

# Compiling Life-Oriented Moral Education Textbooks for Elementary Schools in China: The Mimetic Approach in *Morality and Law*

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explores a novel approach to compiling life-oriented moral textbooks for elementary schools in China, specifically focusing on *Morality and Law*.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** Adopting Aristotle's *Poetics* as its theoretical perspective, this study illustrates and analyzes the mimetic approach used in compiling the life-oriented moral education textbook, *Morality and Law*.

**Findings:** The mimetic approach involves imitating children's real activities, thoughts, and feelings in textbooks. The mimetic approach to compiling life-oriented moral textbooks comprises three strategies: constructing children's life events as building blocks for textbook compilation, designing an intricate textual device exposing the wholeness of children's life actions, and designing inward learning activities leading to children's inner worlds.

**Originality/Value:** From the perspective of Aristotle's *Poetics*, the approach to compilation in *Morality and Law* can be defined as mimetic. And the compilation activity in the life-oriented moral education textbook also can be described as a process of mimesis. So this article presents a new approach to compile moral education textbooks and an innovative way to understand the nature of one compiling activity.

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## Keywords

Aristotle's *Poetics*, life orientation, mimesis, moral education textbooks, textbook compilation

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## Introduction: Moral education textbooks and their compilation in China

Direct moral instruction is common in countries like China and Japan, which have formal moral education curricula (Bamkin, 2018). The moral education curricula in China has been seen as an important course, which delivers moral education directly at school (Lu & Gao, 2004). Several countries and regions—such as Hong Kong SAR and the United Arab Emirates—have promoted the establishment of formal moral education curricula in an attempt to combat growing social and moral problems (Keung & Ho, 2004; Pring, 2019). These curricula reflect significant differences as a result of the varying moral learning materials or textbooks used in moral instruction. Initiated in 2001, the reform of the Chinese moral education curriculum transformed its goals, contents, and values system from being political or ideology-oriented to humanistic or life-oriented (Lee & Ho, 2005; Lu, 2003, 2005, 2014; Zhao & Sun, 2017)

According to Lu (2005), China's life-oriented moral education curriculum makes three innovations. First, it transforms the notion of morality from one based on knowledge to one based on life. Second, it redefines moral education as more than moral knowledge instruction but involving the active promotion of introspection and reflection on life experiences. Third, rather than one-way inactive learning, China's moral education curriculum promotes interaction and dialogue between teachers and students, between students and their peers, and between students and themselves. As such, China's life-oriented moral education curriculum does not reflect the traditional and narrow understanding of moral education as instruction on virtue or character. Instead, it comprises broad moral education content and learning themes, including children's learning issues, peer problems, children's willingness and ability to do housework and protect the environment, appropriate public behavior, navigating consumerism, and the cultivation of media literacy.

An impressive aspect of this reform was the compilation of a dozen new sets of moral education textbooks according to the State Curriculum Standards for primary schools, namely *Moral Character and Life* (for Grades 1–2) and *Morality Character and Society* (for Grades 3–6) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2002a, 2002b), both of which were experimental. These novel curriculum standards and textbooks were anticipated to gradually promote the comprehensive reform of Chinese moral education in compulsory schooling.

A new set of life-oriented textbooks, *Morality and Law (Daode yu Fazhi)*, has been used in all primary school grades across Chinese mainland since 2019. The compilation project for these textbooks was launched in 2012 under the direct administration and supervision of the MOE. *Morality and Law* textbooks are designed according to the formal State Curriculum Standards—a revision of the 2002 experimental version officially published in 2011.

Extant research on moral education textbooks tends to focus on analyzing the content of textbooks used in various regions and countries (Anzai, 2015; Lee & Misco, 2014), typically examining the aims, goals, and particular values and virtues contained in textbooks. For example, Anzai (2015) focuses on the content analysis of Japanese elementary school moral readers and demonstrates that the patriotic content and its related values in the new revision is not significantly changed. The majority of these studies are critical in nature and theoretically underpinned by critical pedagogy, especially Apple's (1992, 2008) critical theory. This analytical approach also dominates the research on Chinese moral education textbooks (Sautman, 1991; Tse, 2011). Sautman (1991) examines the extent to which content selection and state ideology are aligned and points out that China's textbooks are characterized by hyper-ideologicalization and politicization.

Rather than content analysis, this study focuses on the method of textbook compilation. Compiling textbooks is analogous to knitting a sweater; as a knitter, one should be concerned with which materials, design, and approach to use. Similarly, textbook compilation needs to consider how textbooks are made, including the exploration of which materials, design, and approach to use. These problems have been systematically explored and summarized in our recent publication, *Connected to Children: The Research of Elementary Moral Education Textbooks Morality and Law* (Gao et al., 2019).

