

Seeking moral autonomy in a Chinese context: A study of elementary moral education standards

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Abstract: In this article, we explored Chinese moral education standards for grades one and two by using the heuristic of moral autonomy and by employing a typology of moral autonomy, one based on Kantian and Deweyan ideas about moral autonomy and agency. Given the larger charge for all of schooling to develop independence, problem-solving, and creativity in China, we sought to determine whether this change is actually the case within the 2011 Chinese moral education standards for grades one and two, for the period of 2011-2020. Although some elements of moral autonomy are stated and suggested in the standard learning objectives, there are significant discrepancies between the ultimate goals of education for children’s development of autonomy and their practices and implementation within these Chinese moral education curriculum standards.

Key Words: China; moral education; moral autonomy, curriculum

Introduction

After the communist party gained control of China in 1949, moral education focused on loyalty and selfless devotion to the country, primarily through a curriculum stressing obligations over rights (e.g., Lee & Ho, 2005; Maosen, 1990). Moral education was both the “soul of the educational system” and a “powerful ideological tool” (Li, Zhong, Lin, & Zhang, 2004, p. 458), one which was used to equate morality and politics and to demand espousal of party ideals, Marxism, patriotism, collectivism, and socialism—in short, a “proper worldview” (Li, et al., 2004, p. 455). The moral education standards set in 2001, for use from 2001-2010, demonstrated an initial shift in the prescribed curriculum towards individual growth instead of political socialization (Lee & Ho, 2005). These standards introduced the concept of “regulated individualism” to describe the tension of personal autonomy that has limits within the People’s Republic of China (Cheung & Pan, 2006).

Moral autonomy represents a new goal for schools, curriculum, instruction, students, and teachers. Although the Communist Party of China still acts as a gatekeeper of morality within moral education (Cheung & Pan, 2006), this curricular change brings forth a tension between individualism and collectivism, one which is borne out in the new standards as well. Whereas moral education used to engage in *a priori* certainties with prescribed and “ready-made conclusions” (Li, et al., 2004, p. 461),

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newer iterations ostensibly seek more critical and creative autonomy within moral thinking and behavior. The 2011 standards are situated within a larger educational goal of developing more creativity and innovation. These curricular reforms are “radical and ambitious” because the macro-curricular intention is to move away from a transmission pedagogical paradigm and towards the development of autonomous learners (Ryan, 2013, p. 82). The encouragement of independence, collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity within all subject matter is a major sea-change, to be sure, and one that is fraught with implementation concerns (Ryan, 2013).

This paper does not address implementation, but rather seeks to explore the extent to which the moral education standards for grades one and two, for the period of 2011-2020, contain directives to cultivate *moral autonomy*. Given the larger charge for all of schooling to develop independence, problem-solving, and creativity, we sought to determine whether this is actually the case within the moral education standards. This analysis is predicated on a theoretical framework that focuses on moral autonomy as a position of agency, one that has numerous roots in western philosophical epistemologies, but is also compatible, to some degree, with Confucianism.

Theoretical Framework

Moral autonomy is a Kantian construct that, in its purest form, rejects “anything other than one’s practical reason as the source of morality” (Chan, 2002, p. 281). This does not imply an individual *sui generis*, who does not make reference to others within their moral calculus. Rather, it is an ideal to make decisions about one’s life without “undue interference by others” and with the capacity to make these decisions with “due reflection and independence of mind” (Hill, 2013, p. 24). A morally autonomous agent also needs to have the “power to deliberate about and to change her values and motivations to alter significant relations in her life if she so chooses” (Oshana, 2005, p. 198). More than simply freedom and free will, autonomy within moral decision-making has to guarantee that the moral agent has “de facto authority over her will and her circumstances” (Oshana, 2005, p. 199).

