

A Critical Review of Chinese Theoretical Research on Moral Education Since 2000

ECNU Review of Education
2019, Vol. 2(4) 561–580
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DOI: 10.1177/2096531119886490
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to summarize and reflect Chinese theoretical research on moral education in the context of globalization and value pluralism since 2000 and to propose possible directions for the future research.

Design/Approach/Methods: The research methods in this article are primarily literature review. Those papers which met the following criteria were selected and included in this review: (1) Papers published from 2000 to 2014 were included if they were cited by at least one other published article and (2) papers published from 2015 to 2017 were included if they were presented in a core research journal. Based on that, speculative thinking and critical thinking are also embodied in this research.

Findings: Based on the features of “a man of virtue,” the article identifies the four dimensions that have influenced Chinese thinking about moral education: (1) Kantian and Enlightenment philosophy, (2) emotion and life experience, (3) social rights, and (4) the culture-value dimension. The four dimensions of moral education theory are related and complement, rather than contradict, each other. The author argues that the research scopes underlying current moral education theories are fairly narrow. A more comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach is needed to improve theoretical research and to enhance the effectiveness of moral education practice in schools and universities.

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Originality/Value: The article provides a latest overview and critical insights to consolidate the foundation of moral education in an era of societal transformation by comparing moral education research between China and the West and proposing realizing a deep integration between theory and practice.

Keywords

Civic education, life experience education, moral education, research review, subjectivity

Date received: 20 December 2017; accepted: 12 October 2019

Since the implementation of the economic reform and opening-up policy, moral education has been gradually marginalized due to the rapid development of the market economy and the shift in values caused by societal transformation. Since 2000, waves of moral pluralism introduced by globalization and economic integration have fostered an environment that is restrictive to the development of moral education. To advance moral education theory, researchers must face the challenges presented by “de-moralization” and value rupture brought about by societal transformation and make efforts to reconstruct the theoretical basis of moral education in the age of globalization.

Since the 1980s, the concept, nature, status, functions, goals, processes, and methods of school-based moral education have been extensively discussed by scholars. A series of Western moral education theories and practice patterns have been introduced. The social foundation and psychological basis of moral education have been reconsidered and efforts have been made to adapt school-based moral education to a continuously changing society and economy. Ban (1999), in his article “Modern Progress of Moral Thought over the Past Decade,” reviewed the results of the modernization of moral theories over the period from 1989 to 1998. Since 2000, a variety of moral education theories have emerged including the subjective and intersubjective moral educational theory, the living moral theory, the emotion moral theory, the aesthetics moral theory, the system moral theory, the life moral theory, the postmodern moral theory, and so forth (Ye & Tan, 2009).

Since the early 21st century, ideological and theoretical moral education research has gone beyond the discussion of discipline construction in terms of its validity and scientificity. Researchers have paid increasing attention to moral education itself, particularly the “person” in moral education. Questions such as “What is a moral person?” or “What are the hallmarks of a morally-educated person?” have become the starting point for constructing the moral education theory. In fact, China’s current moral education theories, from different dimensions, provide answers to these foundational questions.

Every theory has two basic characteristics. First, a theory is a combination of systematic viewpoints and methods. It is comprehensive and logical, as well as self-consistent. A theory

summarizes core messages in plain words, outlines its distinctive features, and strongly explains real experiences. Second, a theory forces the possibility of action. “To develop a thought’s meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce: that conduct is for us its sole significance” (James et al., 1997, pp. 26–27). Accordingly, there must be realistic characteristics in a moral education theory, producing different and observed actions and effects, which have conspicuous impacts on the goal, content, process, method, and evaluation of moral education. Considering the aforementioned two characteristics, the author conducted a review of Chinese research on moral education from 2000 to 2017. Based on the relevance and significance of the research, this article focuses on nearly 150 papers¹ and over 30 representative books. The author proposes that, based on the features of “a man of virtue,” current theories of moral education can be divided into four research dimensions: the philosophy-subject dimension, the life-emotion dimension, the society-rights dimension, and the culture-value dimension.

Four dimensions of moral education research

The four dimensions of moral education research have absorbed many ideas from philosophy, ethics, political science, and psychology, providing a meaningful sketch of a wide range of supporting conditions and influencing factors, all of which must be considered in cultivating a “moral person.” Moral theorists have inherited the traditions of rationalization, standardization, and secularization since the age of the Enlightenment. In moral education theories, humanistic value character has gradually become the focus, while political indoctrination and thought control have taken a secondary role.

Rational characteristics of a moral man in the philosophy-subject dimension

From a philosophical perspective, the promotion of subjectivity and praise of practical reason can be traced back to Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, the basis of moral law is the subject of practical reason which is a subject with self-consciousness (Sandel & Wan, 2001, p. 11). Following the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy, current moral education theorists pay more attention to the value of a person as a moral subject. The moral subject is an autonomous, rational individual possessing the capabilities of self-management, self-development, and self-selection. This is in stark contrast with the moral state of ignorance and obedience, passive blindness, and callousness, which were historically considered by some to be deep-rooted, inferior habits associated with traditional Chinese culture.

