
Neo-Confucianism in Chinese Children's Books

Xiangshu Fang

Confucians believe children are able to reach their full potential of an innate sense of benevolence by following the proper deportment of their elders, or role models in books. From the Confucian point of view, the ideal tranquil and happy society begins with 'filial piety' (*xiao*), which is the principal value of the Confucian morality and central to the Confucian rationale for organising social order of the superior-inferior status in human relationships. When the notion of filial piety is applied to the relationship between subjects and sovereign, it becomes 'loyalty' (*zhong*). Filial piety and loyalty are the commanding moral principles in the reading materials for children in dynastic periods of China. The political role of the moral training in children's books worked extremely effectively from the adoption of Confucianism as an orthodoxy around 100 BC and helped to maintain dynastic rule for about 2,000 years, until Western warships and guns shattered Chinese confidence in Confucianism in the late nineteenth century.

Modern Chinese children's literature emerged as a weapon to save China in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which attacked Confucianism and turned to the West for social remedies. In the years of Mao Zedong's rule (1949-1976), the Confucian idea of filial piety was criticised as 'feudal' because it was believed to ignore the class nature of family. As reflected in many children's stories in that period, children were no longer viewed as heirs to the family but to the proletarian revolutionary cause, and the influence of parents or family were often critiqued in terms of social class background.

Mao Zedong died in 1976 and his disastrous Cultural Revolution was brought to an end. The ideal world of Communism had lost its attraction and the ideology for its realisation worldwide had lost its compelling moral force. The new leadership headed by Deng Xiaoping attempted to rectify the ideological principle and to end the disorder caused by the Cultural Revolution by putting forward a reform program called 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', and calling for 'building up the socialist spiritual civilisation' (Deng Xiaoping 1987, p.3). In the ideological confusion of the 1980s, 'patriotism' appeared to be the only explicit moral principle that had the consistent blessing of the children's book market. The ambiguity of

the reform program somehow encouraged the 'returning' of the May Fourth ideas of democracy and individualism, which contributed to the political storm in 1989. The post-Deng leadership headed by Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) wished to bring up a new generation of obedient citizens who must never challenge or even question the authorities. They must be absolutely loyal to the nation as represented by the Communist government. They must study hard for the prosperity of the nation, and they must conform to the behavioural norms of society, and restrain desires of expressing individual diversity. It is against this background that Confucianism made a surprise comeback in children's books, and this discussion considers three major texts which demonstrate the new ideologies.

In the early 1980s, some literary works for children began to return to the traditional approach and use the bond between children and parents to advocate 'patriotism'. For instance, the poem 'Mum's Love', written by Liu Binjun and published in 1982, describes the love of the mother for a child and the child's love for the mother. But at the end of the poem, the love is extended to the love of the motherland:

*On a very hot night,
I woke up to see
mum fanning me,
and herself sweating all through.
Mum's love is like the cool breeze.*

*One very cold rainy day,
mum came to pick me from school.
The only umbrella covered me
and mum herself was mostly in the rain.
Mum's love is like an umbrella.*

*Once, I was ill,
mum took me to hospital.
Feeling my feverish forehead,
mum's tears began to roll down her cheeks.
Mum's love is like tears.*

One day, I broke a thermos,

and told mum a lie about it.
 Mum's criticism made my face blush,
 and I lowered my head, daring not to look at
 her.
 Mum's love is like the strict look on her face.
 Once for homework, I had to make a sentence
 with 'most'.
 I wrote, 'I love mum most.'
 But mum said, 'The most lovable has to be the
 motherland,
 because she is the mum for all of us.'
 (Liu Binjun, 1982, p.23)

Traditionally in dynastic periods, loyalty to the emperor and the nation was extended from filial piety, the core concept of Confucianism. For a long time, the Communists tried to establish children's loyalty to the Party, its leaders and the nation without this linkage of filial piety, which is regarded as feudalistic and lacking a class nature. This traditional approach has been proven to be effective for fostering children's affection towards a quite abstract concept such as 'motherland' or 'nation'. This approach was also used by Bing Xin, a renowned children's literature pioneer in the May Fourth period, when she advocated that 'love' was the recipe for all the social problems. 'Love', starting from the mother, could and should be extended to all human beings, animals, nature and eventually the whole universe. The poem 'Mum's Love' is a kind of re-application of the traditional Confucian approach and Bing Xin's idealistic idea.

