

Civic education in primary and secondary schools in China

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Abstract

This paper provides a general picture of the evolution and transformation of civic education in China's primary and secondary schools, tracing its trajectory since the country's reform and opening up. The research examines how civic education has adapted and integrated within the expansive tapestry of China's socio-economic and political metamorphosis. Through a literature review, the study articulates the progression of civic education through three distinct phases: recovery, initial exploration, and multidimensional improvement. The recovery phase, following the reform and opening up, marked the rejuvenation of civic education, aligning it with the renewed socio-political ethos of China. Civic education was primarily centered on socialist values and fostering a sense of collective identity. The initial exploration phase signified a critical period of curricular transformation, which emphasized nurturing students with a broader understanding of their roles in society, underscoring moral development, social responsibility, and global awareness. The multidimensional improvement phase, commencing in 2014, represents the most recent and perhaps the most transformative period in the evolution of China's civic education. This phase is marked by the incorporation of legal education into the civic education curriculum, representing a novel approach that intertwined legal consciousness with moral education. The evolution process is showing China's broader aspirations to modernize and engage actively in the global community necessitating a civic education system consistent with the era of development.

Keywords: China; civic education; course reform; transformation

Introduction

Civic education in China's primary and secondary schools has experienced a complex and evolving journey. Civic education in China began in the early 20th century (Liu, 1998), influenced by the cultural exchange and collision between China and the West

in modern times. Many educators in China started to advocate for the implementation of civic education. Around the time of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, democratic education ideals and pragmatic education theories were introduced into China, leading to significant shifts in civic educational thought (Asia for Educators, 2020). Civic education's foundational approach during this time underscored the interconnectedness of the individual, society, and nation, fostering a democratic spirit (Yu, 2010). Despite these advancements, the civic education movement faced setbacks due to the societal upheavals of the era, including the war against Japanese aggression and the subsequent civil war, leading to its marginalization (Zhu & Feng, 2006).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 heralded a new phase in the evolution of civic education. The trajectory of civic education in primary schools mirrored the nation's constitutional developments and shifting policy landscapes (Wang & Hung, 2008). The early years of the new republic saw an emphasis on political education, with civic education taking a backseat (Zhang, 2009). The Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (1949), acting as a provisional constitution, first introduced moral standards. While in this policy, the national was designated as the primary bearer of fundamental tasks, only the people were acknowledged as the primary holders of basic rights. This distinction underscored a conceptual gap in the understanding of citizens' rights (Wang & Hung, 2008). The promulgation of the People's Republic of China Constitution in 1954 clearly defined the rights and obligations of the citizens, legally establishing civic status and forming the basis for civic education.

During this era, the socialist ethical framework, epitomized by the "Five Loves" (love for the motherland, the people, labor, science, and public property), along with a focus on duty and responsibility, became predominant in civic education curriculum of primary and secondary schools (Wang, 2014). These curricula, heavily infused with ideological content, aimed to foster individuals with steadfast political views and ideological consciousness, embodying virtues such as self-abnegation, complete devotion to others, and selfless contribution (Li, 2011).

Between 1957 and 1976, civic education in China's primary and secondary schools was significantly shaped by various political movements (Zhang, et al., 2013), such as the Cultural Revolution. Political education courses during this period were predominantly centered on socialist ideology, particularly focusing on the narrative of China's communist revolution (Han, 2014). The prevailing educational goal in schools shifted to-

wards nurturing the working force (MoE, 2019a), and the marginalization of the concept of citizenship in educational policies. During the Cultural Revolution, civic education was dramatically influenced from primary and secondary schools.

Since the economic reforms and opening-up policies of 1978, China's education system has become stable, civic education has re-emerged as a critical educational component, aligning with the era's demands and receiving a renewed emphasis in the curriculum. The curriculum aimed to shape responsible citizens well-versed in their roles within the wider spheres of society, the nation, and the global community (Feng, 2015). The emergence of globalization, market economy advancements, urbanization, civil society, and private sector prominence in the 1990s further underscored the relevance of civic education in contemporary state-building (Liu, 2005). Civic education in China is often integrated into courses like Ideology and Morality, Morality and Life, Morality and Society, and Morality and Law and Politics, which are synonymous with Ideological and Political Education (Wu, 2013), with civic morality as its cornerstone (Science Bulletin, 2002). Despite its broad thematic scope, China has yet to establish an independent civic education course. Instead, its principles also permeate various subjects, including Chinese language, history, and geography, reflecting the curriculum's dynamic adaptation to contemporary societal needs.