This Kantian foundation is compatible with Dewey’s notion of moral autonomy as reflective morality (1932/1960). Reflective morality, unlike morality of custom, places emphasis on appeals to “conscience, reason, or to some other principle which includes thought” (Dewey, 1932/1960, p. 3). Most critically, this demands the absence of conclusions made in advance of reflection. Whereas autonomous moral agents need to grapple with the deontological evidence, reasons, and motives for a particular course of action, those without moral autonomy largely have teleological conclusions and ends formulated for acceptance *a priori*. The autonomous and deontological moral agent focuses on the method of determining the legitimacy of moral beliefs and behaviors, while the moral agent lacking autonomy experiences established and codified directives for consumption without reflection. Therefore, moral autonomy is fundamentally deontological, whereby all moral beliefs and values are open for debate, circumspection, and reconsideration in light of current conditions, beliefs, values, and experiences. Reflective morality, which was Dewey’s iteration of moral autonomy, positions moral agents to analyze critically prevailing habits of valuation, which is an intellectual endeavor. As such, customary morals naturally “make it hot” for those who question or criticize custom or tradition (Dewey, 1932/1960, p. 112). Customary or traditional moral beliefs that flow from false “idols” of knowledge found in tradition, authority, and custom (Dewey, 1933, p. 25) are therefore not sufficient for informing a morally autonomous agent’s determinations.

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An authoritarian state such as China, which seeks to influence the ways in which citizens think, would seem to be a prima facie case of epistemological incompatibility with moral autonomy. Moreover, China has a long-standing Confucian heritage, which typically fails to recognize the dignity of the individual (Chan, 2002). Yet of the four elements of moral autonomy, two work within a Confucian and authoritarian paradigm (Chan, 2002). The four elements are:

1. Voluntary endorsement of morality
2. Reflective engagement in moral life
3. Morality as self-legislation; and
4. Morality as the radical free expression of the individual's will

In particular, voluntary endorsement suggests a minimal sense of moral autonomy since moral agents cannot live a moral life if they are coerced to act or if actions are based on fear of punishment. Voluntary endorsement is not necessarily reflective or deliberative, but it does denote a sense of agency. The other element, reflective engagement, indicates an agent who is able to lead a moral life "according to *my own* understanding of what morality requires of me" (Chan, 2002, p. 285). This kind of autonomy includes reflection as well as deliberation and judgment. Chan (2002) suggested that Confucianism does not ask for people to "blindly follow the rites as endorsed by society or the majority" (p. 288). Rather, it calls for reflection and appropriateness of application based on circumstances, which are dynamic and contextual. The third level, self-legislation, is moral law independent of societal convention, tradition, and anything "external to one's rationality" (Chan, 2002, p. 285). Self-legislation and radical expression, which suggests obeying no laws other than the agent's own laws, are both largely incompatible with authoritarianism and Confucianism (Chan, 2002).

Data Analysis

In order to understand how Chinese moral education is currently articulated and the degree to which moral autonomy is officially promoted, we decided to analyze the intended curriculum (Porter, 2006; van den Akker, 2003) *Chinese Content Standards from the Moral Education Curriculum* for grades one and two, published by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in 2011. Analyzing the standards is well suited with our research inquiry mentioned above because the intended curriculum is the one written on paper, such as curriculum standards or policies that define curriculum to teach. Thus, the curriculum is often used to examine the objectives of a certain level and subject in education.

For this study, we used Chinese moral standards from 2011, when the sixth period of curriculum reform occurred. These standards will be in use until 2020, when the Ministry of Education engages in the next planned curriculum revision. We intentionally chose the curriculum for grades one and two because Chinese elementary education begins with grade one, and the first and second grades are young children's first two years in their compulsory education experiences. As a result, analyzing the moral standards for grades one and two is important for us to comprehend what young children are expected to learn first, in order to become moral beings in Chinese social contexts.

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We decided to employ Chan's (2002) theoretical framework of moral autonomy for analyzing the standards, because it clearly distinguishes four different elements of autonomy that would fit, or not fit, within a Confucian or authoritarian context. In particular, we sought to distinguish the moral education standards between elements one and two, primarily on the basis of whether judgment, reflection, or deliberation would be required of the moral agent. Our analysis is in four different sections, based on those found within the standards (see Tables 1-4). These sections are "My healthy development," "My family life," "Our school life," and "Our living community."

