

# Chinese Historical Philosophy of Early Childhood Education and Its Impact on Migrant Parents in New Zealand

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**Abstract:** This literature review discusses Chinese traditional philosophy in early childhood education, and gives an account of the historical background of Chinese educational philosophy. It then goes on to review the literature concerning Chinese immigrant parents' apprehension about their children's early childhood education in their host countries. It argues that children's sociocultural backgrounds need to be considered when implementing a play-based curriculum in early childhood education. One of the more significant findings to emerge from the literature is that Chinese highly revere children's learning and their education and rarely emphasise the value of play on its own.

**Key Words:** Chinese, educational philosophy, early childhood

## Introduction

Play has been considered a key factor in children's learning throughout the history of Western early childhood education (Gibbons, 2007; Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007). Recent developments in early childhood education have highlighted the need and value of play in early childhood education (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1996; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004; Santer et al., 2007). Naftali (2010) states that children are persons with unique emotional needs and seeks to redefine childhood as a time of play and relaxation rather than study or toil.

However, a major problem with this pedagogy is that many Chinese parents expect their children to "work" rather than "play" (Chang, 2003; Liao, 2007; Parmar et al., 2004; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). This issue has grown in importance in light of recent studies of traditional Chinese views of childhood (Hsiung, 2008; Pye, 1996; Zhu & Hu, 2011). In addition, this matter has become central to research of education in New Zealand because of the increasing number of migrants from South-East Asia coming to settle in this country (Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009; Yang, 2011).

## Chinese Educational Philosophy

In order to understand the views of migrant parents on the relationship between play and education, it is important to understand their values and beliefs about both education and play, as well as the ways in which they regard the two as connected and/or distinct. To understand Chinese educational values and beliefs, it would be useful to have a summary of the key influences on Chinese educational thought. In the history of educational development in China, there are a number of classic philosophical texts that have laid the foundations of teaching and learning and have had a great impact on Chinese education. For example, the importance of

early childhood education had been noted in the *Book of Change* 易經, which was one of the earliest philosophic classics in China. The *Book of Change* emphasises that the purpose of early childhood education is to nurture children's virtue and moral characters and promotes that children need to be taught through their daily life experiences in order to learn skills for surviving and to be accepted in their society (歐陽秀明, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

In the Chinese history of education development, Confucius (551–479 BCE) has been regarded as the *Fore-Master of Utmost Divine* (至聖先師). He has a great impact not only on wider culture and politics, but also on education in China and some other Asian countries. Confucius established a private school and devoted his life to education, a life which included teaching, researching and writing. His philosophy on education, together with the purpose, content, method and principle of teaching and learning, is still revered and practised by Chinese society (馬永, 2005).

One of Confucius' principles of education is that learning should be a delightful experience for the learner. In addition, the learner's self-motivation to learn should be encouraged. Confucius said, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it" (Legge, 2001).<sup>2</sup> This viewpoint resonates with approaches in Western early childhood education. For example, both Confucius and Plato claimed that enforced learning does not stay in a learner's mind, and promoted that learning should take the form of play or enjoyment (Gibbons, 2007; Santer et al., 2007).

Confucius emphasised that a teacher needs to understand each learner's characteristics and ability then educate individuals accordingly. His idea of *educating someone according to his natural ability* (因材施教) has been practised by many Chinese teachers over two thousand years. This principle again resonates with the values and beliefs that underpin a play-based early childhood education curriculum. For example, early childhood teachers in New Zealand are encouraged to plan their curriculum based on their observation about the children they work with (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Confucius stressed that the learner should be encouraged to explore and find the answer for themselves before the teacher offers guidance or support.<sup>3</sup> This principle is in line with what Piaget suggested; namely, that the learner should be encouraged to develop their own capacity rather than be pushed to progress to a higher level (Ahn, 2008; Mooney, 2013). According to Confucius, the teacher needs to be able to recognise the learner's current ability in order to

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<sup>1</sup>易經蒙卦: "蒙以養正, 聖功也"

Meng, *Book of Change*: "To deal with the young and ignorant ones by nourishing and uncovering their original nature. This is as the same as what a Saint does."

