

# *Comparative Study on Citizenship Education Between China and America*

## An Analysis of the Primary School Textbooks

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**Abstract**—Civic education is an important way to help citizens identify themselves with the nation and pool positive energy to boost the whole nation and also a systematic project usually integrated into the national education plan at different stages and levels. China's fast economic development and sharp social transformation asks for a corresponding development in civic education. America enjoys a long history and wealth in its civic education, which can provide some lessons for China to learn from. Thus this paper compares and analyzes the contents and presenting forms of the civic education in the textbooks of the two countries' primary education. It intends to give some enlightenment to Chinese civic education.

**Keywords**—Civic education; textbooks; primary school; comparative

### I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2013, the Communist Party of China (CPC) issued guidelines bolstering core socialist values and pooling positive energy to realize the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation. Chinese government stresses that core socialist values should be included in the overall national education plan and “cover all schools and those receiving education”. According to the guidelines, core socialist values include national goals of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; social goals of freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law; and individual values of patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. “Core socialist values should be incorporated into the curriculum and classrooms and made a way of thinking for students,” the document said.

The document attracts people's attention again to the national civic education, and the balanced relationship among citizens, society and the country. China promulgated the “Citizen Ethics Construction Program” in 2001, which clearly pointed out the focus point of civic education was civic morality and the purpose was to cultivate excellent citizens with socialist core values. And then proposed a suggestion in 2007 that we need to step up education about citizenship and establish socialist concepts of democracy, the rule of law, freedom, equality, equity and justice.

In most contexts, scholars use the phrase “civic education” to investigate deliberate programs of instruction within schools or colleges for several seasons: first, empirical evidence shows

that civic habits and values are relatively easily to influence and change while people are still young, so schooling can be effective when other efforts to educate citizens would fail [1]. Another reason is that schools in many countries have an explicit mission to educate students for citizenship. As Amy Gutmann points out, school-based education is our most deliberate form of human instruction [1]. So the emphasis on civic education in school is worthy.

Chinese civic education started a bit late and is set as an independent course in school curriculum. In China, the course normally occupies 120 minutes a week in primary school curriculum. While, America has accumulated lots of experience in its civic education but what is interesting is that there is no set courses particularly for civic education in primary school.

### II. CIVIC EDUCATION PRACTICE IN CHINA AND AMERICA

#### A. Civic Education in the USA

The United States began its civic education as early as its foundation from 1776. At that time public schools founded for the common citizens was regarded as the optimal place “to establish the core values of citizenship, popularize knowledge set a democratic accountability and other aspects of civic education”[2].

Now, forty states require civic courses for graduation. Although each state writes its own standards, what they say about civics overlaps a great deal. For example, all states require the U.S. Constitution to be covered in the curriculum.

National Development Assessment Board of Education (NAEP) raised three necessary skills in terms of cognitive competence: (1) the skills of identification and definition; (2) the skills analysis and interpretation; (3) the skills of evaluation and justification.

The American Commission on Civic Education also raised similar civic skills of classification, and in particular pointed out that these cognitive abilities are not capable of departing from the educational content. Engle and Ochoa stressed that civic abilities embodied the integration of a variety of functions instead of just simply repeating and remembering information, the core was to use the knowledge to make a decision[3].

The civic education in America undoubtedly combines more with the cultivation of students' cognitive competence and literature ability. That explains why there is no set civic education course during the primary stage.

#### B. Civic Education in China

In 1912, Cai Yuanpei as the first minister of education of the Republic of China, proposed the educational policy of "five virtues". In 1949, the new China was founded that provided necessary prerequisite for the implementation of civic education.

After the reform and opening up, the inner demands of the market economy and political democratization drove civic consciousness awake again.

In 2002, Li Ping, Zhong Minghua put forward an idea that civic education needed to govern and integrate the moral education. Civic education must meet three basic conditions: independent personality of citizens as a precondition; the unification of rights and obligations as a basis; the legitimacy as the bottom line.

In 2005, the Civic Education Research Center drafted the Proposal for the Establishment of the Civic Education Committee in the Standing Committee of National People's Congress, and the proposal was submitted to the National People's Congress.

