

# Children's Perspectives in the Tide of the Times: The Evolution of Children's Education Views in China Since Modern Times

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**Abstract:** *To this day, modern Chinese perspectives on children have a history of over a century. Having weathered the vicissitudes of the century, they have gone through the embryonic era, the "Century of the Child", and entered a phase of new development in the new era. Like a weathered elder, these perspectives have quietly witnessed the ups and downs, as well as the profound changes, of children's education in China since modern times.*

**Keywords:** The tide of the times, Children's education, Perspectives on children.

## 1. The Embryonic Eran

During the embryonic era of modern Chinese history, the country faced severe challenges: the encirclement of foreign powers, the decline of national strength, and deep-seated national humiliation. Against this backdrop, violent conflicts and integration occurred between Eastern and Western civilizations, shattering the shackles of traditional thinking. As the reform pioneer Wang Tao foresaw: "Gathering the wisdom of ten countries worldwide in China is not to weaken China, but to strengthen it, enabling it to contribute to the whole world." It was in this turbulent era that modern Chinese thoughts on early childhood education embarked on their initial development. (I) The Quality of Classroom Language and Literacy Environment Needs to Be Improved, with Coexisting Differences and Imbalances.

### 1.1 Witnessing – The Lives of Western Children

Dickens wrote in his *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." While modern China endured the military prowess of foreign powers, it also indirectly introduced some advanced Western concepts. A group of insightful Chinese figures, such as Wei Yuan and Lin Zexu, spoke out vigorously, advocating the slogan "Learn from the strengths of barbarians to control them" and promoting the idea of "learning from the West". Guided by this ideology, the Qing Dynasty gradually sent officials and young students to study in the West. From the dispatch of diplomatic missions to Europe and the United States in the seventh year of the Tongzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty to the deployment of the "Five Ministers" by the Qing court to "investigate government affairs" and "prepare for constitutionalism" in the thirty-first year of the Guangxu reign, over a span of thirty-seven years, the Qing government dispatched more than a hundred officials and students successively. Among them were Zheng Guanying, Xue Fucheng, Wang Tao, Sheng Xuanhuai, Rong Hong, Zhan Tianyou, and others. They visited, studied, and worked in many developed countries, seeking ways to save the nation and achieve national rejuvenation. As Chairman Mao stated, "Since the failure of the Opium War in 1840, the Chinese people have been striving to seek the truth from the West." During this period, Chinese intellectuals witnessed the

progress of Western society. Through the visits of government officials and scholars, as well as the personal experiences of overseas students in Western societies, the laws, upbringing, and protection of children left an indelible impression on their minds. Additionally, they gained an understanding of the evolution of Western perspectives on children by reading relevant books and drew lessons from them.

### 1.1 Learning – The Strengths of Western Systems

Since the Qing Dynasty sent its first batch of officials to Europe in 1868, it had engaged in diplomatic activities continuously. After being influenced by the "trends of European and American cultures", many people gradually developed their own perspectives on children. At the same time, they came to realize that the prosperity of Western developed countries stemmed from their enlightened politics, strict legal systems, advanced science and technology, well-trained navies, and prosperous commerce. However, the most crucial reason for their strength lay in the fact that Western countries attached great importance to education – especially the education of children – as they had a more far-sighted vision than China. As recorded: "All school-age children must attend school; everyone understands the obligations of paying taxes, serving in the military, and upholding a martial spirit.... The purpose of law is to facilitate learning, to master knowledge, to cultivate morality, to pursue studies, to travel, to boost powerful commerce, to develop production, to prosper handicrafts, and to achieve prosperity." Driven by this ideology, the Qing government established schools, promulgated decrees, and learned from the advanced systems of Western countries, hoping to rejuvenate China and ensure the long-term stability of the nation. Beyond these measures, the Qing Dynasty also "reformed the imperial examination system". Taking the imperial examination as a guide, it reformed the educational content, replacing the traditional eight-legged essays with specialized subjects focused on practical economics. This reform reduced the ideological constraints on children and made the content they learned more closely aligned with real life and better suited to their physical and psychological development characteristics.