<sup>2</sup>Yong Ye Sixth, Analects, 論語雍也篇第六: 子曰: "知之者不如好之者, 好之者不如乐之者"

<sup>3</sup>論語述而篇第七: "不憤不啟, 不悱不發, 舉一隅不以三隅反則不復也"

Shu Er Seventh, Analects: The Confucius said, "I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to learn, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson."

decide how much support should be given, a principle synonymous to the Russian theorist Vygotsky's concept of a *Zone of Proximal Development*. Vygotsky promoted that with the support of a more competent peer or adult, the learner will be able to achieve the things that they cannot do on their own (Santrock, 2009).

Most importantly, Confucius believed that a learner should apply what they have learnt to their daily life and that they should contribute to society, not just recite or memorise the teaching (馬永, 2005).<sup>4</sup> This is a significant point because this interpretation of Confucius' work differs to many Chinese peoples' experience of education. The popular image of the Chinese student is that of the rote learner, and this image prevails and is encouraged in Chinese culture (Li, 2004).

The Confucian educational principles described above demonstrate that there are several similarities between Confucianism and Western educational philosophies. However, few writers have discussed the similarities between these two philosophies.

### **History of Childhood and Education in China**

Although there is no comprehensive study of the history of childhood in China, information can still be found in the two subdivisions of cultural and social history (Hsiung, 2008). Children were rarely mentioned prior to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), when writing and discussion about childhood suddenly became an intellectual focus (Hwa, 2006). The rise in interest in childhood was because many Confucians lived during the Han dynasty and these idealists believed that society would become more peaceful and civilised if education was made available to most people (Kinney, 1995).

In the history of education in China, instruction and education of the unborn child has been important since the Han dynasty (Pye, 1996). According to Han Confucians, education of children should begin at conception, and moral instruction is the centre of Confucian discourse on children. Hence “foetal education” was seen as “a way to influence the moral development of a child at the earliest possible time” (Hwa, 2006, p. 224). The mother was seen as the child's first major educator, and it was believed her action during the pregnancy would impact on her unborn child. A pregnant woman was expected to “be careful in what she saw, ate, heard and said, and it required her to be ritually correct” (Hwa, 2006, p. 224). Consequently, foetal instruction and total immersion in virtue was recommended and the practice laid the foundation of the moral development of children in China (Kinney, 1995). In addition, it was believed that a child at birth was undeveloped or incomplete, and should be empowered by education.

Han Confucians encouraged mothers to be the moral educator of their young children. A classic and well-known example is that the mother of Mencius spent a lot of effort turning Mencius to the right path and eventually he became a great Confucian master (Hwa, 2006; Wu, 2009). On this historical and traditional basis, Chinese parents, particularly mothers, believe they are

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<sup>4</sup> 子路第十三: “誦詩三百, 授之以政, 不達; 使于四方, 不能專對。多, 亦奚以為?”

Zi Lu Thirteen, Analects: The Confucius said, “Though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when entrusted with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?”

responsible for their children's education and see their children's success as being more important than their own welfare (Wu, 2009). An example of this is evident in a study carried out by Wu (2009), in which Chinese middle-class professionals migrated to New Zealand for their children's education despite the social and financial hardships that they experienced as a result of their migration.