Findings

Content Standards: My Healthy Environment

The content standards, "My Healthy Environment," have eight different learning objectives (see Table 1). Of these objectives, five fit within Chan's first element, "voluntary endorsement of morality," and three fit within the second element, "reflective engagement in moral life." This set of content standards includes more instances of the second element of Chan's moral autonomy than the rest of the set of the content standards combined. Although the major learning objectives are for young children to understand knowledge and attitudes of morality, rather than to question and reflect on morality, some of these standards are aimed at young children's own thinking and ideas to reflect in developing morality and solving problems.

Table 1. 2011 Content Standards "My Healthy Environment"

Element	Learning Objective
2	Students get to know their own traits, develop their strengths, and know about other peoples' interests. Develop self-confidence and learn from each other.
2	Students learn to love themselves and retain self-esteem. Learn to reflect upon their daily lives and behaviors. Know how to distinguish right from wrong.
2	Students should be able to face academic and non-academic challenges. They should try to solve problems on their own and develop a sense of achievement when they overcome difficulties.
1	Be honest people.
1	Learn to respect, appreciate, and forgive other people. Learn the basic appropriate behaviors.
1	Understand that life is precious and know that they should take care of their physical wellbeing. Develop safety awareness and learn about safety commonsense and basic self-protection skills.

1	Know about the negative effect of addiction to internet and videogames, as well as other unhealthy hobbies. Say no to unhealthy lifestyles.
1	Know about the extreme hazards of using illegal drugs to one’s health as well as to society. One should treasure life and stay away from illicit drugs; Attain healthy, positive attitudes toward life.

Content Standards: My Family Life

All five content standard objectives of the “My Family Life” fit within the first element of moral autonomy, although the last objective also related the element two (see the Table 2). In particular, this set of learning objectives clearly demonstrates a Confucian emphasis on duty and responsibilities for family and society, both of which have cultural traditions within a Chinese context. As a result, instead of seeking a question about reasons or reflection, the objectives are composed of statements such as “ought to” or “should” recognize and understand the importance of such others as parents, family, and neighbors, as well as other areas of normative guidance.

Table 2. 2011 Content Standards “My Family Life”

Element	Learning Objective
1	Students should know about the importance of their family’s contribution to their personal development. One should be thankful about parenting and pay back to their family with gratefulness, respect, and care.
1	Students ought to know how to take care of themselves and form good habits. In the meantime, pay attention to their family experiences and contribute to it in order to develop responsibility. For instance, help with household chores.
1	Be a reasonable and moral person. Get along with neighbors. Protect the community environment.
1	Learn from parents about the family’s finance situation. Learn to spend according to needs and be economical.
1, 2	Know that family members should have mutual understanding and respect. Good communication should be maintained. Learn how to resolve family conflicts.

Content Standards: Our School Life

The content standards of the “Our School Life” section all fit within the first element of moral autonomy: “Voluntary endorsement of morality” (see the Table 3). These standards deal with geographic and economic knowledge and skills, as well as adequate understanding of both community and self. The geographic and economic objectives are fact-driven, which invites the most basic element of moral autonomy. However, when the objectives of community and self are present, there is no significant difference in indicating Chan’s elements of moral autonomy, because these objectives still rely on basic moral autonomy levels within a “voluntary endorsement of morality.” For instance, several objectives start with existing values and virtues, such as social collaboration and collectivism as “a team” and “obeying social conventions including the rules of activities and of the school,” exemplars for behavior within Chinese society.

Table 3. 2011 Content Standards “Our School Life”

Element	Learning Objective
1	Be able to read maps, especially those describing campus and the surrounding area. Be able to use simple lines and shapes to outline the campus as well as directions from home to school.
1	Be aware of the major departments of the school and their corresponding responsibilities. Know about the school’s development. Show respect to campus, faculty, and staff.
1	Time is precious and should not be wasted. Learn good time management. Create good study habits. Be able to finish tasks independently. Do not plagiarize.
1	Be sincere with each other in the classroom and be willing to help each other when needed. Know that everyone is equal. With mutual respect, everyone should get along with classmates and make friends.
1	Learn about a sense of belonging. Know that everyone is in a team and should take care of the team together. Join team activities and maintain a good team reputation. Be responsible for your own team.
1	Know about the rules in class and on campus. Experience the use of rules in team standing. Build awareness towards rules and abide by the rules of activities and of the school.
1	By spending time in the school and in class as a team, students learn that everyone is equal.