The moral education theory of “subject-development” played a dominant role from the late 1990s to the early 21st century. Subjective moral education has marked an undergoing significant change: Chinese moral education has gradually broken away from political attachment and instead, emphasizes the moral qualities of the individual as a good person. A moral subject is not a

hypocrite, but an individual with an independent, rational, and voluntary moral personality; he or she is a kind person who handles matters calmly, being tranquil, persistent, and magnanimous, “standing between heaven and earth—which means a man of indomitable spirit” (Xiao, 1999, p. 24). Piaget and Kohlberg’s theories have been widely introduced, studied, and quoted since the 1980s. As a result, Chinese scholars no longer emphasize that the most important goal of moral education is to guide students to internalize societal norms, as Durkheim advocated. Instead, researchers have adopted a constructive perspective on moral cognitive development and emphasize the importance of nurturing students to become moral subjects who are self-constructive, consciously practical, and capable of self-restraint (Wang & Hao, 2007). In regard to the means of moral education, indoctrination has been denounced. Students are not regarded as mere recipients of ethics, but rather are seen as individuals who are capable of the self-selection and self-construction of ethics. A shift from the authoritarian model of moral education to the libertarian model is now advocated. Likewise, the transformation from the “externally-shaped” model to the autonomous, generative, and individualized model is more likely to bring forth freedom for children in their own development (Ban, 2002, p. 75).

However, the philosophy of subjectivity has been questioned based on a reflection on Enlightenment philosophy and a critique of modernity. There is a concern that the subject has a tendency to rid himself/herself of the moral constraints of practical reason, thereby degenerating into “dispirited professionals” and “soulless hedonists” (Habermas, 2004, p. 446). Correspondingly, subjective moral education also faces challenges. For instance, moral subjects can be viewed as isolated individuals who disregard the interests and dignity of others. Hence, the concept of a mono-subject has gradually been replaced by that of “communicative dialogue” (Habermas, 2004, p. 136). Interactive subject and intersubjectivity are used to eliminate interpersonal conflict brought about by subjective antagonism, as well as the self-division caused by duality. Under the influence of the Dialogue Theory, which was developed by Fletcher, Buber, and Habermas, moral education researchers emphasize the need for dialogue between both sides of openness and acceptance. Dialogue is an activity “to fuse the vision” by mutual listening and equal sharing and to create meaning by exchanging spirit together (Guo, 2005, p. 76). Particularly, the moral education practices of intersubjectivity are designed to target subjects’ communicative rationality, altering the method from unidirectional to bidirectional dialogue (Fang, 2006), establishing an equal dialogue on the teacher–student relationship, and reconstructing moral training classes and even school life (Du, 2012).

Cultivating of a complete moral person in the life-emotion dimension

The life-emotion dimension manifests the influence of pragmatism and existentialism, while opposing knowledge-centered, rationalized, and intellectualized moral education. The dimension

emerges as a necessary supplement to subjective moral education theory. It moves toward two different directions: First, to the moral life, it initiates “morality is from life, in life, and for life.” Life is holistic while people maintain “holistic existences” among various social relations (Lu, 2010, p. 7); second, to the emotional experience, it proposes emotional moral education, life moral education, caring moral education, and so forth, claiming that affectivity is the basic state of human existence. The uniqueness and intuitiveness of emotional experience reshapes individual understanding of moral education.

Influenced by Dewey’s and Xingzhi Tao’s philosophy, life moral education advocates that people should follow the logic of life by returning to the living world and resisting the cold “Science World.” The current education system is criticized as being too monotonous and restrictive. The system is like a fence, which squeezes the integrity from children’s lives (Gao, 2012, p. 6). Moral education is for good life, however, life is not for morality or for demonstrating the loftiness of moral principles. Morality is the byproduct of life, not a product of deliberate school education. “The process of life is a process of moral learning. The best way to learn morality is through meaningful life” (Gao, 2006, p. 32). The purpose of life moral education is to help students pursue a comprehensive, enriched, and good life. Lu (2005) has observed that “the curriculum of moral education should be based on life rather than knowledge; the curriculum system should be on the basis of the evolution and development of children’s lives rather than the deduction from concept or category” (p. 11). Life moral education theory has become the leading idea of moral education curriculum reform under the new national curriculum reform since 2000 and has become the guiding ideology for compiling moral education textbooks for compulsory education.

Emotional moral education theorists criticize that the conceptual, superficial, and doctrinal moral education employed in schools is indifferent to individual feelings, and thereby often results in “the disabled” of rational perversion and emotional malaise. Moral education aims to cultivate complete people who are “inherently fully-developed” (Zhu, 2005, p. 1). Books from the *New Theory of Moral Education in Contemporary Society Series* (2005), written by Zhu and others, advocate the importance of caring moral education, emotional moral education, life moral education, happiness moral education, and hope moral education, which embrace care ethics beyond fair ethics and ecological ethics beyond the anthropocentric doctrine. These works share the same belief: Emotion is not only a power system that promotes cognition but also a development goal in itself. The objective of moral education is to cultivate individual moral features including concern and compassion, love of life, gratitude to nature, and pursuit of a meaningful life (Liu, 2005, pp. 94–95).