Gao argues that the knowledge-oriented approach to moral education textbook compilation is not appropriate for children's moral learning. The knowledge-oriented approach lists numerous moral requirements (moral knowledge), presents some pictures, and narrates heroic or allegorical stories as paragons (Lu & Gao, 2004). This approach can be traced back to the earliest modern textbook, Comenius's (2009) *The Orbis Pictus*. It can also be recognized in recent moral education textbooks, such as the Chinese moral education textbooks for elementary education that highlighted the moral ideas or the cognitive process of moral knowledge (Li, 2000; Wu et al., 1982; Xu, 1985) and Malaysian moral education textbooks (Banks, 1993; Tan et al., 2018) published in the 1980s and 1990s.

This approach was criticized as an "empty sermon" lacking relevance to children's individual lives (Lu & Gao, 2004). Gao (2017) contends that such an approach must be replaced by the narrative approach, which is intertwined with narrative and moral logic system. In this respect, the narrative focuses on children's individual, real-life experiences and attempts to encapsulate them in diverse life events. The moral logic system in moral education textbooks is not based on

metaphysical moral concepts and propositions but the logic of life—that is, the logic of children’s growth. As building blocks, diverse life events can be incorporated into textbooks according to the system of moral logic. Therefore, the narrative approach is an appropriate way of compiling life-oriented moral education textbooks.

The narrative approach is used in compiling the *Morality and Law* textbooks for elementary schools. One volume of *Morality and Law* (especially for Grades 3–4) usually consists of four units, each possessing its own learning theme designed according to the age and stage of the target reader’s development. Each unit typically comprises three or four lessons centered on the learning themes and designed to progressively broaden and deepen the learning themes. Each lesson comprises various kinds of “life events,” which serve as the basic materials of the textbooks.

This study further explores how the narrative approach is applied in the compilation of *Morality and Law*, addressing the issue of how the textbook as a two-dimensional, static, printed medium can present children’s multifaceted and dynamic life experience. To better understand the compilation method, this study traces the narrative approach back to Western classical poetics, namely Aristotle’s *Poetics*. This study first examines the correlation between the notion of mimesis in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and compilation in order to reveal the nature of compiling life-oriented textbooks. It then elucidates the intrinsic predicaments and challenges of compiling life-oriented moral education textbooks, before suggesting specific compilation strategies.

## **The mimesis of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the compilation of life-oriented moral education textbooks**

The narrative approach proposed by Gao laid the foundation for compiling life-oriented moral education textbooks, especially insofar as it emphasizes the use of life events as building blocks and links them as a whole in light of narrative ethics. This approach to compiling life-oriented moral education textbooks serves as an appropriate replacement for the knowledge-oriented approach.

Gudmundsdottir (1995) advances two narrative theories. First, from the perspective of structuralist literary theory, a narrative has two parts: story and discourse. These theorists emphasize the structure of story and discourse and its final product—a narrative or organized text. Other scholars emphasize the narrative “embedded in human action” and which constitutes “a series of verbal, symbolic, or behavioral acts sequenced for the purpose of ‘telling someone else that something happened’” (Herrenstein-Smith, 1981, cited in Gudmundsdottir, 1995).

The second perspective, namely the narrative approach proposed by Gao, draws on structuralist literary theory insofar as it stresses the structure of textbooks—including the events, characters, settings, expression, and narration—and draws on the strength of narrative and life logic in compiling an organized text. This perspective thus elucidates the nature and meaning of compiling

moral education textbooks. In this respect, the narrative approach to compiling moral education textbooks can be viewed as “human action.” This narrative perspective underscores the purpose, context, and meaning of narrative actions. However, the issue of the nature of these narrative actions remains unresolved, particularly in terms of the nature of narrative approach to compiling textbooks. Exploring the narrative as a unique “human action” from the perspective of Aristotle’s *Poetics* reveals the nature and meaning of compilation.

For Aristotle, poetics can be regarded as “imitations” and its nature is “to make.” In *Poetics*, Aristotle probes the full meaning of poetics: “first to make or do and secondarily to make poetry” (Aristotle, 2002). The nature of poetics is the action or activity of imitation, which has three aspects: namely, the medium, the objects, and the manner or mode of imitation. To make poetry is to imitate the essential, archetypal speeches and actions selected from the whole life of a human being in order to explore the possibility of life, purify emotions, and gain insights into how to live. Considering this understanding of mimesis, creating moral education textbooks is also a poetic action. Moreover, as a mimetic action, the meaning of such compilation is to guide children to live a better life through the representation and imitation of children’s essential, archetypal speeches and actions. This raises the following questions: Is it possible to compile moral education books guided by the notion of mimesis? Can printed books—that is, textbooks—be the medium through which to imitate children’s lives? If so, what are the modes/strategies of imitation? To address these questions, this study first examines the challenges involved in the compilation of the moral education textbooks, *Morality and Law*.