After the reform and opening up, China's political, economic and social structure are all experiencing great changes, which calls for a more complete and scientific civil education. The concept of civic education has been unprecedentedly supported

### III. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CIVIC EDUCATION FROM PRIMARY TEXTBOOKS

#### A. The Introduction of Textbooks

Chinese Morality and Life (2013) [4] is the standard textbook adopted by most Chinese primary schools as a compulsory course textbook. Morality and Life and Morality and Society are the core curriculum on civic education in China and are aimed to help cultivate students' basic civic literacy. In America, different states have their own choices of textbooks for the civic education; this study chooses American Eclectic Readers [5], a quite popular and classic textbook as the research subject. This textbook has been widely used as a school language textbook from the mid-19th century to mid-20th century in the United States; allegedly more than 10,000 US schools use it as a textbook. In the 21st century, some Western private schools and home schools still use it. Time Magazine commented that this textbook was 'the third best-selling book in the press history,' had an unprecedented impact on shaping mind and moral development of young Americans. Encyclopedia Americana remarked: this book is not only influenced American education, but also affected the American ethics. As historian Margaret said: "They provide American children with something that is obvious deficient today, the universal allusions knowledge, common experience and sense of self-restraint."

#### B. The Analysis of Chinese Morality and Life and Morality and Society

In Chinese Morality and Life (2013) (for Grade One to Two) and Morality and Society (2013) (for Grade Three to Six), patriotism is a frequent topic covered in Grade One, Two and Five. Patriotism is included in the introduction of some basic knowledge about the country such as the national emblem, the geographic features of the landscape and its people and history. Patriotic education can directly deepen students' awareness of the motherland, and raise the students' patriotic feelings, which play an important role in national identity unifying.

Family Life is also introduced at a lower stage of civic education. Issues such as kinship of extended family, respect in family communication, mutual understanding and gratitude for family members, positive attitude towards life serves as a basic way for primary school students to understand the world around them in Chinese culture. And the importance of family ethic education is a regarded a good way to help students understand the relationship among the individual and the nation and society.

Democratic life is covered in the second volume of Grade Two(36-43) and the first volume of Grade Five(22-46) with the aim of helping students understand their responsibilities and roles in democratic activities, such as legal ways to behave themselves, decision-making methods of democracy, etc. In textbooks democratic ideas transfers through a variety of activities, such as the class leader election, young pioneers, deputies and other content.

Environmental ethics has been mentioned in the First (18-33) and Second Grade (16-35) Third grade, suggesting that the China also begin to arouse the ecological awareness in civic education from the younger generation. China now is in the high speed of economic development at the cost of the environmental destruction. So the government has realized that to enhance students' environmental awareness at the stage of basic education is proper and scientific, and is the inevitable requirement of citizenship culture. Environmental ethics is urgent to be trained; sustainable development of this society is possible.

Chinese Morality and Life & Morality and Society have reflected the purpose of civic education in China----a bridge for a citizen to connect himself with family, school, society and the nation.

Chinese Morality and Life & Morality and Society are distinctively featured by its closeness to real life. "By living life to develop civic awareness education has become the consensus of the majority of scholars [7]". The explanation of the content is easy to understand, no professional terms and concepts, trickling citizen concept through familiar scenes, and plus colorful illustrations, lively and lovely cartoon image will help arouse students' curiosity and culture students' interest in learning, and ultimately achieve the purpose of civic education.

Chinese traditional culture attaches more importance to moral education which asks students to discipline themselves with requirement in their morality. It cultivates students' awareness of right and wrong by telling them they should feel ashamed for certain behaviors and ideas. Also, such civic

education stresses more on citizens' duties rather than the rights and obligations. In a way, duties are not equal to rights and obligations. Citizen responsibility is a manifestation of civic literacy, but if the relationship is distinguished between the two it will easily lead to misunderstandings in civic education. In the book we can see that doing one's own things by oneself, protecting the environment, etc. are proposed in the matter of responsibility. Responsibility equals to the rules that society members must abide by as well as the basic requirements to citizens.