### 1.3 Germinating – The Buds of Modern Perspectives on

## Children

After experiencing the Westernization Movement, the New Policies at the end of the Qing Dynasty, and the preparations for constitutionalism, the Chinese people opened their eyes wider to the world. Meanwhile, the government dispatched more officials and overseas students with increasing frequency. It was truly like “the waters of the Yangtze River, flowing endlessly, with each wave surging higher than the previous one”. At that time, advanced Western perspectives on children exerted twofold influences on China. On one hand, through officials sent abroad and overseas students, what they heard, saw, and experienced unconsciously transformed their original perspectives on children – in other words, inspiring them based on their traditional ideas. On the other hand, some insightful Chinese individuals gained an understanding of the essence of Western perspectives on children through these books, thereby forming their own views. This was precisely because there were significant differences between Western society and China in terms of children’s culture, children’s education, and children’s lives at that time. The care and concern shown by the governments, societies, and ordinary people of European and American countries for the survival and development of children had a profound impact on their outlooks, souls, and ways of thinking. All of this stimulated their understanding of children. It was on this foundation that modern Chinese perspectives on children began to take shape.

In summary, as an integral part of social culture, whether perspectives on children are in line with the times and can keep pace with the evolving era is a matter of crucial importance for a nation’s destiny. It exerts a profound influence on the direction of a nation’s historical development and foreshadows the future and prospects of a country. It served as a beacon that guided China from darkness to the crossroads of history.

## 2. The “Century of the Child”

### 2.1 The Early Republic of China – The Innovation of Perspectives on Children

The New Culture Movement, which erupted in China in 1915, not only brought about ideological emancipation for the Chinese people but also triggered tremendous changes in their outlook on life. Prior to this movement, children were merely regarded as “little adults” and were only allowed to read books related to their physical development, such as the Four Books and Five Classics, the Three-Character Classic, and the Thousand-Character Classic. The emergence of the New Culture Movement aimed to overthrow all the dregs of the old era and thoroughly reshape the national ideology. It represented a shift from the previous approach of treating children solely as “little adults” (and thus ignoring their physical and psychological development characteristics) to an educational model after the movement that emphasized freedom for children and centered on children themselves. Meanwhile, during the Republic of China, influenced by the educational policies of the period, the prevailing perspective on children advocated nurturing children to become the future masters of the motherland and cultivating their sense of patriotism and ownership. The urgent task at that time was to foster children’s national identity so that they could thrive in

the future national life. Zhou Zuoren was a pivotal figure in the transformation of Chinese perspectives on children during the Republic of China. He detested the feudal concept of “children’s words being innocent” and advocated for “no moralizing”. During this period, not only did writers awaken to the concept of “child-centeredness”, but also a group of educators influenced by Dewey’s “Child-Centered Theory” gathered like-minded teachers and even wrote books themselves.

It is evident that during the Republic of China, under the influence of the New Culture Movement, some individuals sought to discard all the outdated dregs of the past and create an environment for children in the newly established nation where they could fully unleash their talents and creativity, enabling them to become integral members of their nation.

### 2.2 The 1930s – The Development of Perspectives on Children

On the land of China in the 1930s, two great educators emerged: Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin. It was through their unremitting efforts and perseverance that China’s children’s education navigated through the war-torn years and achieved further development during this period.

#### 2.2.1 The Essence of Tao Xingzhi’s Thoughts on Children’s Education

One of the most prominent features of Tao Xingzhi’s perspective on children was regarding children as genuine human beings. In other words, he believed that children are living individuals with emotions and their own needs. Firstly, children are living beings. Recognizing that children are alive implies, first and foremost, acknowledging that they have their own needs. Therefore, our teaching should be tailored to meet children’s needs – that is, “teaching students in accordance with their aptitude”. Secondly, children are curious by nature. Thus, educators should possess the ability to pose questions in the teaching process, particularly the ability to raise meaningful questions, know how to ask questions, and be capable of answering children’s questions. Furthermore, sufficient teaching tools should be provided for children. Thirdly, children also have emotions, as he stated to adults in Creative Children’s Education: “Do not underestimate children’s emotions!” Secondly, children are promising “seedlings”. Treating children as seedlings serves as a reminder to educators that they need to provide children with ample “sunshine and rain” (i.e., proper care and support). Moreover, educators should adopt different educational methods for different children, understand the unique characteristics of each child, and teach them in accordance with their individual aptitudes. Finally, children possess developmental potential and creativity. Children are not static entities; they undergo significant changes every day. Therefore, educators must be mentally and academically prepared to cope with the substantial physical and psychological changes that children experience. In the teaching process, emphasis should be placed on adapting to local conditions and maximizing children’s creativity based on their distinct characteristics.