## **Challenges to the compilation of life-oriented moral education textbooks**

Compiling *Morality and Law* faced challenges in respect to the fundamental predicament between the static nature of the printed textbook and dynamic nature of children’s lives. In other words, textbook compilation needs to address whether and how the static medium of text can capture the multidimensional nature of children’s lives. As such, compilation challenges are rooted in both the characteristics of children’s lives and the unique layout of textbooks. This section discusses each of these challenges.

### *Challenges in compilation I: Adapting the characteristics of children’s life*

The main challenge in compiling *Morality and Law* was the “eventless,” “continuous,” “dynamic,” and “inward” nature of children’s life. In this regard, the term “eventless” does not mean that nothing happens in children’s actual lives; rather, it means that children feel as if nothing occurs in their daily lives. In other words, because children seldom feel that anything worth marking as an event occurs in their daily lives, they perceive life as eventless.<sup>1</sup> This perception results from the fact that things in children’s everyday life are so interrelated and overlapping that they cannot draw clear-cut boundaries between them. Consequently, children cannot differentiate and untangle their

daily experiences enough to label any one thing as an event, resulting in children's lacking "a sense of event" in their lives. As a result, children find it difficult to reflect on their lives, thus making their lives seem non-introspective as well. Moreover, limited by their insufficient language proficiency, children struggle to express their experiences in speech, rendering their lives seemingly incommunicable. As such, children perceive life as eventless, making them non-introspective and feeling as though there is nothing to communicate.

Accordingly, converting children's lives into textbook format is a challenging task—especially in regard to tasks intended to help them organize, reflect on, and talk about their lives and guide their prospective ways of living. As noted, children's lives are also continuous and dynamic. As a two-dimensional static medium, textbooks act as a point-and-shoot camera aimed at children's lives—only capturing frozen moments and fragments. However, children lead continuous and dynamic lives, which means that not a single activity or moment is stationary. Every action springs from another, leading to other actions or feelings in turn. Therefore, imitating such continuity and dynamism in textbooks poses a difficult problem for the compiler.

Finally, children's lives are characterized by an invisible inwardness. Human beings are internal or inward by nature (Taylor, 2001). Although limited in age and life experience, children are inward beings with abundant inner lives. Therefore, in addition to outward activities, words, and deeds, children's lives comprise invisible inward aspects, such as feelings, thoughts, emotions, and other spiritual activities. This prompts several questions for textbook compilers, which include the following: What is this inwardness of children? In what forms does it exist? How does a child experience their internal life? How can textbooks imitate these invisible inner lives? Can these inner lives be represented by visible symbols such as text or pictures? As such, the characteristics of children's lives need serious consideration in order to effectively imitate children's lives in textbooks.

### *Challenges in compilation II: The unique format of textbooks*

Another challenge in the compilation of the life-oriented moral education textbooks, *Morality and Law*, arises from the uniqueness of "textbooks" themselves. In English, the etymological root of the word "textbook"—that is, "text"—originally referred to "something woven," and "textiles" have a basic pattern and texture. As a type of "textile," textbooks clearly have their own basic texture woven by several units and texts. This indicates that it is necessary to divide "children's lives" into several segments in order to adapt them to the particular layout of textbooks. Therefore, the vital question becomes how to best divide children's lives into sections. Is there an ideal way of segmenting children's lives and sorting these sections into categories appropriate for textbooks? If so, how can we ensure that this process is not simply the mechanical segregation of children's lives? More importantly, how can we ensure against the mechanical compilation focusing on external learning subjects irrelevant to children's lives and personal experiences? In the case of

the latter, children reading these textbooks will place themselves as onlookers, witnessing the lives of the other children narrated in the textbooks, contradicting the notion of “returning to life.”

As such, developing a more suitable layout for moral textbooks in order to appropriately reflect children’s lives needs to be considered in compiling moral education textbooks. In view of these challenges, efforts must be made to overcome the limitations of the current method of compiling moral textbooks and explore alternatives in line with the characteristics of children’s lives.

### *A breakthrough in approaches to compilation: “To imitate life”*

Dealing with the aforementioned challenges was inevitable in compiling *Morality and Law*. Inspired by classical poetics, a new approach to representing children’s dynamic lives in the static medium of textbooks was explored. According to the notion of “mimesis,” compiling life-oriented moral textbooks can be regarded as poetic “imitation.” In this regard, the notion of “imitation” differs from that in modern psychology, which views “imitation” as a “replica” of the original. Aristotle’s *Poetics* advances two attributes of “imitation”: First, poetic imitation always refers to the imitation of a human being “in action”; second, imitation describes something that might happen—that is, what is possible as probable or necessary (Aristotle, 1994). Accordingly, life-oriented moral textbooks can serve as a poetic imitation of children’s lives. More specifically, such textbooks can imitate children’s activities, thoughts, and feelings in real life. However, such imitation does not refer to the complete replication of children’s current and real lives but constitutes a construction of how they might and ought to live. The next section explores how textbooks can achieve this imitation of children’s lives through three modes or strategies of imitation to the compilation of *Morality and Law*.