Emotional education theorists emphasize the significant roles played by empathy, experience, aesthetics, and epiphany in students’ moral growth. First, the caring interpersonal relationship is of great significance for moral growth. Although the concepts are expressed in various way by

theorists, Noddings (2003) has summarized them well by saying, “We believe that virtues are best learned in strong, happy relationships.” “Happy children rarely become violent or cruel” (pp. 11–12). Second, the role of teachers is emphasized. Teachers should be humanists. The fundamental source of teacher creativity is the teacher’s love, sensitivity, and the ability to interact with students affectively (Zhu & Ding, 2015). Lu (2015) conducts experiments to optimize teaching through facilitating positive emotional factors in class, develops tools for the assessment of young people’s emotional well-being, and implements related surveys. Third, experience is used as an approach to provoke emotions. Experience is a picture of the thinking activity that transcends specific time and space. As such, it can awaken experiencers’ past life experiences and strengthen their future dreams. In addition, an experiencer will achieve full understanding of their current experiences as a subject of survival and practice, which may lead to substantial changes of moral realms (Liu, 2003, p. 38). In addition, moral narrative (life narrative), with episodic, dramatic, educational, and cultural characteristics, is advocated as an important way for teachers and students to teach and learn morality (Ding, 2005). It is also suggested that researchers should tentatively apply moral narrative as a research method for moral education research.

The life moral education theory rejects the dominant moral education paradigm of scientism and behaviorism, emphasizing the role of personal emotions and positive social relationships. Viewed from the strong tradition of rationalization in modern moral education research, however, life moral education research (and, especially, emotional education research) is relatively weak. Moreover, the connotations of the two key terms, namely, “life” and “life moral education,” are rich and fuzzy. Since the understanding of life and life moral education has not been well clarified, there exist two tendencies: (1) generalization, starting from the literal meaning and linking moral education with all life activities without distinction, and (2) perfectionism, believing that life moral education is infinitely beautiful and capable of satisfying all the conditions needed for ideal moral education (Wang & Tang, 2017).

Cultivating citizens in the social-rights dimension

The social-rights dimension of moral education research is rooted in the development of civil rights arising from the Chinese social transformation period. It is also influenced by Western liberalism, republicanism, and communitarianism. Civic education is opposed to the cultivation of subjects loyal to the government; it embodies the concept of people-oriented education and emphasizes civil rights. The renowned Chinese scholar, Li (1999), in his paper “Amending the Constitution and Citizenship Education” claims that civic education is truly urgent and stresses the priority of spreading constitutional knowledge. Due to the enactment of the CPC Central Committee’s *Guidelines on Citizen Morality* in 2002, research in civic education has substantially increased. Researchers have reached an agreement that civic (or citizenship) education is not an exclusive

product of Western countries but should be universal across all the countries. Civic education is markedly different from traditional moral education. Civic education is a subjective education; civic education unifies the rights and duties of citizens; and civic education regards consensus of “legitimacy” as a basic principle of governance and seeks “reasonableness.” In other words, civic education is not a “saint education” but a “civilian education” (Zhong & Li, 2002, p. 69).

Civic education research has developed in two aspects: aim and approach. In terms of aim, civic education has moved away from the expectation of cultivating “big citizens” in order to focus on the cultivation of “little citizens.” “Big citizens” are Aristotelian virtuous men who pursue excellence and reputation both in public life and in personal life by dedicating themselves to public affairs and the realization of their unique human nature. “Little citizens” are average men who, according to Strauss, are self-interested, gossipy, and politically alienated. Citizens’ moral qualifications drop from “excellence” to mediocrity. With respect to approach, civic education researchers are no longer keen on presetting levels of awareness and content of citizenship consciousness, but instead place more stress on institutional establishment and civic participation. Civic consciousness is formed by participating in the construction of social institutions and providing social service. However, due to different interests, academic preferences, and divisions between liberalism and communitarianism, scholars in the field of civic morality are divergent on three points: First, whether civic duty exists prior to rights; second, whether citizens should be individualistic or collectivist (scholars who agree with the former adhere to inner and faith freedom, speaking highly of acts of civil disobedience; scholars who are for the latter believe that individual freedom gives way to the communal interest); and third, scholars hold different options on the priority of training citizens to defend national interests with a strong national consciousness and patriotism or cultivating world citizens with universal ethics and a spirit of considering all humanity (Feng, 2013).

Citizenship education research has mostly been in the Western discourse, which has brought two problems: First, the role of the citizen is unbalanced (civic autonomy is overstated while citizens’ obedience and duties are neglected); and second, the role of the citizen seems to be irrelevant to culture. Citizens are considered to be unified and identical without gender differences, ethnic differences, and cultural differences. These two problems have resulted in the sterility of content of Chinese civic education and a lack of localized and original thinking.