After the crackdown on the 1989 students' pro-democracy movement, and in the mid-1990s, a new ideological system of Neo-Confucianism began to take its shape to fill in the vacuum left by the decline of faith in Marxism and Maoism in China. The new Party boss, Jiang Zemin, launched 'patriotism education', especially among children and juveniles (Jiang Zemin 1991, pp.43-46). The content of patriotic education was set out in the 1994 Patriotism Education Application Program.

Education for patriotism: Neo-Confucianism

Educators and writers in China began to revive Confucianism for the purpose of education for patriotism. They maintained the relevance of Confucian rule 'Let the ruler

be the ruler as he should and a minister be a minister as he should. Let the father act as a father as he should and the son as he should' (*jun jun chen chen fu fu zi zi*), which in its context means that each person has a role to perform, and if everyone performs his role, the social order will be sustained. They asserted that Confucian rule, in modern society, can be turned into a powerful 'sense of social responsibility' and 'sense of historical mission' (Ming Sen 1994, p.90).

Fairbank and Goldman summarise some of the main points of the neo-Confucians:

[The neo-Confucians] asserted that modernization did not mean Westernization. The seeds of modernization, they argued, could be found in Chinese history and values, especially in Confucianism. Instead of China's deeply embedded traditional culture being an obstacle to its modernization, as preached by the May Fourth intellectuals, Maoist ideologues, and party reformers and intellectuals in the 1980s, they insisted that Confucianism was conducive to modernization. Citing the dynamic economies of the Confucian-shaped societies in their East Asian neighbours, they asserted that a revived neo-Confucianism could provide the intellectual and cultural underpinnings for China's rapid economic development, while helping China avoid the immorality and individualism of western capitalism.

(Fairbank and Goldman 1998, p.440)

Illustrated Copies of Classical Chinese Enlightening Stories (1995)

In the 1990s several texts were published which demonstrate this emergence of neo-Confucianism as the new ideal. The largest of these appeared in 1995, when the Beijing Juvenile and Children Publishing House re-published the major Confucian classics in a set of six volumes for children, entitled *Illustrated Copies of Classical Chinese Enlightening Stories*, including *Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety*, *The Three Character Classic*, *An Essay of a Thousand Characters*, and so on. Inside the cover, there is Bing Xin's handwriting in traditional Chinese writing

brush 'promoting Chinese traditional virtues'. The endorsement by Bing Xin, one of the best-known children's writers in the anti-Confucianism May Fourth Movement, symbolises the power of the new tidal wave and repositioning of Confucianism by Chinese intellectuals in their pursuit of modernisation.

Han Zuoli, one of the editors, says in his preface that this set of classics is 'new, refined and complete', and he outlines the main moral principles endorsed in this set:

1. Love of the motherland
2. Collective spirit
3. Industry, thrift and economy
4. Respect for teachers and devotion to learning
5. Unity and friendship
6. Respect for elders and concern for the young
7. Sincerity and courtesy
8. Honesty and truthfulness
9. Strictness with oneself and leniency towards others
10. Consideration for others before oneself
11. Diligence in study

(Wang Longlin and Zong Yanfu 1995, pp.1-2).

Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety was generally believed to be compiled by Guo Jujing in the Yuan dynasty (1206 - 1386). Beijing Youth and Children Publishing House reprinted only twelve of the stories in its *Illustrated Copies of Classical Chinese Enlightening Stories* in 1995, because 'some stories in the original title advocate foolish blind feudal filial piety and therefore they are excluded. The reprint only includes those with positive and healthy significance' (p.186).