In summary, since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the primary conduits for civic education in Chinese primary and secondary schools have been through political subjects, specifically ideological and political education, as well as moral education. However, the curriculum has demonstrated a blend of both change and continuity. A constant feature has been the subject's foundational aim to develop holistic socialist builders and successors (Dai, 2019). Nonetheless, there has been a significant evolution in both the content and the structure of the subject.

Originally, the curriculum was narrowly focused on specific ethical standards in students, with an emphasis on national identity and duty. However, following the Reform and Opening Up initiative, there was a considerable expansion in the breadth of moral education within the civic education framework, accompanied by a marked decrease in ideological emphasis. The educational goals shifted from the focus on political education to a more balanced approach that included moral education and respect for the law, addressing both societal needs and the combined necessities of personal development. The curriculum became more aligned with students' real-life experiences,

concentrating on their holistic development and psychological well-being. The teaching methods evolved from the previous slogan-centric approach to political education, becoming more nuanced and varied (Tan & Chen, 2018). Additionally, there was a tighter integration of curriculum design and disciplinary structure, leading to greater standardization and a more scientific foundation. Teaching methods also became more adaptable and varied, and the evaluation of teaching grew to be more diverse and open-ended (Zeng & Li, 2019). Course changes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The course names and changes at each stage

Year	Names of civic education courses for each school age group		
	Primary school	Junior secondary school	Senior secondary school
1978	Political course was offered in the grades 4-5	A brief history of social development (grade 1) Common sense of scientific socialism (grades 2-3)	Common sense of political economy (grade 1) Common sense of dialectical materialism (grade 2)
1980		Youth cultivation (grade 1) Political common sense (grade 2) A brief history of social development (grade 3)	Common sense of political economy (grade 1) Dialectical materialism common sense (grade 2)
1981	Political course changed to ideology and moral education		
1985		Politics course changed to the ideological and political course	
		Socialist citizen (grade 1) A brief history of social development (grade 2) Common sense of socialist construction (grade 3)	Revolutionary outlook on life (grade 1) Economic common sense (grade 2) political common sense (grade 3)

1986		The textbook title has been slightly adjusted	
		Citizen (grade 1) Common sense of China's socialist construction (grade 3)	Communist outlook on life (grade 1)
1992		The teaching objectives of junior and senior secondary schools are distinguished and collectively referred to as ideological and political.	
2001	Ideology and moral education changed to morality and life (grades 1-3) morality and society (grades 4-6)	The name of the textbook was changed to ideology and morality	Continue to use political ideology
2014	It is proposed to incorporate legal education into the national education system.		
2016	Collectively referred to as morality and law	Collectively referred to as morality and law	Continue to use political ideology

This article, through a comprehensive literature review, analyzes the developmental characteristics of civic education curricula in ordinary primary and secondary schools in China since the reform and opening up (1978). The evolution of the curriculum is summarized into three stages: the revival, preliminary exploration, and multi-dimensional enhancement stages (the course names and changes at each stage are shown in Table 1). The aim is to offer a deeper understanding of the nuances and progression of civic education in China's primary and secondary schools.

Development and Characteristics of Civic Education Curriculum in China

Overview of the Chinese Education System and Civic Education Curriculum

The education system has undergone significant transformations since the founding of the People's Republic of China. A pivotal moment was the reinstatement of the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in 1977, which marked a return to aca-

democratic meritocracy and stabilization and progressive reform in China's school education system, following a period of socio-political turmoil.

In 1986, a landmark educational policy was implemented in China, mandating nine years of compulsory education. This framework typically encompasses six years of primary education followed by three years of junior secondary education. However, some regions have adapted this structure to five years of primary and four years of junior secondary education (MoE, n.d.). After completing this compulsory phase, students usually advance to three years of senior secondary education. Within this structure, civic education plays a crucial role, spanning the entire educational journey from primary through to senior secondary education and integrating key concepts and values at each stage. In 2016, the curriculum for moral education within the nine-year compulsory education system (grades one through nine) was uniformly renamed Moral Education and Law (Zhao, 2019). And in senior secondary education named Ideological and Political Education.