Cultural identity of the moral person in the culture-value dimension

Morality is closely connected with culture, value, and spirit. Moral education is therefore deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual ground. Due to globalization and societal transition, morality has become more complex while conflicts among moral values have become increasingly intense (such as conflicts between traditional and modern morality, between value normativism and

pluralism, between deontological and utilitarian orientations, between ecological ethics and anthropocentrism, and between virtual and real-world morality). All these conflicts must be interpreted from social and cultural perspectives. Qi (2011) argued that “to some extent, the issues encountered in moral education are not all specific moral issues or education issues, but cultural issues” (p. 3). Conflicts between moral values were mainly manifested as the conflict between traditional and modern in the 1970s–1980s, between deontological and utilitarian orientations in the 1990s, and between multicultural and universal values in the 21st century. Researchers have been reconsidering the role of moral education in a society and have been moving toward the multicultural direction. Some theorists have been concerned about the negative impacts of moral relativism on schooling and are worried that relativism may undermine the foundation of moral education and lead to nihilism and egoism (Huang, 2001; Zhang, 2005). Moral education researchers desire to reconstruct and expand consensus on values and—at the same time—to be aware of the homogenization and Westernization brought about by globalization. Thus, Chinese moral education researchers highlight the importance of enhancing cultural consciousness, so that people can become “cultural viewers and pioneers” and bear the mission of “rebuilding the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation” (Li, 2011, p. 166).

Some researchers are committed to linking modern moral education to traditional culture by attempting to establish and promote a moral education with Chinese characteristics in the face of globalization. Fan (2013) has argued that one of the assets of Chinese traditional morality is its emphasis on spirituality, and therefore Chinese moral education should be in a spiritual form rather than in a rational form as in Western culture. He has also observed that ethics, justice, and conscience are interlinked rather than contradictory. Some researchers believe that the traditional moral concepts of “harmony between man and nature” and of “benevolence and love of things” can give birth to modern ecological moral education ideas (Yuan et al., 2010, pp. 75–76). They hold that traditional moral teachings contain rich consciousness and life education which can be utilized. Yi (2010) argued that, in the theoretical study of education, multilevel, overall perspectives should be adopted when addressing the issue of inheritance and utilization of Chinese traditional moral culture, thereby ensuring that the approaches to cultural inheritance are holistic rather than misplaced and fragmented. With the promulgation of “Guidelines for the Improvement of Education of the Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture” in 2014, the Ministry of Education recognized the value of traditional cultural education in an unprecedented fashion. Traditional culture education has returned to the campus in a variety of forms. Etiquette education and filial piety education have been given particular attention in primary and secondary schools.

Other researchers have attempted to highlight the repressive nature of, and other risks posed by, the modern culture. Some researchers criticize consumerism for excessively stimulating people’s material needs, creating false demands, exploiting the environment, and destroying spirit and

morality. They argue that the cultural reconstruction brought about by technology is a double-edged sword for moral learning, either promoting moral growth or fostering moral alienation. "Misery saturation," exposed by electronic media, might induce moral indifference. The euphoria and fragmentation of cyber culture also run the risk of triggering a moral crisis (Gao, 2009, p. 81). Moral education researchers have adopted an attitude of vigilance toward technological innovation and have yet to figure out how to best utilize technology in moral education.

Reflections

The four dimensions of moral education theory are related and complement, rather than contradict, each other. Together, they constitute the whole picture of current moral education research in China and display the following three characteristics: First, although different terms are used in various moral theories, they commonly pursue moral reason, moral autonomy, and moral tolerance; second, the current theories criticize the shortcomings of moral education practices as indoctrination and standardized behavior training; third, moral education theorists consciously rethink the impact of value pluralism and multiculturalism in the age of economic globalization and information integration. Theorists criticize the negative influence modern civilization has on individual spirituality and consciously accept the responsibility to rebuild a better moral education for the next generation. However, generally speaking, moral education theories still have many limitations with respect to research issues, methods, and perspectives. The limitations are not due to laziness or limited capacity on the part of moral education theorists, but are related to social environment, disciplinary institutionalization, and so forth.

Relatively narrow disciplinary perspective

Moral phenomena and moral behavior are complex and multidisciplinary. Moral education theoretical researchers focus more on the study of philosophy and ethics, but less on psychology, biology, sociology, economics, and other relevant disciplines. Little is known about the influence of linguistics, aesthetics, art, and other interdisciplinary fields on the research achievements regarding human moral behavior. Moral education theorists are more inclined to emphasize the social nature of moral behavior while ignoring its biological underpinnings. Therefore, they pay little attention to biology and anthropology research. Ethical evolution, based on Darwinian natural selection theory of the 19th century, helped spur a Chinese moral revolution toward the beginning of the 20th century. It demonstrated how biological research could change our understanding of morality and human nature. The study of selfish, altruistic, and cooperative behavior in humans (and other animals) challenges the "selfish self" hypothesis of human nature, which provides the crucial basis for understanding moral phenomena. Certain books reshaped Chinese thinking on human behavior, such as *Evolutionary Ethics* by Williams in 1893, *Altruism and Related*

Phenomena by Hamilton in 1972, *The Selfish Gene* by Dawkins in 1975, *The Evolution of Cooperation* by Axelrod in 1984, and many others, which have been translated into Chinese, but seldom cited in the papers written by Chinese moral education scholars. Anthropological studies of primitive civilizations and urban civilizations help to enrich the understanding of cultural diversity and cultural equality. At the same time, the research results of psychologists have not received adequate attention. The study of human free will, obedience behavior, moral self, and identity construction also have had an enlightening effect on the understanding of moral issues. The research results of psychologists in particular have refreshed our understanding of the boundary between moral evil and psychological abnormality.