## **The compilation method of *Morality and Law*: Three imitation strategies**

Three imitation strategies were consciously adopted in the process of compiling *Morality and Law*: (a) the construction of children’s life events as building blocks for compiling moral textbooks, (b) the design of an intricate textual device exposing the wholeness of children’s life actions, and (c) the design of inward learning activities leading to children’s inner worlds. These strategies attempt to resonate with children’s lives while adjusting to the unique format of textbooks, thus producing moral textbooks that achieve the aim of a “return to life.” The following sections discuss each of these strategies in greater detail.

### *Constructing children’s life events as building blocks*

According to the notion of imitation advanced in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, poetic imitation is the imitation of a “human being in action”—that is, to imitate profoundly meaningful and educational actions or deeds selected from the continuum of human life (Davis, 2012). Therefore, the imitation

of children's lives in life-oriented moral textbooks refers to the selecting of educational actions or deeds from children's lives to imitate. The process of such imitation or selection involves reconstructing children's lives, and its ultimate products are children's life events, which serve as the basic building blocks of the textbook content.

Three types of life events are constructed in *Morality and Law*: namely, temporal ("time"), spatial ("locating"), and ordinary ("substantiating") life events. These three types of life events help children establish the temporal and spatial context, as well as substance of their life events, thereby cultivating their "sense of event." This means that students' chaotic, loose, and obscure life experiences can be vividly organized and become well-remembered events or, as Gudmundsdottir (1995) notes, create "a reasonable order out of experience." Consequently, an understanding of children's prospective lives can be communicated. This section discusses these life event types in greater detail.

*Temporal life events.* Temporal life events are time-related events, the construction of which needs to correlate with both natural time and artificial social time. Whether occurring in natural social time, the temporal life events designed by the textbook are intended to shape the basic "sense of time" in children's lives. With a sense of time, children can arrange and divide their life events in accordance with "time," thereby "timing" their lives more effectively (Elias, 2006)—resulting in their lives being organized more systematically.

*Morality and Law* textbooks created for the lower grades use the seasons—a typical natural time frame—to orchestrate children's life events. For instance, the first volume of the first grade textbook for the autumn term includes a lesson called "Healthy Living in Winter," which revolves around a number of topics, including playing and engaging in sports in the winter season, dressing appropriately for the weather, and preventing and treating common winter illnesses. Life events that are typically correlated with the winter season are used to facilitate children's understanding of life and ways of living in winter. Using the same approach, first grade *Morality and Law* textbooks also incorporate the other natural time frames of spring, summer, and autumn in order to form a complete natural timeline and showcase the typical life events for children in each season, thus cultivating a sense of the seasons and seasonal change.

In addition to natural time, the textbooks also present the role of artificial social time in children's lives. People's lives have become increasingly dependent on artificial social time, which appears shorter and more precise than the relatively broader and imprecise qualities of natural time. In a lesson called "A 10-min Recess,"<sup>2</sup> *Morality and Law* explores the minuscule time division of a 10-min recess in the institutional schedule of the school system. Every child spends their "10-min recess" very differently: Some use it for playtime, some focus on studying, while others use it to visit the toilet or drink water. Additionally, students often require time to finish their preparatory work for the next class, such as previewing the learning content and preparing the learning tools.





**Figure 1.** An example of an illustrated lesson entitled “What else to do during recess.”

Notes. 1. Translation of embedded Chinese characters are as follows: (a) What else to do during recess? 2. The image was from Sun, C., & Lu, J. (2016). *Textbooks in compulsory education: Morality and law* (vol. 1 of grade 1, p. 30) [in Chinese]. People's Education Press. © 2016 by People's Education Press.

Students are thus deeply preoccupied in the short span of “10 min.” As such, it is necessary to discuss and co-construct the arrangement of a “10-min recess” with children in order to guide them in organizing their activities—such as playtime, toilet breaks, drinking water, and pre-class preparation—thereby helping them leverage their 10-min recess appropriately (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, a lesson called “Chimes on the Campus” uses the “school bell”—which symbolizes the

institutional schedule of the school system—to help children perceive the correlation between different types of school bell chimes and school activities, thus facilitating better adaption to the institutionalized routines of the school.