The following is such an example of 'positive and healthy significance':

One summer night, many mosquitoes were bothering parents who had worked the whole day and fallen asleep. When their filial son saw this, he tried to drive away the pests by fanning, but

without much success. In the end, he took off his own clothes to attract the mosquitoes to attack himself in order to reduce his parents' suffering. (pp.225-227)

However, this story is excluded by the reprint, presumably because of its 'foolishness':

A filial son, who was seventy years old himself, was dressed in colourful clothes and then poured water on the ground. He began to walk like a toddler, pretended to slip on the ground, and had a big fall. Then he imitated the crying of a baby. All this was for entertaining his sick parents. (Hu Wenbing 1879, p.32)

Another story excluded from the reprint presumably advocates the 'blind feudal filial piety' referred to by the editor:

Guo Ju lived in a place called Longlu in the Jin dynasty (265-420 AD). Guo Ju had a wife and a three-year-old son. Guo Ju's mother also lived with them. Guo Ju often saw his mother give her food to the grandson, and he said to his wife that they were simply too poor to feed all of them. He decided to dig a hole to bury his son to protect his mother's share of food. He dug a hole on the ground in the backyard, but found a pot of gold with a sticker on it: this pot of gold is the gift to the filial son Guo Ju. They lived happily ever after. (Lu Xun 1982, p.257)

The Three Character Classic was compiled by the Song dynasty scholar Wang Yinglin (1223-1296) as a textbook. The book uses three Chinese characters to form each line, and it is very easy for children to memorise. The essence of the book is to encourage sons to study hard, pass the imperial examination, and gain an official appointment so that, as filial sons, they can bring glory to the family to repay the hardship of the parents in bringing him up. It lists examples of well-known people as role models. It also tells children why they should observe the rules of propriety and moral principles. It outlines 'Chinese history and the social tenets of Confucianism' (Farquhar 1999, p.14). It was the most widely used and most influential

language primer from the 15th century to the early 20th century in China. The following is the preamble to *The Three Character Classic*:

*People, at beginning,
have good nature.
Comparable characters become
altered through learning.
With no teaching
character drifts downwards.
The teaching method
values total devotion.
Mother of Mencius
selected residential locality.
Son didn't study;
mother cut weaving.
(Wang Longlin and Zhong Yanfu 1995, p.5)*

The editors of the reprint explain that all people are good by nature at first, and it is the environment and education that either help children maintain this good nature and further develop the potential of the innate moral sense, or lead them astray. They also comment that, when children are able to walk around, the locality of the residence or the neighbourhood begins to have an impact on the moral growth. The reprint outlines the story of the mother of a Confucian sage, Mencius. At first they lived near a graveyard. Young Mencius, for fun, imitated the crying of the mourning people, so his mother decided that place was not suitable to his growth. They moved to a busy town and soon found themselves near a slaughterhouse and when Mencius began to take great interest in slaughtering, his mother decided to move again. This time they moved to a place close to the temple of Confucius, where government officials often came to salute the sage by bowing and kowtowing according to the rules of propriety. Mencius came back to tell his mother that he would follow Confucius's ideas, and his mother felt happy to have found such a good place to live (pp.6-7).

However, the reprint emphasises that the right environment by itself cannot ensure the proper growth of children. It explains how Mencius' mother educated him. Mencius became a student of Zi Si, who was a disciple of Confucius. One day Mencius felt tired and came home early. His mother was weaving cloth on a loom. He told her the study

was boring. She was most upset and cut the cloth on the loom. Mencius was alarmed, knelt down and asked why. His mother replied, 'Your study is like my weaving cloth. I have to weave inch by inch till eventually the cloth becomes long enough to be of any use. I cut the cloth to show you that once it is cut, all the effort before is just wasted and it will never be of any use.' The reprint explains that it is this kind of influence from the mother that led Mencius at the end to become a sage next to Confucius (pp.8-9).

In *The Three Character Classic*, there are many role models of filial piety, and Huang Xiang is the first:

*Huang Xiang was nine,
when warming up bed
for his parents
in winter time.
Filial piety must
be implemented thoroughly.
(1995, p.13)*

The editors of this 1995 reprint commend the moral of Huang Xiang warming up the parental bed as follows:

*Filial piety is our Chinese traditional virtue. The story of Huang Xiang warming up the bed for the parents stirs the glow of virtue in us even now. Filial piety is an emotion of children towards parents and their generation, which includes respecting them, understanding them and taking care of them. It is a fundamental quality in any human being and from this point one can develop to love and respect other people.
(1995, p.17)*