Content Standards: Our Living Community

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Similar to the standards of “Our school life,” all the content standards of the “Our living community” demonstrate the first element of moral autonomy, “voluntary endorsement” (see the Table 4). These content standards also relate to geography and economics in relation to the community, similar to those of “Our school life.” Therefore, direct approaches to teaching about basic concepts and skills for geography and economics are manifest within the objectives.

These standards contain critical concepts for young children to understand, including “equal rights of citizens,” “public welfare,” “equality,” “discrimination,” and “prejudice.” However, these objectives also focus on understanding socially constructed “common sense” that is already established. As a result, the objectives state what young children “should” or “should not,” instead of why they can, cultivate certain mind sets and what process of understanding they can have for each concept or issue. More precisely, there are no objectives to discuss or determine why certain rules, customs, or habits are considered bad, negative, or unhealthy. The objectives directly guide what behaviors, preferences, desires, and interests young children must have without taking into account personal considerations or individual differences.

Table 4. 2011 Content Standards “Our Living Community”

Element	Learning Objective
1	Able to read the region (district, county, city, etc.), tourist attractions, such as the small area of the plane diagram. Correctly identify area, direction, and scale, as well as simple illustrations on maps.
1	Determine the characteristics of the environment and economy of the region and its relationship with people's lives; experience the changes and development of the region. Understand a contribution to the development of the region and germinate a love one's hometown.
1	Care about workers in different industries and appreciate how their work brings convenience to people's lives; respect and cherish the efforts of their labor.
1	Know how to choose and use goods correctly; be able to buy simple items independently and become a consciously wise consumer.
1	Understand the traffic situation in this region; know the relevant traffic common sense, consciously abide by traffic regulations, and pay attention to safety.
1	Experience the convenience that public facilities bring to people's lives; be responsible for taking good care of public facilities.
1	Observe public order, pay attention to public safety.
1	Care for the elderly, the disabled, and other vulnerable people with compassion. Develop ideas of respect and equality, and be willing to try one's best to help them; take an active part in public welfare activities.

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1	Understand that there are different social groups in public life, various groups have equal rights of citizens; have mutual respect, equality, no discrimination, and no prejudice.
1	Understand the folkways, customs, and cultural activities in the region, as well as their impact on peoples' lives. Be able to identify negative customs in society and do not participate in the activities of superstition.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explored the extent to which Chinese moral education standards for grades one and two contain moral autonomy. To do so, we employed Chan's (2002) typology of moral autonomy, which is based on Kantian and Deweyan ideas about moral autonomy and agency. All of the learning objectives relate to element one, "the voluntary endorsement of morality," and two, "a reflective engagement in moral life" and over 88% of the objectives fit within element one. These findings fit with Chan's (2002) caveat about Confucian societies' incompatibility with the third and fourth elements of "morality as self-legislation" and "morality as the radical free expression of the individual's will."

The introductory statements of the content standards recognize the important goal of moral education for young children in China. The introduction aims for the "cultivation of moral character and life, good moral behavior habits, be willing to explore, and love their lives" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011, p. 1), and therefore, to become "good citizens" who are able to "explore creativity and practical application." This ultimate goal is accomplished by having different curriculum components and concepts where some higher personal levels of moral autonomy are manifested. For example, the introduction of the standards explicitly states moral education as a mechanism to "make children's own problems as the starting point of moral education" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011, p.1); to "allow children to know how to solve problems and participate socially" (2011, p.1); "take the initiative to explore, developing innovation consciousness and practice ability" (2011, p.2); and "develop the ability for practical application and creativity and use their knowledge and learning to explore and solve the problem" (2011, p. 3). These functions and goals of moral education reflect Chan's (2002) second and third elements of moral autonomy, "reflective engagement in moral life" and "morality as self-legislation."