It is clear that Tao Xingzhi’s educational thoughts on young

children centered on children themselves, regarding them as living individuals, and thus possessed unique characteristics. This period had a profound impact on China.

### 2.2.2 The Essence of Chen Heqin's Thoughts on Children's Education

While Tao Xingzhi's perspective on children viewed children as living beings, Chen Heqin integrated the concept of "vivacity" into his educational thoughts. In particular, he introduced Dewey's educational concepts into China but did not copy them blindly. Instead, he adapted them in light of China's national conditions, thereby pioneering the "Living Education" movement. In terms of perspectives on children's education, he creatively put forward the idea that "a child is not a little adult, nor is he an adult of short stature". After all, young children are children in their own right; they have distinct characteristics and needs that differ from those of adults, as well as their own unique inner worlds. Firstly, he believed that children are curious. Teachers should design appropriate questions based on children's curiosity and desire for knowledge. Secondly, children are inherently active. Teachers should make preparations to cater to this characteristic. Thirdly, children enjoy imitating others. We can leverage this trait of children's love for imitation to foster their creativity and social skills. Fourthly, children prefer to live in groups. This indicates that children tend to approach their peers, and we should provide appropriate support while acting as observers. We should allow children to engage more with nature and refrain from confining them to classrooms.

It is apparent that Chen Heqin's thoughts on children's education, formulated based on a summary of China's national conditions, have exerted a far-reaching impact on China's social development.

In conclusion, during that war-torn era, it was the unwavering efforts of these two educators that enabled Chinese children to achieve a certain degree of development.

### 2.3 The 1940s–1950s – The Maturity of Perspectives on Children

If the evolution of perspectives on children in the previous period was gradual, then during the war-torn 1940s and 1950s, China's perspectives on children gradually matured. As is common knowledge, the 1940s was a decade of war, and children suffered immensely from the ravages of war. However, the Communist Party of China implemented the "Children's School" system in border regions to cultivate reserve forces for resisting Japanese aggression and developing border areas. Through the education of children and adolescents in the Jin-Sui Border Region, a group of young people with a certain level of cultural literacy and qualified ideological and political awareness were nurtured, who became a vital force in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the construction of border areas. During the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the education of children and adolescents in border regions was closely intertwined with the war, and the war effort was integrated into their education and daily lives. This teaching method, which combined education with the war, allowed students to truly understand and participate in the resistance

struggle. The American educator Dewey advocated integrating real education with children's lives, enabling children to happily acquire knowledge from life and grow gradually through continuous learning. This approach significantly enhanced their political awareness and social status. With the deepening of children's education in the Jin-Sui region, young children's sense of subjectivity and creativity were fully developed. Their image gradually transformed from that of traditional, innocent children to a new type of children who were independent, confident, diligent, eager to learn, lively, brave, united, friendly, and heroic in the resistance war. In the 1950s, China's education system truly began to serve socialism, and this included the education of children and adolescents. Therefore, the culture of a specific period is a concrete reflection of the political and economic conditions of that era, and education is an integral part of this culture. Consequently, the education of this period also demonstrated a forward-looking nature in relation to politics, economy, and culture, and to a certain extent, promoted the progress of the Chinese nation during difficult times.

### 2.4 The 1960s–1970s – Growing Pains

The 1960s of the 20th century was a turbulent period. Under the impact of the Cultural Revolution, many concepts related to children's education went astray. A representative view at that time was: "Politically rigid, artistically divorced from reality, stereotyped storylines, conceptualized characters, and dull language." The education of children during this era was more for political purposes than for the well-being of the children themselves. Of course, every coin has two sides. Classic films such as *Little Hero Yu Lai*, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga*, and *Sparkling Red Star* – which centered on children – were created during this period.