The general position of civic education within the curriculum is depicted in Table 2. It is mandatory for primary and junior secondary education, as well as the first year and the first half of the second year of senior secondary education. However, the practical teaching schedules for senior secondary education may vary across different provinces and offer more flexibility. This course is compulsory for examinations that transition students from junior to senior secondary school, though it is optional for the national college entrance examination (MoE, 2021). The curriculum comprehensively covers the operational frameworks of the national legal and political systems, the mechanics of a state, and the dynamics of political participation and activism. It also emphasizes the development of national identity and the importance of patriotism, alongside fostering values associated with democracy and human rights. The curriculum also points out environmental challenges and the imperative of sustainable development. The content tailors its objectives to progressively match the demand suitable for each school-age level. Despite its breadth, the curriculum does not specifically tackle areas such as daily financial competencies, digital citizenship, or methods and critical thinking. Although it engages with themes of global multipolarity and economic globalization, including China's role within these contexts, it does not intensely focus on the broader concept of global citizenship.

Table 2. Position of civic education in the curriculum

Position of civic education in the curriculum		Aspects / options
General aspects	Is civic education integrated in the history subject?	No
	Is civic education compulsory?	Compulsory for grades 1-10.5
	ISCED levels / number of years of compulsory/elective civic education	ISCED 1-3/10.5/1.5
	Is civic education optional in the school leaving exam?	Compulsory for senior secondary school entrance examination. Optional for college entrance examination.
Declared aims	The Curriculum covers the operation and levels of the national legal system	Yes
	The curriculum covers the detailed operation, levels and actors of the national political system	Yes
	The Curriculum covers the functioning of democratic state (rights/responsibilities e.g.: elections, representation, active participation)	Yes
	The curriculum covers the history of political participation and activism	Yes
	The curriculum covers everyday financial competencies, eg. banking, loan, credit	No
	The curriculum covers environmental challenges, sustainable development	Yes
	The curriculum covers digital citizenship, development of digital skills	No
	The curriculum aims at developing national identity, connection to the importance of patriotism or home defense	Yes
	The curriculum focuses on interconnectedness, global or supranational citizenship (e.g.: EU citizenship)	No
	The curriculum covers values (democratic state, human rights)	Yes
The curriculum includes approaches that encourage critical thinking and analysis (e.g.: media literacy)	No	

Revival Phase of Civic Education (1978-2000)

China witnessed significant transformations in its economic, cultural, and educational landscapes in this phase. This era, characterized by stability and openness, facilitated the advancement of civic education curricula in primary and secondary schools (Liu, 2018). The Ministry of Education, recognizing the importance of aligning education with societal needs, initiated several reforms to embed moral and ideological education into the school curriculum.

In 1978, the Draft Plan for Full-Time Ten-Year Primary and Secondary School Teaching was issued (MoE, 2019b), introducing political education into the fourth and fifth grades of primary schools. Initially focused on basic communist ideology and political knowledge, this curriculum faced criticism for its overt political bias. Consequently, in 1981, the primary school political education course was replaced by the “Ideology and Morality” course (MoE, 2019c), which shifted the focus to the socialist citizenship morals and behavior standards.

The Ministry of Education further solidified this direction in 1982 with the “Outline for Ideology and Morality Courses in Full-Time Five-Year Primary Schools (Draft)”. This outline aimed to instil communist moral values and good behavioural habits in primary school students, laying an ideological foundation for nurturing future successors to the socialist cause (Hu, 2008). The “Five Loves” became the core content of the Ideology and Morality courses, with textbooks developed and used across various regions. In 1986, the curriculum was formalized with the publication (Gu, 1998) of the “Outline for Ideology and Morality Courses in Full-Time Primary Schools” and accompanying with entrust the relevant units with the preparation of several sets of textbooks. Recognizing the evolving needs of society, subsequent outlines such as the 1986 “Outline for Ideology and Morality Courses in Primary Schools” and the 1990 and 1992 drafts for nine-year compulsory education, were introduced to refine and update the curriculum.

Secondary school political education also underwent significant changes. The “Ministry of Education’s Opinions on Improving and Strengthening Secondary School Political Education” in 1980 restructured the secondary school politics curriculum into a three-year sequence covering “Youth Cultivation”, “Political Knowledge” and “A Brief History of Social Development”. For senior secondary education, courses on “Basics of Political Economy” and “Basics of Dialectical Materialism” were introduced (Feng, 2018). In 1985, the National Education Commission advocated transforming political education courses into more comprehensive ideological and political education.