Confucius said, 'Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?' (Legge 1971, p.136). He also said, 'When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you don't know a thing, to allow that you don't know it; — this is knowledge' (Legge 1971, p.151). To accept that knowledge is as vast as the ocean is only the initial step. To absorb knowledge takes a tremendous amount of determination, perseverance, and assiduity. That is the strongest message of the primer, which presents sixteen role models to convey and reinforce this message. The best known examples are Sun Kang, who was too poor to

afford oil for light but had to read in the light of the snow's reflection at night (Wang Longlin and Zhong Yanfu 1995, pp.53-56), Sun Jing, who had his hair tied to a beam so he could be awoken every time he fell asleep while studying at night (pp.41-44), and Su Qin, who pricked his thigh with an awl in order to stay awake when studying late at night (pp.45-48). All these people became appointed as high-ranking officials later in their life. After the story of each role model, the editors summarise the moral. The moral of the story of Su Xun, who started to study assiduously at the age of twenty-seven, is explained thus:

We often feel that 'knowledge becomes limited when we want it most'. Su Xun was twenty-seven when he understood this truth. He had wasted so much valuable time. We are young and it is the best time for us to study. We must seize every minute and every second to study hard, so that we can grow up to be a useful person to our nation and society.
(p.70)

An earlier 1991 edition of *The Three Character Classic*, which is directed at a more academic audience, summarises its key message in these lines, which are not included in the 1995 reprint for children:

*Learn when young
and apply when mature.
Serve the emperor with total devotion
and spread his kindness down to the common
people.
Your fame will be widely known
and that brings honour to your parents.
You glorify your ancestors
and set up a shining example for the future
generations.*
(Wu Meng 1991, pp.85-86)

How to become a shining example for the future generations is well illustrated in *An Essay of A Thousand Characters*, which was written by Zhou Xingsi in the Liang period (502-557) of the Southern dynasties (420-589). The following example is taken from the reprint *An Essay of a Thousand Characters* (Beijing Juvenile and Children Publishing House, 1995). After the lines 'one has to exert his utmost strength to show filial piety towards parents; and even sacrifice his life to prove loyalty to his emperor',

the editors insert the story of Li Ruoshui as a role model to children:

In 1127, the troops of the neighbouring Tartar State of Jin occupied the Chinese capital Bianjing. The emperor and many ministers were captured. Many ministers surrendered to the enemy troops, but Li Ruoshui stood out to denounce those cowards. The enemy officer asked him, 'I can spare your life so that you can be united with your family, if you submit your service to us.' Li Ruoshui replied, 'The nation is already taken, what's the point of maintaining the union of the family?' The officer yelled, 'Cut off his hands!' (The picture shows a sword chopping off hands with blood splashing.) But Li Ruoshui did not stop calling the enemy names. The officer ordered him to be executed. Li Ruoshui showed no sign of fear and turned to the captured emperor and knelt down in front of him and said, 'Your Majesty, I feel sad that I can no longer serve you with total loyalty.' He turned to the direction of his home town and said, 'Parents, I can no longer take care of you with utmost filial piety.' He was chopped to death by a multitude of swords (The picture shows many swords chopping a body lying in a pool of blood). Li Ruoshui did not bend at all under tremendous threat and incredible violence. He demonstrated the dignity of our Chinese nation. Everyone loves his parents, wife and children, and everyone cherishes his life. But between these personal interests and the principle of defending justice, Li Ruoshui gave up the former without the slightest hesitation. He composed a brave and heroic song of life for us. This kind of spirit to sacrifice one's life for justice and ideals is certainly what we juveniles and children ought to learn.

(Wang Longlin and Zong Yanfu 1995, p.112)

Golden Treasure House of Stories for Moral Education (1995)

The new tidal wave of 'promoting Chinese traditional virtues' is not limited to reprinting Confucian classics. A large number of historical stories have been compiled and published, and they also use the Confucian approach

of setting up role models. For example, Jiangsu Juvenile and Children Publishing House published a set of ten volumes entitled *The Golden Treasure House of Stories for Moral Education* in 1995. Each volume covers stories of approximately eighty role-models, totalling 800 in ten volumes. Each volume covers two moral topics:

- Volume 1: To love the nation and her people
To establish ideals
- Volume 2: To devote to the public and be selfless
To seek truth from facts
- Volume 3: To be independent and self confident
To study assiduously
- Volume 4: To be modest and prudent
To be hardworking and thrifty
- Volume 5: Solidarity and mutual help
Sense of responsibility
- Volume 6: To respect elders
Harmony in family and love between friends
- Volume 7: To be upright and kind
To be honest and faithful
- Volume 8: To be well disciplined and obey laws
To be civilised and polite
- Volume 9: To be brave and fearless
To be determined and resolute
- Volume 10: To practice what one preaches
To admit one's mistakes and correct them.