*Spatial life events.* “Space” refers to the place in which children live as well as the context shaping children’s practical sense of what ought to be done or said (Bourdieu, 2003). In *Morality and Law*, spatial life events are constructed to represent the ways in which children think, speak, and act in different spaces, thereby helping them form ways of living that correspond to different social spaces and obtain practical understanding. In terms of their principal framework, the teaching materials in *Morality and Law* intended for the middle-to-higher grades revolve around the ever-expanding living spaces of children’s lives—that is, from the household, school, and community to the state and world. This section uses the school and public spaces presented in *Morality and Law* as examples to illustrate how spatial life events are constructed in the textbooks.

The school is the first institutionalized space children encounter after leaving the household. It is not easy for children to adapt to school life after enrolling. This problem should be addressed by the textbooks in order to help children “assimilate” into school life and become accustomed to the way of life in the school system. *Morality and Law* transforms the physical space of the school into a social space, which would become more humanized and spiritual for children. To achieve this, features of school space are highlighted in three ways: first, the physical and social functions of spaces associated with children’s needs; second, children’s distinctive emotional connections with school spaces; third, the unique forms of behavior and interpersonal interactions within these spaces. All of these features serve to cultivate children’s practical sense and “locate” them in school life.

Regarding school, “learning” is undoubtedly the foremost and most representative activity. An urgent problem in the compilation of textbooks is how to help children develop and improve the essential human activity of learning. When it comes to learning activities, their outcomes—especially the narrow aspect of academic performance—should not be the only focus. Life-oriented moral education textbooks seek to construct a holistic view of learning that benefits children their entire lives. Accordingly, the third grade *Morality and Law* textbook contains a unit called “Joyful Learning,” focusing on main themes related to learning activities; these include the concepts, media, experience, attitudes, and methods of learning, thus presenting a near holistic picture of learning. This unit is intended to facilitate the development of a comprehensive view of learning, cultivate an appropriate learning attitude, help children believe that “everyone can learn well,” and acquire positive learning experiences and effective learning methods. Consequently, the compilation of textbooks leads children to learn how to learn and attempts to provide a foundation for their lifelong learning activities.

*Morality and Law* also considers the public nature of social spaces as important. In order to guide children to become modern citizens, content regarding public life events is designed to cultivate an indispensable public spirit and good manners in children; these include the proper use of public facilities, protecting the public environment, and conforming to public rules. For instance, in regard to conformance to public rules, the textbooks present several specific ordinary life situations in order to encourage children to discuss what they should do in similar situations. Examples include the following: “When you are waiting to buy a ticket, your friend wants to jump the queue. What would you do?” or “As you plan to cross the road using the footbridge in heavy traffic, you find that many people are recklessly crossing the road without using the footbridge. What would you do?”

*Ordinary life events.* Adults tend to misunderstand children’s lives as dull and trivial because of the “eventless” nature of their lives. Consequently, some textbook compilers used extreme events that rarely occur in daily life—such as child heroes or the grand narratives from the adult world—as a substitute for children’s ordinary life events in the hope of rendering children’s lives “extraordinary.” The problem with this strategy is that such extreme life events are always incidental and typically happen to individuals. Indeed, even if these individual occurrences are significant, they are still just one part of an individual’s life. Therefore, the wholeness of children’s lives should not be overlooked in favor of an unusual fragment. Compilers of *Morality and Law* did not follow this method of obstinately forcing “life scripts” conceived by adults upon children; rather, they sought to imitate children’s ordinary life. Consequently, the *Morality and Law* textbooks focus on common life events in the ordinary lives of children.

Children’s ordinary lives comprise simple, everyday activities, including eating, dressing, being at home, learning, engaging in sport, and communicating—that is, the main elements of ordinary life events. Using these ordinary life events, the textbooks help children realize that their lives are singular and amazing, lead them to find the extraordinary in the ordinary, and prompt inquisitiveness in daily life. *Morality and Law* constructs ordinary life events in four ways: namely, daily activities or experiences, personification, interesting questions and thought experiments, and hands-on or practical exercises.

First, a daily activity or common experience is purposely selected to construct an ordinary life event that will help children make sense of daily life as well as guide them to the meanings and values of daily experiences that might seem trivial and insignificant. For instance, helping others may seem inconsequential, but helping is not always easy. As such, children need to consider how, when, and why it is important to help others. If we overlook the ways in which we can help people and treat such acts as trivial, people can be hurt by rude, misplaced, and disrespectful help. In short, it is only by understanding the art of giving that we can truly help others. There are still many daily activities or daily life experiences that need to be reconstructed as life events to guide children’s



**Figure 2.** An example of personification entitled “Meet Our Friends.”

Notes. 1. Translation of embedded Chinese characters are as follows: (a) Meet Our “Friends”. (b) Many “friends” silently help us in the community, the village, the street, and the park . . . How much do you know about them? (c) When you are walking in the park and want to sit down for a rest, I will open my arms for you to sit down and relax. (d) When you are trying to throw away a piece of garbage, I will smile at you and say: “Throw it in me and keep the street clean!” 2. The image was from Gao, D., & Lu, J. (2018). *Textbooks in compulsory education: Morality and law* (vol. 2 of grade 3, p. 50) [in Chinese]. People’s Education Press. © 2018 by People’s Education Press.

learning of the specific arts of life, the subtle meaning of daily experience, or the significance of daily phenomena.