### 2.5 The 1980s–1990s – Returning to the Right Track

In October 1976, the "Gang of Four" was overthrown, and the more than ten-year-long "Cultural Revolution" came to an end. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, China's science and technology, as well as its cultural life, gradually returned to the right track and entered a new historical stage. The education sector and academic community needed to correct past mistakes, emancipate their minds, and engage in constructive discussions. Research on the history of early childhood education, which had previously suffered setbacks, showed signs of revival in a relatively short period and achieved rapid development in the subsequent more than two decades. In 1979, Chen Heqin delivered a written report at the "National Educational Science Program", proposing to comprehensively and systematically sort out and summarize the practices and experiences of early childhood education since the May Fourth Movement. Based on this proposal, he compiled relevant works, attempting to separate children's education from politics by drawing on historical experiences. As Cao Wenxuan commented on children's literature: "In the past, we overemphasized the educational function of literature, placing education in a supreme position, and even regarding education as the sole attribute of literature. In the past, the so-called 'education' was synonymous with 'politics', and 'education' simply meant 'political indoctrination'.

Children's literature was no exception; it was also forced into the orbit of serving politics. If our perspective on education is correct, we should not regard education as the sole attribute of children's literature. This is the true essence of literature." This view aptly illustrates the status of children's literature among various disciplines – it is not subordinate to other disciplines. Just as when we discuss perspectives on children (i.e., children's education), everyone can have their own views on children. Admittedly, our approach to children's education may have a utilitarian side, but this is by no means the mainstream. As Professor Hou Limin stated: "Children should not only live in the adult world but also in their own world. They should not only receive education in the adult world to achieve better development but also enjoy freedom in their own world to experience the joy of life and the beauty of the world and life itself." Indeed, the essence of children's education lies in allowing children to freely experience the joy of life in their own world and understand the world they live in naturally. It is not about hastily imposing adults' perceptions of the world on children. Otherwise, our perspectives on children – or children's education – will deviate from their original direction, and our early childhood education will go astray and lose its true meaning.

### 3. The New Century and New Prospects

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, especially since entering the 21st century, with the deepening of educational reform, significant changes have occurred in China's perspectives on children's education.

#### 3.1 From "Children Belonging to the Family" to "Children Belonging to Both the Family and the Nation"

Confucian ethical thoughts, represented by the idea that "the father is the authority over the son", have exerted a profound impact. Traditional Chinese society has always held a "family-centered" perspective on children and a patriarchal "parent-child relationship" centered on parents. In traditional Chinese families, children were regarded as the entire hope of the family, and even as the private property of the family. Lu Xun once pointed out that children were merely the private property of their parents: "Every child is nothing more than a blessing bestowed upon their parents." Since modern times, with the establishment of relevant laws and systems, although children are born to their parents, they do not belong exclusively to their parents. Zhou Zuoren also pointed out that children are part of the nation and part of humanity: "Because children are the future of the nation, the reason we strive to develop a new culture is that they will inherit the cause of their predecessors." Today, after decades of efforts and under the combined effect of laws and policies, although some people still view children as the private property of their families, most people have accepted the concept that "children belong to both the family and the nation". The most obvious manifestation of this is the continuous increase in the gross enrollment rate of compulsory education, and sending children to primary school has gradually become a conscious action of parents.

#### 3.2 From "Children as Little Adults" to "Children as Individuals in the Developmental Stage"

Philippe Ariès argued in his book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* that there was no concept of "childhood stage" in the Middle Ages – a view that is comparable to Copernicus' "heliocentric theory" in terms of its groundbreaking nature. In China, some experts on children conducted a survey, and the results showed that "for a long time, people have not regarded children as children in their own right". It is thus evident that before modern times, both in the East and the West, the attitude toward children was to treat them as "little adults" or "underage adults", and the focus was on preparing them to become adults. Looking back to modern times, Lu Xun was the first to put forward the slogan "Rescue the children". He stated: "Children have their own world, which is completely different from the adult world. We cannot regard children as underdeveloped adults." With the progress of time, especially after the implementation of the new curriculum reform, we have increasingly realized that young children should not be regarded as "preparations for adulthood" nor as "little adults". After all, children are children; their physical and psychological development follows its own unique laws and goes through specific developmental stages. Teachers should fully understand, explore, and accept young children. They should not treat children as adults.