The core moral principle advocated in this set of ten volumes is to 'love the nation', which is best demonstrated by the absolute unconditional loyalty to the nation and the emperor in the story of Yue Fei (Yan Xuzhi and Liu Jianping 1995, pp.25-26). The story took place slightly later than that of Li Ruoshui, when the Tartar State of Jin occupied the capital of the Song dynasty and captured the emperor. Yue Fei was a combat general of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), fighting to recover lost territory. When he was young, he read Confucian classics and understood the

moral principles required of every subject of the empire. Before he left for the front, his mother tattooed on his back 'to serve the motherland with unreserved loyalty'. He recovered large areas, but at the critical moment, the new emperor Gao Zong, on the advice of a treacherous minister Qin Gui, issued twelve imperial commands, written in gold characters, to summon Yue Fei back. Yue Fei knew what these commands meant, but, as a loyal officer, he had no hesitation in returning to the capital. As expected, he was sentenced to death on the charge of conspiring to achieve a coup d'état. The story of Yue Fei in this set of *The Golden Treasure House of Stories for Moral Education* ends in these words:

Yue Fei was only thirty-nine years old, when he died. His ideal for serving the motherland, however, has been highly acclaimed by the people all these years. The words tattooed on his back 'to serve the motherland with unreserved loyalty' has inspired many generations of people with lofty ideals.
(p.26)

Fairbank and Goldman comment that the new leadership of Jiang Zemin agreed to the selective revival of Confucianism because of its authoritarian values (Fairbank and Goldman 1998, p.441). This story of Yue Fei clearly demonstrates emphasis on absolute unconditional subordination and obedience to authorities. However, the version in this collection omits the very important fact that, fifteen years later when the emperor Gao Zong died, the next emperor Xiao Zong righted the biggest miscarriage of justice in the dynasty's history and posthumously honoured the general for his loyalty and patriotism. The emperor ordered a temple to be built in the memory of Yue Fei (Cai Dongfan 1982, p.205). To acknowledge this rehabilitation is simply too reminiscent of the tens of millions of wrong cases that the Communist government created during its rule, and the subsequent rehabilitations after the Cultural Revolution. Nor does this 1995 story mention that the Tomb of Yue Fei was badly damaged by Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution (Kaplan, Sobin and Keijzer 1986, p.444).

The New Three Character Classic (1994)

The most significant publication for children's political and moral education in the 1990s is *The New Three Character*

Classic. It was compiled by a committee of fourteen experts, scholars, educators, ideology workers, propagandists, and workers for the ‘spiritual civilisation’ ‘through wide-range consultations and repeated discussions’ (*The New Three Character Classic* Compilation Committee 1994, p.1), and published by Guangdong Education Press in 1994. Its preface declares that

Every historical period needs the spirit of the time, which can encourage and mobilise the people to strive to complete its special historical mission. Every nation needs a spiritual pillar to congregate the national strength and establish its position among all other nations in the world.... We take Deng Xiaoping's theory of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' as the national spiritual pillar and the core of the spirit of our time... combine the traditional virtues, socialist moral norms, and ethics of the modern civilisation and integrate ideological significance, educational function, knowledge, and readability in The New Three Character Classic. Its pictures, pinyin¹ and notes help children read and memorise it easily. It is an important source for moral and ideological education on patriotism, collectivism and socialism.
(p.1)

After almost an entire century, the Chinese Communist government finally recognised the effectiveness of the Confucian classics as a tool of moral and political education and decided to follow suit. More importantly, the state, once again, resumed its role as the absolute moral authority to regulate the content of moral and political education in children’s reading materials. *The New Three Character Classic* provides us with an exceptional opportunity to identify the key moral principles that the current authorities try to establish for children, compare these principles with those in the original Confucian *Three Character Classic* and analyse the changes as well as the continuity. The new revised version has seven sections: preamble, key moral principles, daily school life, role-models of high moral standards, history, achievements, and conclusion.