Although moral theorists are sensitive to progress made in the fields of philosophy and ethics, they fail to grasp the current paradigm shift present in the humanities and social sciences. This failure is manifested by their neglect of “power critique” and “linguistic turn.” Power-criticizing research is intended to reveal the link between morality and power and to strip morality from the oppressive ideology in instances where power is abused in the name of morality. Power is not only a political power, but more importantly a micro-power. Any one-way, mandatory force is power. Those with power often label as “immoral” behaviors which do not conform with the mainstream ideology, creating an image of a “moral dwarf” of the actors. In the feudal period of China, “ritual killing” and “moral killing” resulted from the binding of morality to political power. For that reason, traditional Chinese morality was rejected as cruel and harsh since the early modernization of China in the 19th century, whereas the camouflaged power hidden behind morality escaped detection and remained intact. Current scholars are now cognizant of the misplacement of past criticism and attempt to repudiate power when it is unreasonable and coercive. However, Chinese moral education theorists are still inclined to use grand narratives and favor moral universalism. They, although affected by Foucault who revealed and criticized the implementation of power in microcosmic aspects, fail to reveal the hidden gender bias, discrimination, repression, and inequality behind moral discourse or discover power when it is intended to impose unified and homogeneous discipline under the mask of moral universality.

The linguistic turn of philosophy and ethics stresses that thought should be expressed verbally and thought content is subjected to utterance. Similarly, the study of moral education can only be carried out through language. The British philosopher Hale deliberately studied moral and value language by conducting linguistic analysis of “goodness” and “obligation;” the German philosopher Habermas constructed the theory of communicative action based on the use of semantics production. Language research indicates that vague concepts can cause theories to go astray. For instance, the following ideas can be found in many papers: There are certain advantages of moral relativity and disadvantages of moral relativism; there are arguments to be made about the benefits of consumer culture and about the harms of consumerism. However, what are the differences

between moral relativity and moral relativism, between consumer culture and consumerism? There is a lack of clarity in the language we use to define the boundaries between, and meanings of, key terms. A failure to insist on precision and a lack of a common language constrains theoretical dialogues among theorists, which then leads research into “self-talking.” Using unnecessarily vague language can produce the appearance of disagreement; accordingly, the seemingly disparate views presented in the research are often more attributable to differing expressions than ideas. Imprecision in the language used by thinkers and theorists causes significant duplication of effort and research.

Lack of conscious reflection on methodological foundations

Moral education theorists adhere to a philosophically speculative paradigm. Influenced by normative ethics, the theorists prefer linear deductive logic to complex, dynamic, and holistic modes of thinking. This bias is embodied in the following ways: (1) A large amount of research is of the “directly transplanted” type that applies philosophical terms and theories directly to explain moral issues without any consideration of theoretic adequacy and transformation; (2) moral education research values the individualized construction of societal norms and morals, but little research has been devoted to discovering the mechanism underlying this process; and (3) the moral philosophy-subject dimension is rich in research on developing and training an individual’s moral reason, but is comparatively weak in the development of an individual’s moral sentiments.

Influenced by Enlightenment thought, moral education theorists pursue universality, certainty, and unification of moral education. Lack of respect for diversity may lead to unconscious moral prejudice and cultural discrimination. It is generally believed that people share the same mind, heart, and morals regardless of their culture and ethnicity, and that, in principle, they can be taught in the same manner. The moral needs of minorities and of those with different moral standards have not been duly recognized. It is also believed that the task of moral theorists is to reveal the universal law of moral education. Unfortunately, this task is almost impossible to accomplish. Meanwhile, moral theorists tend to lay more stress on the present than on the past; they think highly of moral theories from overseas while looking down upon local ideas. As a result, the development of moral education theory in China has largely become a process of duplicating international mainstream theories (Ding, 2005, p. 237). Moral education theorists lack the necessary vigilance against Enlightenment ideology and “Western-centrism.” In terms of civic education content, cultural diversity and multicultural awareness education have recently received greater attention. However, there is no in-depth or systematic consideration of the image or concept of a “citizen” with Chinese characteristics. One is left with the impression that the only path for Chinese civic education is to teach students to become Westernized or Americanized. Although there has been a strong call for the return of traditional culture, the Chinese traditional ethical discourse on

“heaven” and “conscience” and the main topics of argument over “the distinction between heaven and man” and “discrimination of righteousness and benefit” lack resonance and inheritance in the current research on moral education. This suggests that, despite their noble ambitions to rejuvenate the culture of the nation, scholars have still drifted from Chinese traditional culture and moral traditions with respect to knowledge structure and research direction.