Second, textbook compilers use the personification of ordinary things in daily life to help children grasp the meaning of ordinary things. For instance, *Morality and Law* personifies several ordinary objects: A plastic bag narrates its long journey after being discarded, foodstuffs state their experiences after being wasted, a street bench warmly offers a hospitable place for people to rest, and a garbage bin accepts any trash with a smile (see Figure 2). Such personification breathes life into ordinary things and allows children to walk in their shoes and perceive their existence. This strategy seeks to reduce indifference to familiar things in life as well as restore the genuine and deep connections between humans and ordinary objects. As such, children are guided to identify with ordinary things and consider their destiny. Thus, they may learn to “make the best use” of things in their daily lives and realize the value of ordinary objects.

Third, compilers use interesting questions and thought experiments—that is, creative questions requiring children to imagine different scenarios—to inspire children to reconsider aspects of their lives. For example, the textbooks contain questions similar to the following: “Why is the village in which you live called Wangjiacun?” and “Why do parents give relatives and friends a gift of red-painted eggs after the birth of a baby?” These questions are intended to arouse children’s curiosity and stimulate children to investigate the customs, traditions, and histories behind these ordinary things. Meanwhile, imaginative scenarios or thought experiments are designed to help children reconsider ordinary life by developing lateral thinking. For example, a fictional character named “Ding-dang” has to travel through a city without public transport; by imagining Ding-dang’s situation, children are encouraged to consider the significance of public transport in their daily lives. In another example, a thought experiment is designed to inspire children to imagine whether it is possible for no commercial advertisements to emerge in a single day, thus helping them realize the omnipresence of commercial advertisements and their imperceptible effect on people’s purchasing choices and decisions.

Finally, compilers use hands-on or practical exercises to help children gain life experiences firsthand. An example of a hands-on practical activity is one designed to help children experience manual labor, such as imitating the actions of a chef and courier (see Figure 3). This helps children recognize that even work that might seem easy and simple requires effort. Apart from direct activities helping children gain firsthand life experiences, the textbook includes an activity helping children recover their firsthand life experience through a discussion of the problems caused by the development of transportation (see Figure 4). For the air pollution problem, children can compare their experience in a park or cornfield with that in a road with heavy traffic. Through comparison with direct life experience, the students learn of the serious environmental problems caused by the development of transportation.

As such, through the construction of temporal, spatial, and ordinary life events, children learn how to shape their life events and create their own chronicles through which to narrate their lives. This textual strategy serves to bind together the loose and disparate aspects of children’s lives, while adjusting such content to the unique format of the textbook. Consequently, the principal framework of the textbook shifts from knowledge-based to life-based, producing new possibilities for compiling life-oriented textbooks.

### *Making a textual “device” capable of exposing the wholeness of life actions*

The second imitation strategy involves creating a textual device capable of exposing the wholeness of children’s life actions. Children’s lives are continuous, dynamic, and accidental. Consequently, the static medium of the textbook can do little more than capture fragments of children’s lives, thus failing to reflect a holistic picture of their lives. However, the notion of “mimesis” in poetics does not refer to the representation of fragmented actions but “a framing of reality” (Davis, 2012, p. 3). It reveals the “wholeness” of actions—that is, the “causes and effects” of actions. As such,

**体验活动<sup>a</sup>**

我们也来体验一下不同职业人们的劳动吧!<sup>b</sup>

厨师为了让大家吃上美味的饭菜，常常持锅翻炒，这个看似简单的动作，他们每天至少要重复上千次。请你模拟这个动作，持续两分钟以上。<sup>c</sup>





快递员每天忙着送快递。他们需要不停地联系收件人，请对方签收物品。请在十分钟内将两件快递送到校内两个收件人手中，并请收件人签字。<sup>d</sup>

**Figure 3.** An example of a hands-on practical activity about the lives of different workers.

Notes. 1. Translation of embedded Chinese characters are as follows: (a) The Role-Play Activities. (b) Let's do and experience different jobs! (c) The cooks make delicious food for us. The cooks' actions may seem so simple and easy, but they do them thousands of time each day. Please act as a cook, and try to hold a wok to fry foods for two minutes. (d) The couriers are busy taking and sending the packages for customers. They are constantly busy contacting the recipients and asking them to sign for the packages. Please act as a courier to send two packages for two recipients on campus within 10 minutes, and ask them to sign the receipts. 2. The image was from Gao, D., & Lu, J. (2019). *Textbooks in compulsory education: Morality and law* (vol. 2 of grade 4, p. 70) [in Chinese]. People's Education Press. © 2019 by People's Education Press.