The preamble of the traditional Confucian version emphasises innate good nature and, although the current version does not refute the view, it stresses that the process

of ‘constructing’ good nature and character should start from the very beginning. The responsibility of education in the old version rests entirely with father and teacher. This responsibility is now shared between parents and children. The most obvious insertion in the preamble is the reference to Yue Fei’s mother tattooing his back with the words ‘to serve the motherland with unreserved loyalty’. Unmistakably, the moral principle of patriotism is given priority in the new text.

The next section focuses on other key moral principles:

*A young pupil
should show respect
to senior generations,
and practice etiquette.
Little Huang Xiang
warmed the bed.
To love parents
has long significance.
Little Kong Rong
picked a smaller pear.
Affection among brothers
must be remembered.
Filial piety and fraternal submission
must pass on.
Relation between old and young
is like bone and flesh.
Bringing up children
is hard work.
One must repay
the kindness of parents
who care for their young
like the sun with seedlings.
When parents instruct,
children listen attentively,
and correct mistakes
with no hesitation.
If parents err,
try to persuade them to mend,
with humble sincerity
and in pleasant voice.
Help with housework
with no reluctance.
Wash up dishes,
clean rooms and courtyard.
Family love me
and I love family.*

*Extend this love
to our China.
(pp.12-19)*

The moral value of ‘filial piety’ is restored to the core position. ‘Fraternal submission’ is also recognised as an important moral principle, which teaches children how to behave before seniors. Most importantly, the new version accepts Confucius’ words: ‘filial piety and fraternal submission! — are they not the root of all benevolent actions?’ (Legge 1971, p.139), and consequently bases its ‘patriotism’ on ‘filial piety’ and ‘fraternal submission’. *The New Three Character Classic* omits the three Confucian cardinal guides in regard to the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son and husband and wife, but the principle of these guides to human relationships, except between husband and wife, subtly remains.

The next section specifically focuses on the daily school life of children. It teaches children how to become people with ideals and a sense of discipline. Children must salute the national flag in the morning, join in physical exercises, cherish the honour of their school, respect their teachers, and love school friends. It tells children that knowledge is like an ocean and they must study hard, the example of ‘Su Qin pricking the thigh with an awl in order to stay awake when studying late at night’, taken from the old version, is still used. Another two examples of assiduous study taken from the old version are the story of a boy of a poor family using a bag of fireflies as a lamp to study at night and the story of the poor boy who studied at night in the reflection of the moonlight from snow.

The section of role models of high moral standards starts with these lines:

*When growing up,
people enter society.
An individual is like one drop
in the ocean of society.
Everyone obeys law
observes public morality,
is devoted to work
and fulfils duty.
(pp.32-33)*

Compared to the original text, *The New Three Character Classic* puts much more weight on the notion of collectivity and the sense of discipline and conformity to law. This indicates the concern of the authorities in regard to the rebellious tendency of young people, which has been displayed both in the Red Guard movement in the Cultural Revolution and in the 1989 students’ pro-democracy movement. This section lists ten role models, five being contemporary and five historical. Liu Shaoqi, the former president of the People’s Republic of China and head of the state, is listed as the first role model. This is to present the irreproachable quality of the ruler as the absolute moral exemplar, according to the Confucian belief.

*Liu Shaoqi stressed
cultivation of oneself,
set a good example himself
and won respect from the people.
(p.34)*

The term ‘cultivation of oneself’ originates from the traditional Confucian idea of ‘cultivation of person’. It stresses the process of constant self-examination of behaviour and purification of thoughts.

Corruption has become a serious problem since the introduction of the ‘market economy’ and was one of the most important factors that led to the demonstration by students in 1989, but the Party and the government are reluctant to admit it in this important children’s moral and political education material. So the fight against corruption draws the moral from the less-known role model of Yang Zhen of the Han dynasty 1,800 years ago:

*Yang Zhen of the Han dynasty,
refused to accept bribes.
His disinterestedness and purity
have been universally admired all the time.
(pp.46-47)*

Yang Zhen’s story is certainly not universally known, so the note in the book has to explain. Yang Zhen was a high

official in the Han dynasty. Once, he was visiting a county. A county official came at night with ten *jin* of gold. Yang Zhen said to him, 'We have known each other for years, and you should have known me.' The county official replied, 'But it is late at night now, and nobody would know.' Yang Zhen laughed, 'Heaven knows, the spirits know, you know, and I know. How can you say nobody would know?' (pp.46-47)