### **Origins of Chinese formal learning.**

In China, government school started during the reign of the emperor Han Wudi (141–87 BCE); however, it was not a universal education – school was only for educating the princes and boys in the capital and women and girls were not encouraged to receive formal education during that time (Kinney, 1995). A century later, the emperor Wan Mang (9–23 CE) proposed that there be an elementary school in every village so that children of commoners could have opportunities to be educated (Hwa, 2006). For thousands of years up until in the early 1900s, school children in China would recite the teachings of Confucius at the start of the school day, until his teachings were permanently recorded into their memory. The purpose of learning these teachings by rote was that “it helps the youngest generation understand, preserve, and feel a sense of ownership for traditional Chinese culture” (Zhu & Hu, 2011, p. 418). The Confucian values of Ren 仁 (benevolence), Yi 義 (righteousness), Li 禮 (propriety), Xia 孝 (filial piety) and Zhi 智 (wisdom) not only form the core of most Asian cultures, but also set the standards for most families, communities and political behaviour. As a result, Confucian values and children's education are frequently connected in Chinese society. Stories, sayings and special terms are often used to promote Confucian ideals when adults socialise or educate children (Yim, Lee & Ebbeck, 2009).

For Chinese, learning aims to achieve breadth and depth of knowledge, but it is also about applying this knowledge, the unity of knowing and morality, and contributing to society (Li, 2001b). Matters of filial piety, ancestor worship, clan and patrilineage identity, moral instruction, and sex and age role differences, all come together and reinforce each other in the Chinese views about childhood (Pye, 1996). Confucianism highly values education, especially moral development (Hwa, 2006; Yen, 2008). Bai (2005) argues that according to Confucian theory, the relationship between play and education did not centre on educating children through play, but on “the influence of play and environment on children” (p. 14). For many Chinese, learning has been a matter that should be distinct from play (Liao, 2007). Children are allowed to play after they have completed their serious learning. Play is often used as a reward rather than a strategy in encourage children's learning (Cooney & Sha, 1999).

Although Confucius promoted that learning should be a joyful activity, Chinese rarely conceptualise learning as a fun activity (Li, 2001b). For thousands of years, the Chinese have been teaching young children about moral principle and basic concepts of science, daily life and history (Yim et al., 2009; Zhu & Hu, 2011). In the past, children were encouraged to learn these principles and knowledge by citing classical primer reading materials. One of these materials is the *San Zi Jing* 三字經, which is a lens to understand the core curriculum of early childhood education in ancient China. The *San Zi Jing* 三字經 provides a view of Chinese culture, history and civilisation. In addition, it supports the ways in which young Chinese children develop spoken language. While this traditional way of teaching young children to recite classical reading materials is still popular in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, it has become a controversial

issue in recent times with modern Chinese early childhood educators promoting that children should be more active in their own learning (Tang, 2006; Zhu & Hu, 2011).

Because traditional Confucianism emphasises and values education, academic achievement is important to Chinese people for gaining higher social status (Chan, 2011; Yen, 2008). Education not only leads a person to become noble and moral, but for thousands of years in Confucian societies, including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, education has also been a mechanism, through national examination systems, to select an elite for governance (Liu, 2012).

### **Play and childhood in ancient China.**

The literature analysed above highlights the key principles and approaches to education in Chinese society and presents a general, albeit recently challenged, image of the young child as a studious, respectful and dedicated learner. Confucian educators were generally concerned that play and a playful environment would distract children's attention from serious study (Bai, 2005). However, not all Confucian educators promoted this approach to learning – some liberal scholars such as Wang Yangming (1472–1529) “saw the usefulness and necessity of using sober and educational play to regulate and mould children” (Bai, 2005, p. 15). Wang Yangming believed the original model of Confucian education did value play by encouraging learners' singing and practising of etiquette. In addition, the story of Mencius (372–289 BCE; one of the most important philosophers of the Confucian school after Confucius' death) illustrates that young children did play typically in their daily life and play was widely accepted in Chinese society (Bai, 2005; Wu, 2009).

### **Modern Chinese parents' and teachers' perspectives.**

In contrast to Western developmental theories, Chinese see character, personality and temperament as all nurture and not nature (Pye, 1996). An example of the difference between the way Euro-American and Chinese American parents perceive learning is evident in two relatively recent studies. Parmar et al. (2004) found that compared with Euro-American parents, Chinese American parents prefer their preschool children to be taught in a more formal structured and directive way. In the second study, it was reported that American parents believed that the innate ability of the child is a greater contributing factor to success than any kind of formal tutoring (Lin, Gorrell, & Taylor, 2002), whereas Chinese believe persistence and effort are the keys to educational performance and achievement. Throughout history, Chinese parents have commonly shown love to their children as a way of supporting them to succeed in education (Pye, 1996).