Yet the actual moral education learning objectives in the standards tell a different story. Unlike the goals of moral education to which China aims, the learning objectives predominately reside within the basic level of moral autonomy, or more precisely, Chan's (2002) first element of "voluntary endorsement of morality." Therefore, there are significant discrepancies between overarching ideals and the ultimate goals of education for children and their practices and implementation in everyday lives within these Chinese moral education curriculum standards. Again, this finding echoes Ryan's (2013) remarks concerning the current governmental initiatives of independence, problem-solving, and creativity in education that does not quite correspond to the reality of teaching and learning in schools.

While constructing these findings, it is salient to note that voluntary endorsement has more meaning in a Chinese context as compared to a Western or non-Confucian culture because it presupposes that a moral act should be derived from a moral life, wherein each individual must cultivate through his/her internal motivation (Yearley, 1990). A Confucian paradigm advances the notion that a person cannot have a moral life without his/her wills to do so (Wong, 1996). This presumption also involves a fulcrum idea that such a moral life must be in consensus among people and society as "common sense." Morality and its principles within a Confucian context result from a sense of the common good or the majority of people or group, not from individual needs, desires, reasons, or freedom to choose. The concepts within Confucian morality are decidedly more collective when compared to non-Confucian moral structures, and moral questions are situated in the issue of "whether" rather than that of

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“what” or “why” in Chinese education. Because of this reason, the simple, direct action statements we found in the Chinese moral education curriculum are contextually relevant.

Given the Chinese Confucian views where different understandings and expectations of morality are present, this curriculum standard analysis has some implications for Chinese moral education for young children. First, Chinese moral education needs to be intent on how educational goals can be accordingly applied and operationalized into the current practical curriculum enactments in young children’s classrooms. Even though the Chinese Ministry of Education strongly encourages children to explore creativity and develop independence as one of the important educational goals (Chinese Content Standards from the Moral Education Curriculum, 2011; Ryan, 2013), moral education curriculum objectives for children’s learning do not precisely respond to them. Chinese moral education should provide ample educative opportunities for enhancing children’s abilities for divergent thinking and innovative ideas to make appropriate choices by themselves in the manifold moral situations they will encounter throughout their lives.

Second, it is necessary for Chinese moral education to create a critical space between children and traditional concepts of morality and to seek a deontological inquiry of moral reasoning on various circumstances and situations with diverse people. Considering that China has recently undergone substantive economic changes, if its education mainly emphasizes Confucian morality based on humanity and common sense of the world, moral education may not reflect the children’s reality in contemporary Chinese society. As a result, Chinese moral education needs to reconstruct some important standpoints and perceptions of Confucian morality by allowing children to reflect upon such questions as who the majority of people are, whose common good has been considered, and who are assumed to ignore the discourse of morality and its decision making. In this way, Chinese education would enable cultivating children’s morality based on personal reasoning, as well as developing its scheme to balance individual differences with Chinese traditional culture of Confucian strong morality for the common good.

In a similar vein, it is important for Chinese moral education to consider that children’s developing moral autonomy needs to coincide with full recognition of their own personal autonomy through their own reflections. Social convention is often rendered as morality in China because it is mostly assumed to be established for the public good and the majority of people in the country with the absence of personal needs or individual selves as the first priority. Therefore, it is not easy for China to reconsider the definition of “moral” with the concepts of “autonomy,” because morality was thoroughly rooted from what is good for the others, not one’s self, and what ought to be done as human beings in general, not one’s specific criteria. Hence, moral education with the level of reflection that both Kant and Dewey (1932/1960) suggested can be a useful mechanism for China to encourage young children to bridge social expectation from Confucian moral perspectives to children’s real life experiences. Children’s discussions about their reasons for a functional arrangement that each individual can develop differently, depending on his/her rationality, can allow them to understand how different people can have various actions and purposes in morality. By promoting young children’s own freedom in reflecting upon and discussing specific moral issues and situations, Chinese moral education may lead them to have more opportunities to develop moral autonomy.

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