imitating children's actions involves taking on the causes and effects of their actions, making it possible to illuminate children's personal actions. In this regard, the difficulty lies in framing and constructing "reality" in order to capture the wholeness of actions. Accordingly, it is necessary to devise an effective textual "mechanism" to assemble everything in and around children's actions and represent a "holistic picture" of their life actions. This "mechanism" or device can be a specific time, venue, action, utterance, special event, or any other element. This section uses the topic of lying to illustrate this strategy in *Morality and Law*.

**a**

## 交通发展带来的问题

快速发展的交通，极大地方便了我们的生活。但是交通发展带来的一些问题，也应引起我们的关注。**b**



听一听，一长串急促嘈杂的汽车喇叭声会带给你什么感受？如果听到的是一阵小鸟的叫声，又会有什么样的感受呢？**c**



闻一闻，在车辆往来的路口闻到的气味是怎样的？和在公园或田野中闻到的气味有什么不同？**d**



数一数，你所在的社区大约有多少停车位？如果没有这些停车位，空出来的地方可以干什么？**e**



想一想，你乘坐的公交车被堵在十字路口，你会是怎样的心情？**f**

**Figure 4.** An example of a thought experiment activity intended to make children think about and recognize the issues caused by transport development in their own lives.

Notes. 1. Translation of embedded Chinese characters are as follows: (a) Problems Caused by Transport Development. (b) Although the rapid development of the transportation system has made our lives much more convenient, it has also caused problems that are worth our attention. (c) Listen to it. How does a string of quick, jumbled honks make you feel? Imagine that it is the chirping of birds. How does it make you feel now? (d) Smell it. What do you smell at a traffic interchange? How does it differ from what you smell in the park or the cornfield? (e) Count it. How many parking lots are there in your community? If these huge and open spaces are not availed for parking, how to creatively utilize these vacant spaces? (f) Think about it. How would you feel if the bus you are riding is stuck in the middle of an intersection? 2. The image was from Gao, D., & Lu, J. (2018). *Textbooks in compulsory education: Morality and law* (vol. 2 of grade 3, p. 78) [in Chinese]. People's Education Press. © 2018 by People's Education Press.

With regard to lying, textbooks tend to describe a child's decision to lie in terms of rebuke and blame rather than guide children to explore the wholeness of the act, which includes the internal emotional state and why they lied, as well as the possible consequences of lying. Of course, it is difficult for children to perceive the wholeness of their lying, and the textbook can devise a textual mechanism to unveil the wholeness of the act that will help them reflect on their own lies.

The second volume of the third grade *Morality and Law* textbook contains a lesson called "I am Honest," which details a story about a boy named Wen, who lies to his classmates about having a beautiful goldfish at home (see Figure 5). In reality, there are few opportunities to verify the authenticity of Wen's claims, and the teachable moments that come with such authentication are seldom realized. However, textbooks can overcome the constraints of reality and provide a teachable moment by adding an extra plot device. In *Morality and Law*, a classmate suggests visiting Wen's home to see the goldfish; this plot device constitutes an ideal textual "mechanism" that can look both backward at the consequences of Wen's lie and forward at the motives behind it. In doing so, the textbook narrates Wen's self-reflection and the lessons he learned in a neutral tone. Such a holistic picture of "life events," constructed on the basis of children's common wrongdoing, helps children probe the motives and consequences of their actions. Only when children gain a deeper understanding of the motives and consequences of their own lies can they correct their actions.

### *Designing learning activities leading to children's inner worlds*

The third imitation strategy involves designing learning activities that lead to children's inner worlds. Such activities are necessary to help children gain insight into their internal lives. In this regard, the following learning activities are developed in *Morality and Law*. First, children's inner worlds are brought to light through the design of activities relevant to their internal lives. For instance, in a lesson called "I am Unique" in the second volume of the third grade textbook, children's "secrets"—a symbol of their inner world—are introduced to reveal the existence of their inner world. As such, the textbook design seeks to reveal both external and visible activities, as well as internal and invisible ones. For example, the textbooks contain a specific section called "Reading Corner," which lead children to their inner world and encourage them to use internal abilities to feel and think. However, what they think and feel is not necessarily expressed or externalized on the principle that children's inner worlds should be respected. For example, several activities are related to secrets, such as asking children to dig into their own secrets without requiring that they express or share how they regard their secrets. This also applies to other activities involving self-reflection—that is, the textbook serves as a guide and does not intend that children externalize their self-reflection. For example, regarding the topic of children's