The unified and deterministic characteristics of dichotomous thinking (something must either be “this” or “that”) often limit a researcher’s approach and vision. Consequently, it makes researchers keen on constructing theories while ignoring the hidden problems behind their theories, ignoring facts that are inconsistent with their theories, and overwhelming concrete issues with grand theoretical discourse. Between “problem” and “-ism,” theorists often prefer the latter and, therefore, are prone to fall into the mode of thinking that Hu Shih once criticized, thinking that theory was an all-embracing and “fundamental solution” to all problems. In addition, researchers are familiar with the research paradigm of philosophical and quantitative methods, conducting moral education research either by theoretical speculation or by questionnaire survey. Comparatively, they know less about (and therefore fail to employ) qualitative research methods from the perspectives of criticism and Hermeneutics. As a matter of fact, two qualitative methods, namely ethnography and grounded theory, can be used to construct theories from facts and evidence following an inductive process, thereby not only retaining the systemic theory but also preserving empirical facts. It should also be noted that without the researcher’s theoretical insights and capacity, the use of those methods cannot produce any theories in itself.

Lack of an ethical examination of major educational issues

Moral education is often considered to be education for the development of students’ character and virtues. This view, however, was criticized by Dewey who argued that “Our conceptions of moral education have been too narrow, too formal, and too pathological” (Dewey, 1909, p. 40) and “The educative process is all one with the moral process” (Dewey, 1920, p. 183). Thus, moral education cannot be confined to a narrow range of disciplines. Rather, moral education should be the ethical foundation of all education, an approach that would help ensure that school education is beneficial to the development of individual freedom and social justice. In this regard, if researchers fail to maintain their enthusiasm for individual freedom and social justice, they could easily yield to the educational status quo and believe that “what exists is reasonable.”

The ethical basis of school-based education includes moral values, such as freedom, justice, democracy, and happiness. Research on these issues is not only an area of educational philosophy but also an important issue for moral education researchers who find themselves obliged to answer the questions: “What kind of education is moral?” and “How can we cultivate moral people in an ethical way?” Moreover, moral education researchers should reflect on and criticize the current

educational system, education policy, and education reform. In regard to the educational system, moral education researchers need to consider the nonmoral aspects of the current overemphasis on examinations, addressing how to break through the shackles of a bureaucratic, hierarchical, and instrumentalized educational system and how to transform schools into moral and democratic communities of life. In the field of educational policy, moral education researchers should reflect on the legitimacy of education policies and examine procedural justice and substantive justice in policy formulation. With regard to educational reform, moral education researchers should repudiate the pseudo-reform of anti-educational behaviors and add ethical standards to the evaluation indicators on the effectiveness of any reform. It is necessary not only to evaluate students' academic quality but also to consider the equity of school education.

Disconnected from school practice

There is an unbridgeable gap between school moral practitioners and theoretical researchers. Moral education theorists accuse practitioners of conflating true moral education with imposing discipline, doing moral education by indoctrination and coercion. Whereas, moral education practitioners regard theorists' favored humanistic values as unrealistic castles in the sky. School moral education practitioners do not recognize the theoretical wisdom of researchers, just as theoretical researchers do not recognize the practical know-how of practitioners. This results in limited influence of theoretical research on practice and vice versa.

The reason why practitioners do not recognize researchers' theoretical wisdom is, to some extent, related to researchers' ways of raising questions. Following the logical development of philosophical theory, researchers explore moral problems that stem from theoretical studies rather than actual problems arising from the practice of school-based moral education. Theoretical researchers and practitioners have different primary issues of concern. They use different discourse systems and therefore lack common language and recognition. As a matter of fact, a number of moral education theorists have been acutely aware of this problem and have made efforts to convert theoretical research into practical results. For instance, they participate in the formulation of moral education curriculum standards, edit moral teaching materials, diagnose the problems of school moral education practices through field investigations, and promote innovation in school-based moral education via school-university cooperation. However, these efforts have been insufficient.

Our strategy and path of deepening moral education reform in China should not go forward in the separation of theory and practice, nor should it be paralyzed in the non-ecological dilemma of experience abduction practice or practice repression theory. Instead, moral education should consciously follow the road of deeply integrating moral theory with its practice, thereby allowing moral education theory and practice to prosper together and develop harmoniously. (Liu et al., 2015)

“Deeper integration” between theory and practice has become a consensus, although more work must be done to explore how to combine the two sides.

The outlook on prospective moral theoretical research

One way to understand the future of the research and development of moral education in China is through a comparison of moral education research in China and the West.

