education approach that emphasizes exploration, trust and diversity, the continual endeavor to refine such an approach should rest upon the interface of philosophical ethics and moral psychology.[15] Insights into the development of human character, clearly one of the major purposes of moral education, should be informed by a splendid blend of ethical postulations and empirical evidences that can guide us surely to a new way of moral education. Further discussion on this search, however, should be posited in a separate paper.

References (omitted)

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[15] See, for example, Daniel Lapsley & F. Clark Power, eds. (2005). *Character Psychology and Character Education*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; and William Damon, ed. (2002). *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press