## 请你帮他出主意<sup>a</sup>

有时我们会不由自主地说了谎话，是什么原因呢？让我们帮下面的同学分析一下吧。<sup>b</sup>

我们家养了几条非常好看的金鱼！<sup>d</sup>



放学后我们到你家去看看吧！<sup>e</sup>

小文是个热情的孩子。一天，同学们都在谈自己家里养的小动物。小文家根本没有养金鱼，但他……<sup>c</sup>

小文很后悔，因为自己爱面子，没说实话，结果出了丑。他决心改掉这个毛病，但后来同学们不再相信他的话，也不愿意与他一起玩了。小文很苦恼，你能帮小文解决这个问题吗？<sup>f</sup>



1. 小文为什么说家里养了金鱼？<sup>g</sup>
2. 设想一下后面会发生什么事。<sup>h</sup>
3. 同学们会怎么看小文？<sup>i</sup>
4. 这件事给了你什么启示？<sup>j</sup>

**Figure 5.** A lesson about lying entitled “I am Honest.”

Notes. (1) Translation of embedded Chinese characters are as follows: (a) Find Him a Solution. (b) Why is it that, sometimes, we cannot help but lie? Let’s help the following student analyze the problem he has encountered. (c) Wen is a passionate kid. One day, all his classmates were talking about their pets. Wen’s family has no pet, but he ... (d) We are keeping a few beautiful goldfishes as pets at home! (e) Let’s go to see them at your home after school! (f) Wen is quite embarrassed and regrets his lying for boasting himself. He is determined to make a change. However, his classmates no longer trust his words and do not want to play with him again. Wen is distressed. Can you find him a solution? (g) 1. Why did Wen lie about having goldfishes at home? (h) 2. Imagine what would happen next. (i) 3. How would Wen’s classmates think of him? (j) 4. What insights have you gained from this story? (2) The image was from Gao, D., & Lu, J. (2018). *Textbooks in compulsory education: Morality and law* (vol. 2 of grade 3, p. 18) [in Chinese]. People’s Education Press. © 2018 by People’s Education Press.

vandalism and promise-breaking, one of the related learning activities guides students to reflect on and evaluate themselves silently, without asking them to share their thoughts with the class.

Second, in addition to illuminating children's inner worlds, the textbooks focus on designing inward-looking activities to help children learn how to lead an internal life. How to guide children to their inner worlds and enable them to arrange and organize their inner world properly must be considered when imitating their internal lives. In the second volume of the sixth grade textbook, learning activities themed around "self-reflection" are designed to guide children to understand "self-reflection" as a common type of inner-world activity. This also serves to help children examine their daily speeches and deeds in what Lu refers to as a "flashback," thus enriching and enhancing the way in which they lead their internal lives. Other textbook topics are incorporated in order to bring children's inner worlds into sharper focus. For instance, when devising contents on topics like honesty, keeping promises, bullying, and forgiveness among children, the focus is placed on guiding children to consider people's mental state.

## Conclusion

The imitation strategies discussed in this article have opened new ways of compiling textbooks and propose alternative forms of compiling life-oriented moral education textbooks. Although numerous surveys and interviews regarding children's lives are undertaken prior to textbook compilation, and great effort is put into assimilating the various achievements of related academic research, the development of moral textbook compilation remains fraught with perplexing problems that have yet to be solved. Despite the progress in compilation illustrated in this article, it remains uncertain as to whether the new set of textbooks can advance the reform of moral education and change its marginal and disparaged position in primary schools. Indeed, textbooks are but one aspect of the reform of moral education curriculum. Nonetheless, we have embarked on an effort to identify and advance a solution to the predicament of implementing effective life-oriented moral education curriculum in classes of varying sizes.

## Author's note

This article is partially based on the author's recent research on Chinese moral education textbooks in elementary schools, which was published as a Chinese-language article in the *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education* in January 2018. In the current article, the author has deleted the theoretical part, which was about the comparison among the different compiling approaches of moral education textbooks, and has added two parts. One is about the background of the reform of Chinese moral education curriculum and the other is the context of the related theories and researches, especially the poetic theories. The use of the part of the Chinese-language article has been authorized by *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education* and acknowledged by *ECNU Review of Education*.

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## Notes

1. The discourse on the children's lives as "eventless" draws on the work of Fang (2003).
2. According to China's curricular organization, primary school students engage in six to seven school sessions a day, with a 10-min recess between classes. As such, there are five or six 10-min recesses a day, amounting to 50 or 60 min of free time.

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