#### 3.3 From "Adult-Centered" to "Child-Centered"

For a long time, teacher education in China's primary and secondary schools has mainly adopted two teaching models: "adult-centered" and "teacher-centered". Especially since modern times, after the New Culture Movement, Herbart's "three centers" theory was introduced into China. However, traditional "three centers" theories such as Herbart's have been greatly challenged, and Dewey's "three centers" theory emerged as a response to the changing times. With the arrival of the new century and the deepening of the new curriculum reform, more and more teachers have come to realize that textbooks are no longer the center of teaching; instead, they should serve as a vehicle for the inheritance of knowledge and culture. Teachers are promoters and guides of children's development, as well as beneficiaries of children's learning. Classrooms are no longer the sole center of teaching; instead, they are a space where teachers and students interact and integrate. This transformation is similar to Copernicus' heliocentric theory in terms of its revolutionary significance and was widely recognized at that time. Han Yu once said: "Therefore, students are not necessarily inferior to teachers, and teachers are not necessarily superior to students. Each has their own expertise in learning – that is the reason."

#### 3.4 From "Preaching" to "Dialogue"

We have all heard the phrase "earnest and sincere persuasion" many times. Under the traditional educational concept, parents and educators tend to impose what they believe is correct on children, assuming that children must obey what they say. However, they overlook the importance of children's own awakening. In fact, "people can be guided but not forced to learn", because everyone needs to experience a process of enlightenment – that is, a process of "being awakened". Therefore, educators should, on the basis of comprehensively observing young children, provide guidance through dialogue to facilitate the awakening of children's



subjective consciousness or their realization of insights.

### 3.5 From “Excessive Man-Made Intervention” to “Following the Natural Course”

Chinese educational history has long emphasized strict educational methods, which stands in sharp contrast to the Western world after Comenius proposed the concept of “natural education”. China’s traditional education system has focused more on strict control and man-made constraints rather than on naturalistic educational concepts. Although there have been waves of naturalistic educational thoughts in China, they have never become the mainstream. However, with the issuance of The Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Educational Evaluation in the New Era and Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-Campus Training for Students in Compulsory Education, China’s education system is undergoing a transformation. The implementation of these policies marks a shift from “excessive man-made intervention” to “following the natural course” in the education system. This shift means greater respect for students’ individuality and talents, and emphasizes a student-centered educational approach. It not only reduces the learning burden on students but also provides them with more freedom and space for creativity. This is an important step toward making Chinese education more humanized and natural.

## 4. Some Thoughts from the Author

When analyzing the evolution of children’s education, we must recognize the influence of social structure on social consciousness. Specific political and economic environments undoubtedly shape children’s education and related perspectives. However, we must also be aware that social consciousness possesses relative independence. In today’s materialistic society, we can recall Dickens’ famous line from *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” This sentence accurately reflects the challenges and opportunities faced by modern educators. They need to see through the glitz of modern society and explore the true essence of education.

Education is not only a process of imparting knowledge but also a process of cultural inheritance and personality shaping. If education is limited to the level of knowledge enlightenment, what difference is there between it and the education of the feudal era? True culture should subtly influence individuals – and this is particularly evident in children’s education. The influence of culture is profound and long-lasting. For children, cultural influences are like seeds, which require a suitable environment and nutrients to grow. In this process, perspectives on children should not merely serve as a tool for guidance and restraint; instead, they should be like rain that nourishes children’s hearts.

Even though perspectives on children and children’s education are inevitably influenced by the environment of the times, educators should strive to maintain a transcendent perspective, absorb the essence, and discard the dregs. Such efforts will contribute valuable strength to China’s cause of children’s education, allowing the next generation to grow freely in the sun with healthy hearts. As Professor Hou Limin

stated: “Giving children a real world means allowing mature adults to re-experience the beauty that has passed forever. This is also the spiritual home that adults pursue in their tiring lives.”

We all hope that no matter what storms we encounter, we will remain true to our original aspirations and keep our hearts pure – just like returning to our youthful selves.

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