Other historical role models are Confucius, Guan Zhong, Bao Shuya and Sima Guang. Confucius is praised for his golden rule, 'Do not do to others what you don't want to be done to you', and for his open-mindedness and modesty, shown by his words, 'If there are three of us walking together, at least one of the other two is good enough to be my teacher' (pp.43-44). Guan Zhong and Bao Shuya are commended for their genuine friendship, which is based on the principles of righteousness and morality. They never hesitate to point out each other's shortcomings, they respect each other's political allegiance, and always have a balanced objective view of each other's talents (p.42). Sima Guang of the Song dynasty is a child role-model. He and his friends were playing hide-and-seek in the garden. One boy fell into a large pottery jug which was used as a water tank. All other children were frightened and did not know what to do, but Sima Guang picked up a piece of rock, broke the jug and rescued the boy (p.45). In this section, there are also these words, advocating the restraint of desire, materially and sexually:

*Either for the nation or a family,
success comes from thrift,
and luxury leads to a downfall.
Young people must behave decently.
To indulge oneself
in carnal desire
is to treat oneself like mud.*
(p.49)

The 'ethics of the modern civilisation' mentioned in the preface are represented in these lines:

*Protect the environment
so that the luxuriant plants
make a green world
against the blue sky.*
(p.50)

The history section begins with these lines:

*The history of China
Is like a long river:
Five thousand years
produces many outstanding figures.*
(p.52)

The original *Three Character Classic* is much more specific and factual about Chinese history. It does not deny the long periods of fragmentation and two-way or three-way split of what is now regarded geographically as 'China'. However, *The New Three Character Classic* attempts to create an impression that China has always been a unified entity. The metaphor of history like a long river stresses continuity, and the listing of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty as the first of the four outstanding emperors in Chinese history deliberately ignores the three thousand years of fragmentation and split before the Qin unification in 221 BC, which lasted only twelve years. China's history has been a continuous process of expanding its frontier and subjecting the 'barbarians' to their political master, and this process has had its ups and downs. The strife between the Han people and other ethnic minorities is well described in the Chinese classical literature. For instance, a Tang dynasty poet, Chen Tao, wrote:

*They vowed to crush the Xiongnu,
thinking nothing of death:
Five thousand in sable battle-dress
fell in the foreign dust.
How sad that the bones that lie
by the banks of the Wuding
Are still lovers in many a woman's dream.*
(*Three Hundred Tang Poems* 1993, p.370)

The section on history highly commends three contemporary rulers after talking at length about the national crises starting from the nineteenth century and the failures of many patriotic attempts to restore the strength and prosperity of the nation. It tries to tell children that Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping were trying to achieve the same goal, to free China from the foreign powers' bullying and establish a powerful, happy and prosperous China. Just like the four outstanding emperors mentioned in *The New Three*

Character Classic, the three contemporary rulers were all patriotic and all made great contributions to the nation. The current rule of the Communist Party is now represented as part of this continuous patriotic process.

The section of Chinese achievements puts Confucianism on the top of the list:

*Our tradition of cultural heritage
ranks the longest in the world.
It has strong roots
from which lush leaves and branches grow.*

*Confucius and Mencius emerged first
to establish the school of Confucianism.
It emphasises education
and advocates benevolence and righteousness.*

(The New Three Character Classic 1994, pp.81-82)

Confucianism is now regarded as the 'strong roots' giving rise to the rich culture of China. Ironically, the name list of the 'lush leaves and branches' includes Lu Xun, who attacked Confucian benevolence and righteousness as 'man-eating' in the May Fourth Movement.

The concluding section of *The New Three Character Classic* outlines the geographical features and the ethnic composition of China. After going through the magnificent landscape of the nation, the text emphasises the link between the mainland and Taiwan:

*Among the numerous treasure islands,
Taiwan ranks number one.
It is always connected with the mainland,
and so is the affection between the two places.*
(p.114)

The outline of the ethnic composition tries to present a picture of a harmonious nation of multi-ethnic groups:

*For thousands of years,
fifty-six ethnic groups
have lived together like a big family,
and are now holding hands with one another
to build the Chinese nation.*
(pp.120-121)

The ultimate purpose of the assiduous study encouraged by the old Three Character Classic is to bring glory to the family and ancestors, but the new version promotes national interests:

*Good sons and daughters of China,
read this classic and think carefully:
Strengthening ourselves,
riding the strong wind,
surging to the sky,
and vitalising China,
all this needs our joint assiduity.*
(pp.124-125)

Finally, the omission of the most significant patriotic movement in contemporary Chinese history, the May Fourth movement, strongly reveals the government's change of mind on Confucianism and its concern about the rebellious tendency of young people reflected in the 1919 movement, as well as the idea of democracy advocated by the movement.