### C. *The Analysis of American Eclectic Readers*

The content in *American Eclectic Readers* mainly reflects the civic knowledge and civic characters, specifically, the common knowledge of natural and social life and character development. The book covers the common sense in nature such as climate change, natural landscape, animal and plant introductions, and also character development such as self-awareness, honesty, kindness, integrity, solidarity, diligence. In the matter of teaching materials, the book takes a variety of forms like essays, poems, expositions. The language used is natural and simple, usually in the first-person tone.

As a more mature civic education system, the American one aims, at the primary stage, to help students find their roles in society by introducing basic concept of family, community, school and nation and encourage them to take up their responsibility in life as a member of a group. The main significance is to train the ability to observe life and understand the world so as to lay the foundation for the subsequent civic education. "We believe that civic knowledge is necessary and useful for citizens in a democracy and, indeed, that democracy is incompatible with widespread ignorance about government and politics on the part of the citizenry"[8].

In terms of civic dispositions, the textbooks involve more. It includes three parts: civic virtue, civic participation and civic knowledge and intellectual skills. What a qualified citizen should have has been clearly explained. The article *If I Were a Sunbeam* (the first volume, 306) takes sunshine as the first-person tone, and tells the story that under different circumstances what choices should be made for the revelation. From the perspective of civic education, this is not just civic disposition requirements, but also civic morality destination. It teaches children to respect cultural differences or different value pursuit in multicultural conflicts. The article *Behind Time* (the first volume, 209) tells students the lack of time sense results in adverse consequences. This time metric-oriented character is very important in modern life. Moreover, *Supposed Speech of John Adams* (the second volume, 587) is a speech. The writer expresses his confidence in the country's political system and the loyalty to be willing to dedicate everything for his country. The article shows us from the angle of political events that citizens should make what kind of choices; stick to what principle, up to what is required when faced with state affairs.

Without a set compulsory course for civic curriculum, but American civic education just runs through the whole of educational process directly or implicitly. *American Eclectic Readers* has rich contents and wide coverage. It contains the

quality and literacy that a qualified citizen shall have, such as honesty, sense of cooperation, enterprising; also it gives emphasis on multiculturalism to teach children to understand and tolerate differences in order to prepare them to be the trendy global citizens.

American education attaches great importance to the cultivation of students' personality as usual, rarely developing uniform evaluation criteria in the educational process. Students are also demonstrating that their civic knowledge leaves much to be desired. A National Center for Education Statistics NAEP report card for civics (2010) stated that "levels of civic knowledge in U.S. have remained unchanged or even declined over the past century". Specifically, only 24 percent of 4th, 8th, and 12 graders were at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in civics [9]. Traditionally, civic education has emphasized the facts of government processes detached from participatory experience [10]. In an effort to combat the existing approach, the National Council for the Social Studies developed the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. The C3 Framework emphasizes "new and active approaches" including the "discussion of controversial issues and current events, deliberation of public issues, service-learning, action civics, participation in simulation and role play, and the use of digital technologies".

### IV. CONCLUSION

China is now starting to focus on civic education but without clear civic education curriculum materials, practical political support in place, adequate educational resources, China is still has a long way to go. Classroom teaching is not only an important place of civic education, but also the direct form of output of the civic educational theory contents. After the analysis of primary school textbooks of the two countries, it can be found that the relevant civic knowledge is the focus of civic education at the primary stage, but civic skills need to be strengthened.

Civics in the 21st century should be excitingly different. The political world for which we are preparing students has changed dramatically, as have our students' demographics and backgrounds. For instance, to stay informed, citizens once had to understand how a printed newspaper was organized, but now they have to know which social media to trust, follow and share.

Clearly, there is a need to innovate. The point is not to "bring back" the civics we once had, which never produced an impressively informed adult public.

A major priority in improving civics should be to expand opportunities for high-quality learning and engagement where they are most scarce today. That way, we can help students learn that politics and civic affairs are interesting, relevant and even enjoyable.

It is important that civic education must be reality-based; the contents of civic education should reflect the nature of the citizens. As regards to the choice of what kind of way to carry out, the options should be in accordance with the different

periods, different cultural levels and cultural basis, which is noticed in the civic education as well.

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