The implementation of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986 marked a pivotal shift, integrating junior secondary school education into the compulsory education system. In 1992, the “Syllabus of Ideological and Political Classes in Full-time Secondary Schools (Pilot Draft)” was published, which for the first time defined the objectives of teaching in accordance with the junior and senior secondary schools respectively, and no longer separated the titles for each grade, collectively referred to as “Ideological Politics” (MoE, 2019).

A significant milestone was reached in 1997 with the issuance of the “Curriculum Standards for Ideology and Morality Courses in Primary Schools and Ideological and Political Courses in Junior Secondary Schools”. For the first time, curriculum standards replaced teaching outlines, unifying the moral education of primary and junior secondary schools with clear objectives and content. These standards emphasized the development of moral qualities and civilized behaviors, showcasing the depth and breadth of moral education (MoE, 2019). Throughout this period, civic education curricula were characterized by a focus on civic virtues, with minimal emphasis on citizens’ political rights (Tang & Wang, 2021).

Preliminary Exploration Phase of Civic Education (2001-2011)

During the period from 2001 to 2011, civic education in China’s schools underwent a phase of rapid development and preliminary exploration. This era was marked by the implementation of the “Outline for Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Trial)” in June 2001, which set forth new curriculum standards and proposed a comprehensive design for a consistent nine-year compulsory education curriculum. This reform initiative significantly altered the landscape of primary education with the introduction of “Morality and Life” for grades 1-3 and “Morality and Society” for grades 4-6. These curricula represented a notable departure from the previous Ideology and Morality courses, emphasizing activity-based and integrated learning to foster moral development, a spirit of exploration, and a zest for life (MoE, 2019).

“Morality and Life” is crafted as an activity-based integrated curriculum, centered around children’s experiences. It is structured around three key dimensions: the child’s relationship with self, society, and nature. On the other hand, “Morality and Society” is designed based on children’s social experiences, aiming to promote students’ moral development and socialization through six modules: “Growing Up”, “Family”, “School”,

“Community”, “Being Chinese”, and “Approaching the World”. In 2011, these national curriculum standards were revised to better align with contemporary societal needs and requirements.

The 2001 (MoE) “Outline for Basic Education Curriculum Reform” also marked a pivotal shift in junior secondary school education, transitioning from “Ideological and Political” education to “Ideology and Morality”. This change was further solidified in 2003 with the publication of the “Ideology and Morality Curriculum Standards (Experimental Draft)”, which initiated experimental curriculum reforms in selected areas. The culmination of these experiments was the “Compulsory Education Ideology and Morality Curriculum Standards (2011 Edition)”. This curriculum is tailored to junior secondary school students’ lives, focusing on guiding their moral development and preparing them to lead active, healthy lives as qualified citizens. It encompasses modules like “My Growth”, “Me and Community”, and “Me and the Nation/Society”.

At the senior secondary school level, significant curriculum reforms were undertaken as part of the “General Senior Secondary School Curriculum Reform Plan (Experimental)” initiated in 2003. In line with the new senior secondary curriculum reform requirements, the “General Senior Secondary School Ideological and Political Curriculum Standards (Experimental)” were released in 2004 (MoE). These standards incorporated fundamental Marxist-Leninist views, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, and the “Three Represents” into the ideological and political courses. The curriculum included compulsory modules like “Economic Life”, “Political Life”, “Culture and Society”, “Life and Philosophy”, and elective modules such as “Knowledge of Scientific Socialism”, “Economic Knowledge”, and “Legal Knowledge in Life”. The “Ideological and Political” course for senior secondary education, while retaining its name, shifted its focus to a blend that addresses students’ developmental needs and life experiences.

Textbook management during this phase adopted a “one outline, multiple textbooks” approach, allowing for the simultaneous selection and use of multiple sets of textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education’s Textbook Review Committee for Primary and Secondary Schools. The content of these textbooks exhibited two main characteristics. Firstly, civic consciousness education was formally recognized at the policy level. In 2001, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the “Outline for the Implementation of Citizen Moral Construction”, establishing a civic moral code and underscoring the importance of citizen morality. The Seventeenth National

Congress report of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007 and the “National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)” further emphasized strengthening civic consciousness education. Secondly, education on citizen rights consciousness made its way into national textbooks. Between 2002 and 2004, the People’s Education Press published “Morality and Life” and “Morality and Society” textbooks, which included concepts of freedom, equality, rational rights, and responsibilities (Wang, 2004). In 2004, the textbook of senior secondary school “Political Life” was introduced, signifying a significant step in incorporating citizen rights consciousness into the curriculum (ICTR, 2004).