The current Chinese authorities' adaptation of Confucianism recognises the importance of the role of filial piety as the base for other moral qualities, but it does not accept it as the ultimate purpose as traditional Confucianism advocated. The neo-Confucianism promoted in the 1990s stresses the notion of loyalty, which is demonstrated in the individual's responsibility and duty to the nation, carried out through faithfully implementing the instructions of the ruling group. The fundamental difference between traditional Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is that the traditional construction of children's moral character derives from a long-term value-oriented ideology, which aims at achieving a tranquil and happy world of benevolence, whereas the contemporary form only emphasises the norms that regulate human relationships, especially the subject-sovereign relationship. This reveals the short-term and expedient nature of this modern ideology as a strategy for ensuring the political survival of the ruling group. Overall it seems that the prevailing contemporary moral principles for children are only an impoverished residue of past ideologies, with unquestioning trust of authorities as the dominant element.

END NOTES

1. 'Pinyin' is the phonetic spelling system to represent the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese. It was introduced in 1958. Since then the pinyin spelling system has been used in Chinese primary schools as an aid to teach children Chinese characters.



REFERENCES

- Cai Dongfan (1982) [1922] *Stories of the Song Dynasty History*. reprinted by Shanghai Wenhua Chubanshe.
- Deng Xiaoping (1987) *Fundamental Issues in Present-Day China*. Beijing. Foreign Languages Press.
- Fairbank, J. & Goldman, M. (1998) *China, A New History*. Cambridge and London. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Farquhar, M. (1999) *Children's Literature in China - From Lu Xun to Mao Zedong*. New York. East Gate.
- Hu Wenbing (ed) (1879) *Picture Book of Two Hundred and Forty Stories of Filial Piety*. Shanghai.
- Jiang Zemin (1991) 'General Secretary Jiang Zemin's Letter to the Leading Comrades of the National Education Commission', 9 March 1991, in Propaganda and Education Bureau of the Propaganda Ministry of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (1994) *Patriotism Education Application Program, Reading Material*. Beijing. Study Press.
- Kaplan, F., Sobin, J. and Keijzer, A. (1986) *The China Guidebook*, Terneck, New Jersey. Eurasia Press.
- Legge, J. (1971) *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, Taipei. Wenshizhe Chubanshe.
- Liu Binjun (1983) 'Mother's Love', *Ertong Wenxue*, no 2, Beijing.
- Lu Xun (1982) *Complete Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 2, Beijing. Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe.
- Ming Sen (1994) 'Three Topics of Confucianism', in Chinese Confucianism Association, *Confucianism and Modernisation*, Beijing. Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe.
- Propaganda and Education Bureau of the Propaganda Ministry of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (1994) *Patriotism Education Application Program, Reading Material*, Beijing. Study Press.
- The New Three Character Classic* Compilation Committee (1994) *The New Three Character Classic*, Guangdong Education Press.
- Three Hundred Tang Poems* (1993) reprinted by Shanghai Classical Books Publishing House.
- Wang Longlin and Zong Yanfu (eds) (1995) *Illustrated Copies of Classical Chinese Enlightening Stories*, Beijing Juvenile and Children Publishing House.
- Wu Meng (ed), (1991) *The Three Character Classics, A Hundred Family Names and An Essay of a Thousand Characters*, Shanghai. Shanghai Classical Books Publishing House.
- Yan Xuzhi and Liu Jianping (eds), (1995) *The Golden Treasure House of Stories for Moral Education*, Nanjing. Jiangsu Juvenile and Children Publishing House.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr. Xiangshu Fang grew up in China and currently lectures in Chinese language and culture at Deakin University. His research interests are Chinese political movements, especially the Red Guards movement and Cultural Revolution. This article is drawn from his PhD study which looks at political and moral education in China.