Comparison of moral education research between China and the West

The methodology of research on moral education in China is mainly humanistic, philosophical, and deductive, whereas the paradigm of Western moral education research is primarily scientific, analytical, and reductionist, emphasizing empirical research. The well-known British moral education theorist Wilson (2000) writes, “Serious enquiry requires (a) conceptual clarity and (b) empirical knowledge; and any contributor to the literature of moral education must advance either (a) or (b)” (p. 261). The practice of conceptual clarification advocated by analytical philosophers has been declining, whereas the use of empirical research methods still represents the mainstream. Western moral education research takes psychology as its foundation and increasingly introduces the perspective of biological evolution (revealing the impact of evolutionary mechanisms on human morality) while also utilizing neuroscience (revealing the neurological basis of moral thinking). Research on moral education in the West advances the understanding of moral education from two aspects: First, by focusing on the core competencies of moral behaviors, such as moral reasoning ability and moral judgment ability; and second, by focusing on core moral values and virtues, making efforts to construct theories to explain the mechanisms behind the acquisition and formation of core moral values. Hence, research has been conducted extensively and meticulously on topics such as justice, fairness, conscience, moral self, and moral identity. In the study of moral education in China, there are few in-depth empirical studies centering on the above themes. Western moral education research has made breakthrough in the measurement of children’s moral development, such as the Defining Issues Test based on Kohlberg’s Moral Stage Theory (Rest, 1979) and the Moral Judgment Test developed by Lind (1982). While in China, the assessment and measurement of children’s moral development and ability still has a long way to go. Measurements of children’s moral competencies have been mostly conducted in the form of questionnaire surveys. Due to flaws in the design of the research method, many of the results and conclusions are either common sense or contrary to common sense. For example, most questionnaire surveys are likely to find that the younger the child is, the stronger his moral consciousness is and the more ethical his behavior is, results which are inconsistent with our common sense expectations.

In terms of morality, Chinese moral education researchers still tend to think that morality is a given set of social behavioral norms, mandatory but not negotiated, universal but not culturally

relevant. In terms of morality acquisition, Chinese researchers still adhere to Durkheim's position and believe that the goal of moral learning is to develop an individual's rationality, thereby understanding and internalizing social moral norms. However, Western moral education research emphasizes the social, constructive, and multicultural dimension of morality. The understanding of moral learning has gradually eliminated the tendency of over-rationalization characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s and has placed more emphasis on emotions, empathy, intuition, and conscience. Current research is more inclined to regard moral learning as an interaction between individuals and social relationships in the process of personal growth. Based on this approach, research has focused on the integration of rationality and emotion in the context of individual moral decision-making. For example, Haidt (2012) establishes a social intuition model which reveals the role of intuition and emotion in moral judgments. Greene (2013) proposes a dual-process model, observing that "the human brain is like a dual-mode camera with both automatic settings and a manual mode" (p. 133), and holds that the manual mode corresponds to System 2 moral cognition, which is primarily utilitarian, whereas the automatic settings correspond to System 1 moral cognition, which is primarily Kantian or deontological.

The scope of Chinese moral education research mainly focuses on school-based moral education. School-based moral education is seen as the center of moral education. Family moral education and social moral education research in China has been limited. Research on the intersectional relationship between moral education and religious education is also relatively rare. Although China's moral education also emphasizes the integration of families, schools, and society, it does not do enough because the school system is a vertically led bureaucracy and is limited in terms of horizontal cooperation. In addition, Chinese moral education follows a concept of "grand" moral education, which goes beyond the cultivation of students' core moral qualities and is composed of political education, values education, ideological education, mental health education, and so on. It is so comprehensive that the acquisition of the moral values of fairness and caring and the cultivation of competence of morality are not at the center of moral education, instead, they have been neglected. This feature makes Chinese moral education significantly different from American character education. Western moral education research has formed branches of school-based moral education, family moral education, professional moral education, and social moral education; a macroscopic three-dimensional pattern in which moral education is integrated within socioeconomic, political, cultural, legal, and ideological fields, including religion. However, in China, it is still rather rare for researchers from different fields and disciplines to collaborate on moral education research.

With regard to approach, Chinese moral education researchers have borrowed numerous methods of moral education from the West, such as dilemma discussion, fair communities, values clarification, role-playing, and service learning programs. Recently Nucci's Domain Theory (2008) of moral education has been introduced to China. Nucci's theory distinguishes three

interrelated, crosscutting, and independent areas: the personal domain, the conventional domain, and the moral domain and illustrates that each domain should be treated, respectively, and inter-related in moral instruction. However, these methods have not generally been practiced in Chinese schools. Therefore, their validity has not been examined and adaptive adjustments to the Chinese context have not been made. Most Chinese moral education practitioners still tend to use traditional moral education methods that combine indoctrination with persuasion.

Prospects for Chinese moral education research

In the future, the main problems facing moral education researchers include the following: How to make school-based moral education more adaptive to the pressures introduced by societal transformation and economic globalization; how to deal with the challenges posed by value pluralism and moral relativism; how to transcend the deductive and speculative theoretical construction methods and shift the research paradigm; and how to meld theory and practice, so that theory can better nourish practice and vice versa.

Trend toward integration and diversification

On the conceptual level, moral education researchers should be more concerned about differences, promote diversity, and absorb the thought of criticizing power from feminist, postmodernist, and multicultural perspectives. Furthermore, moral education researchers should also be sensitive to technological innovation and closely monitor its influence on moral education. A moral person should not be viewed as isolated, atomic, and interchangeable. Instead, he or she should be seen as embedded in various social relationships and technological environments. Theorists need to address moral education issues from an integrated and comprehensive perspective of “culture–society–biology–technology” and construct a multidimensional image of the moral person who exists in the complex, constantly interacting realm of “culture–society–biology–technology.”