Multidimensional Enhancement Phase of Civic Education (2014-Present)

Since October 23, 2014, civic education in China has entered a phase of multidimensional enhancement, marked by significant policy decisions and curriculum reforms. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China’s “Decision on Several Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Advancing the Rule of Law” (CPCNEWS, 2014) set a new course for civic education. This decision underscored the importance of a dual approach to governance, combining law and virtue, and mandated the integration of legal education into the national education system, starting with primary and secondary schools.

In June 2016, a collaborative initiative by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, and the National Office for Promoting the Rule of Law culminated in the issuance of the “Outline of Legal Education for Young People”. This outline called for a revision of the moral education curriculum standards in primary and secondary schools to align with its teaching content requirements. Consequently, from the autumn term of 2016, national curricula for primary schools’ “Morality and Life” and “Morality and Society”, as well as junior secondary schools’ “Ideological and Moral”, were rebranded to “Morality and Rule of Law”. This shift marked a significant evolution in the content and focus of the curriculum.

These textbooks emphasized fostering virtue in the new era and strengthening education in traditional Chinese culture, rule of law, and ethnic unity. The Ministry of Education, adhering to a “one outline, one textbook” policy, organized and compiled these textbooks, which were subsequently reviewed by the National Textbook Committee for nationwide implementation. Starting in 2017, these unified textbooks began being used in first and seventh grades, expanding to second and eighth grades in 2018, and by

autumn 2019, they achieved full coverage across all grades. Notably, this was the first instance since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 that the term "rule of law" was featured in the names of compulsory education courses (KKNEWS, 2016).

In the realm of senior secondary education, the "General Senior Secondary School Ideological and Political Course Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)" were published in 2017, introducing significant refinements in the core competencies of the subject. These curriculum standards restructured the modules of senior secondary education ideological and political courses to better reflect the contemporary socio-political landscape of China. The compulsory courses were designed around the theme of socialism with Chinese characteristics and included four key modules: "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", "Economy and Society", "Politics and Rule of Law", and "Philosophy and Culture". Additionally, selective compulsory modules such as "Contemporary International Politics and Economy", "Law and Life", and "Logic and Thinking", along with elective modules like "Finance and Life", "Judges and Lawyers", and "Philosophers in History", were introduced. These senior secondary school ideological and political textbooks, also organized and compiled by the Ministry of Education, began being used in general senior secondary schools across various provinces including Beijing, Tianjin, Liaoning, Shanghai, Shandong, and Hainan from September 2019 (MoE, 2019).

Discussion

The evolution of civic education in China's primary and secondary schools since the reform and opening-up represents a transition from structural revival to systematic exploration. This transformation, aligned with contemporary requirements and grounded in China's specific context, has established a distinct framework for the nature, objectives, and methodology of civic education. However, as the curriculum enters a more sophisticated stage, it encounters a multifaceted landscape of developmental opportunities and practical considerations.

A primary focus in the current stage is the coordination between curriculum design and pedagogical implementation. While standards have been continuously refined, a localized gap persists in how these concepts are translated into classroom practice. To further enhance the synergy between school culture and civic principles, there is an

ongoing need to strengthen the professional development of the teaching force, which remains a cornerstone for the subject's practical effectiveness. Furthermore, in the context of China's exam-oriented educational system and the heavy academic burden on students, civic education often becomes relegated to mere rote memorization for exams. This approach neglects the subject's fundamental role in guiding personal behavior and advocating for legitimate rights and interests. Consequently, the practical integration of civic education faces the risk of being overshadowed by intensive academic requirements (Chen, 2018). The overemphasis on intellectualization, curricularization, and scientification of moral education in schools often leads to an evaluation system that prioritizes knowledge acquisition over the development of students' personalities, moral consciousness, emotions, and behavioral habits (Wan, 2003).

Overall, while China's civic education has made significant strides in aligning with contemporary societal needs, it still faces critical challenges in terms of practical implementation and teacher training with the development of civic consciousness and values. There is a need for a more holistic approach that integrates civic education more deeply into students' learning experiences and personal development, moving beyond theoretical knowledge to foster a well-rounded understanding and practice of citizenship. Addressing these issues is crucial for the development of a civic education system that not only resonates with China's specific socio-political context but also prepares students for the complexities of the modern world.

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