However, influenced by Western education theories and philosophies, there has been a dramatic change over the past century in education philosophy and practice in the Chinese societies such as China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The rise of a psychological discourse of childhood signals a shift in Chinese ways of governing school and family life (Naftali, 2010). Western educational policies and practices such as learning through play and the belief that children should be independent learners have impacted on early childhood programmes in Chinese communities as well (Yen, 2008). A major problem with this new approach is that most early childhood teachers in China do not have faith that young children can learn independently and actively (Tang, 2006) and high parental expectations are rooted in Chinese cultural heritage (Li, 2001a). Wang, Elicker, McMullen, and Mao (2008) found many teachers in China saying that traditional

teaching based on Confucian conventions and socialist ideas has come into conflict with Western ideas about developmentally appropriate practice, individual creativity, autonomy and critical thinking.

Similarly, Yen's (2008) study reported that teachers in Taiwan mostly give lectures and expect students to memorise content, an approach which has been criticised by early childhood professionals, and many early childhood centres have taken on a heavy academic focus. Because most Taiwanese are descendants of Chinese, traditional Confucian cultural values and contexts are also found in Taiwan. As in China, any move to a child-centred philosophy and child-centred methods in Taiwan would conflict with the ideas of Taiwanese parents and society about how best to educate children. Parents like to push teachers to give academic lessons or activities in preschools as they believe children will develop cognitive skills faster with early formal academic learning (Chang, 2003; Yen, 2008). Due to the influence of Confucianism, Chinese and Taiwanese parents place a heavy emphasis on academic advancement and view early childhood education as a preparation for elementary (primary school) education (Wang et al., 2008; Yen, 2008). Consequently, an academic-oriented early childhood curriculum still prevails in Chinese society because of parents' high expectations for their children's academic achievement.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in how Chinese immigrant families adjust their traditional educational values and practice in their host countries such as the United States, Australia or New Zealand. Yang (2011) and Guo (2012) reported that Chinese immigrants in New Zealand hold traditional Confucian values and conceptualise their perspective of how young children learn within the New Zealand context. Chinese parents use traditional instructional learning strategies along with the child-initiated play-based approach to encourage their child's learning in literacy and numeracy. In addition, they conduct various educational activities at home to facilitate their children's literacy and numeracy learning.

Questions have been raised about the disconnect between activities at home and practices at early childhood centres. There is potential conflict when trying to form a cross-cultural community of practice in which immigrants' knowledge and perceptions can sit alongside those of early childhood centres (Guo, 2012). At the same time, Wu (2009) argues that in order to maximise benefits for their children, Chinese immigrant mothers in New Zealand have "promoted, criticised, and rejected various traditional Chinese practices and beliefs" (p. ix). Taken together, these results suggest that "an understanding of the values inherent in any culture is important for teachers of young children" (Yim et al., 2009, p. 301) and is critical if teachers want to form an effective partnership with families from diverse cultures while recognising that not all families of the same ethnic group will have identical expectations.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review has given an account of how learning, education and play are perceived by Chinese as well as some historical perspectives of why this might be so. These findings suggest that an understanding of the values and beliefs inherent in any culture is essential for early childhood teachers when working with families from diverse cultures. One of the more significant findings to emerge from the literature is that Chinese highly revere children's learning and their education and rarely emphasise the value of play on its own. As a result, many Chinese

immigrant parents find it challenging when sending their children to play-based early childhood settings in their host countries. An implication of this is the possibility that play-based activities might be more acceptable to Chinese parents if they can see that their children's learning and development are enhanced through their play.

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