The rationalist tradition of moral education research gives little attention to the study of the irrational aspects of human beings, such as emotional experience, intuition, and epiphany. Thus, the significance and the influence of irrational aspects on human moral growth are still not clear. In follow-up studies, it is necessary to draw lessons from psychology, art, aesthetics, and even religion to study the influence of the unconsciousness and subconsciousness on individual moral development. Various art forms and art teaching can be borrowed and used to stimulate students’ feelings of goodness. Ideally, in an environment filled with happy and joyful experiences, students are naturally moving toward goodness.

In addition, the theoretical researchers of moral education must adopt a wider academic vision. They should absorb and organize the research findings made in biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology while also using interdisciplinary perspectives and methods to interpret moral

education issues. Methodologically, researchers should consciously apply systems theory and complex thinking as methods of seeking knowledge; paradigms of Hermeneutics and criticism should also be employed in moral research. Moral researchers need to examine the trend of moral education from a global perspective, by actively engaging in dialogue with international scholars, so as to strengthen international understanding as well as multicultural awareness and make additional contributions to international moral education research.

Realizing a deep integration between theory and practice

Fostering a meaningful integration of theory and practice represents a win-win for both theorists and practitioners. To do their part, theorists must attempt the following.

1. Focusing on the major problems in moral education practice. Examples of such problems include the boundaries between moral issues and value issues; how to face the challenges posed by value pluralism in the process of moral instruction; how to achieve longitudinal convergence of moral education across the different stages of schooling and horizontal integration among school–family–community; how to conduct moral evaluation beyond behavioral quantitative assessment methods by simply adding points to students’ grades for good behavior and reducing them for bad behavior; how to help teachers solve their moral dilemmas and carry out moral reflection activities in teaching.
2. Constructing theory inductively on the basis of facts and empirical evidence. Beyond quantitative research, qualitative research methods utilizing empirical approaches can be useful for understanding the natural educational context, though they may require theoretical preparation prior to field investigation. Furthermore, as opposed to one-way, guided, and rigid educational experimental research, action research can allow theoretical researchers and practitioners to work together to test the reliability of a theory and modify that theory as necessary. Also, the Universities working together with K-12 schools (U-S) model of cooperation between universities and primary and secondary schools has tremendous potential to promote school reform and translate theory into reality.
3. Going into schools. Theoretical researchers should undertake the task of popularizing theory, expressing theoretical facts and viewpoints in a way that the general public can understand, actively participating in dialogue with practitioners, and providing consultation services for practitioners to improve the quality of school-based moral education. Additionally, researchers should make their “grand” theories more specific and operational. For instance, research on moral and emotional cultivation can provide practitioners with school-based curricula and activities to develop students’ compassion and empathy skills. The research on core socialist values can also be converted into a series of teaching materials.

Construction of an academic research community

Up until now, Chinese researchers have not yet formed academic research communities with distinctive and unique characteristics. “Guerrilla-style” academic research is still very popular. Moral education researchers are fighting theoretical “guerrilla warfare.” They transfer their theoretical ground and positions frequently rather than sticking firmly to a particular theory and studying it further and refining it. Thus, many theoretical researchers do not take their own theories very seriously and do not consider the demands the real world may place on their ideas. A review of articles published on moral education since 2000 reveals that only a few researchers are persistent in doing thorough research around a single question and then publishing two or more high-quality papers around it. Like a ship without a rudder, researchers often change their theories to follow the latest “fashion” trends, especially the political situation and recent developments in Western theories.

Moreover, moral researchers generally work alone and have been hesitant to engage in collaborative research or co-discussion around major issues of moral education. Fortunately, moral education researchers have gradually noticed that doing research alone is not sustainable. As one scholar put it vividly, “In the past, a great researcher was like a high mountain, but now every single researcher is only a blade of grass on the mountain. Through teamwork, we can become a small hill.” Various kinds of moral education institutions and research centers establish a number of platforms for moral education studies, but these are far from enough. The vitality of an academic research community lies in its ability to foster open and productive collaboration among scholars of varied fields, backgrounds, and perspectives. Further efforts must be devoted to breaking through academic kinship, developing a reasonable age structure and knowledge structure for research teams, and forming research “schools.”

Conclusion

Facing the challenges posed by societal transition, globalization, and value pluralism, moral education theorists have been making painstaking efforts to reconstruct a solid theoretical foundation for moral education. In the future, to facilitate the further development of moral education theory and research, moral education theorists need to consciously reflect upon their research questions, discourse, and methods. They must discover the wealth of moral practice and construct a more comprehensive and diverse moral research paradigm. There remains much work to be done.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the National Education Science Project (BEA180113), entitled “Ethical Pursuit and Practical Approaches of School Reform in the Process of Education Modernization.”

Note

1. The author used the following selection criteria for determining the papers to be included in this research: Papers published from 2000 to 2014 were included if they were cited by at least one other published article; papers published from 2015 to 2017 were included if they were presented in a core research journal.

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