

Managing Risk and Balancing Minds: Transforming the Next Generation through ‘Frustration Education’

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Abstract

Societal transformations in China during the last decades have been accompanied by changes in the perceived challenges for children in contemporary and future Chinese society. For the urban Chinese middle class, children's experiences radically differ from prior generations, both in everyday life and in life opportunities such as education and work. Simultaneously, middle-class urban childhoods are increasingly more isolated and privatised in comparison to past generations. The family planning policies that came into force in the late 1970s, aiming to regulate the family composition of urban Han Chinese to one child per family, has played a significant role in this changing social landscape. However, there is concern that the family scenario where four grandparents and two parents place all their attention onto one child has created a generation of emotionally spoiled ‘little emperors’. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in an urban Chinese kindergarten, this chapter exemplifies how this perceived challenge was dealt with, through an educational strategy called frustration education, during a kindergarten day trip to an army school. The chapter explores how the kindergarten staff used frustration education to strengthen children's emotional balance in an attempt to transform the ‘little emperors’ into resilient citizens. Alongside concerns about how future competitive scenarios for these children place particular expectations on academic and artistic competencies from an early age, frustration education is interpreted as a way of managing and meeting concerns of future and contemporary risk. Frustration education is thus conceived of as a practice aligned with the principle of the ‘best interest’ (Article 3, UNCRC) of children in contemporary urban China.

Keywords

China – childhood – kindergarten – frustration education – UNCRC

1 Introduction

It is early morning and children are arriving, dressed in army uniforms, wearing camouflage trousers, army jackets and caps with red stars. Proud parents and grandparents with cameras in hand fill the street and kindergarten yard, surrounding large drums and cymbals brought in for the occasion, waiting to send off their children on a kindergarten daytrip.

As parents and grandparents wait outside, the children walk around in their classrooms, excited about the trip. Teacher Ma is sitting next to one of the tables, putting small tomatoes in plastic bags and the children go over to her and receive one bag each. All the adults are given a water bottle and two cucumbers. Everyone apart from my interpreter and me are dressed in camouflage army uniforms, including the teachers, the principal and the nurses. The children are told to sit in their seats, their bags behind their backs, and sing an army song (lyrics: happy song flying in the air, fly to Beijing, now chairman Mao is very happy to hear it). The teacher checks off a list for attendance and offers practical information. Loud sounds come in from outside – the sound of large drums. The teacher tells the children to go pee and reminds them to fasten the buttons well on the uniform, and to not turn the brim on their caps upwards; it should be flat. Teacher Liu is sitting next to us, she says that this is part of the play curriculum for this kindergarten. It is a collective activity. She says that the police and the army are children's heroes.

The drums and cymbals are getting louder. The sound is not constant but reaches a climax every time a group of children go outside. The song the children were singing in the classroom is also coming out of the speaker. We follow the children through a sea of parents and grandparents, from the kindergarten building to the gate. The parents are smiling and taking pictures. As we approach the gate, we can feel the parents pushing behind us. The guard yells at the parents that they must wait and not push, but they keep pushing. The children enter the bus, smiling and waving to the parents and grandparents standing outside on the pavement, taking pictures and waving back as the children put their seatbelts on. (Excerpt fieldnotes,¹ May 2012)

The 11-month fieldwork in Shanghai was coming to an end, and two weeks before departure I accompanied 'big class' children in the kindergarten on a trip to an army school. It was a special day and the atmosphere in the kindergarten prior to leaving was one of celebration and excitement. This army school trip would teach me about a practice that has become increasingly popular in Chinese

society the last decades called ‘frustration education’.² This is an educational method aiming to tackle a perceived negative trend in Chinese society that had followed in the footsteps of the family planning policies in the late 1970s, namely the problem of emotionally frail or ‘spoiled’ children. Alongside other changes in the historical, economic, social and political landscape, particularly in China’s urban areas, this chapter will explore this perceived problem through the lens of generational and societal transformation – emphasising both how everyday experiences of children in contemporary China are subject to different concerns than prior generations, as well as how such concerns translates into a particular form of practice, aiming to shape a stronger and more resilient future generation of Chinese citizens. Using Ulrich Beck’s notion of the risk society (1992, 2000), such practices are interpreted as part of reflexive modernity in the Chinese context, through exploring how contemporary and future risks and uncertainties of individual children are perceived and dealt with.

The global aspirations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to set international norms and universal standards of childhood has been contested (Kaime, 2009; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2013). China ratified the UNCRC in 1992 with a reservation made to Article 6, the right to life and development; a reservation made in connection to family planning and the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.³ Not only has this reservation been controversial because children’s rights, like human rights, are interrelated, interdependent and indivisible (Burr & Montgomery, 2003), thus of equal value and weight; some articles are furthermore emphasised as *guiding principles* of the UNCRC, Article 6 being one of these, together with Article 2 (principle of non-discrimination), Article 12 (principle of children’s participation) and Article 3 (the ‘best interest’ principle).⁴ China’s reservation against Article 6 has been subject of critique from the UNCRC Committee (2013) and can in some ways be seen to compromise the core essence of the Convention, thus serving as an illustrative example of the intricacies and complexities inherent to the UNCRC as a global child rights document. The UNCRC has been said to contain a particular historical and cultural construct, namely that of a secure, carefree and happy childhood, a notion that is linked to the capitalist countries of Europe and North America (Boyden, 1997). The rights-bearing autonomous individual is seen in this concept from an emancipatory and individualistic lens (Liebel & Saadi, 2012), and includes specific norms and values regarding what can be considered a ‘good’ childhood. In this chapter, Article 3 and the principle of the ‘best interest’ of the child forms a backdrop for the discussion, as this article exemplifies potential tensions between global documents and local conceptions and convictions (Alston, 1994). Article 3 is complex because its meaning can be interpreted in very diverse ways, which may result in practices thought

of as adequate and beneficial in one context but perhaps not in another. The following pages provide one example of how beliefs of the 'best interest' of children finds contextual form in an urban Chinese kindergarten.

2 Contemporary Urban Chinese 'Spoiled' Childhoods

China has gone through massive economic, political and social changes in the last few decades, which have transformed Chinese society in different ways, including the ways in which children and childhood are perceived (Jing, 2000b; Watson, 2000). For a large part of China's urban child population, changes in life conditions have been attributed to a betterment of living standard and educational facilities, but also to an increasingly private and isolated lifestyle (Naftali, 2010). Combined, such factors present life circumstances that differ greatly from prior generations, not only in terms of access to resources, entertainment and material assets, but also to life opportunities, education and work. Historical events such as the Sino-Japanese war, the Chinese civil war, and the Cultural Revolution in the 20th century saw periods of great economic difficulty, lack of resources and intense hardships for children (Yuhua, 2000). In the later parts of the 20th century, China's increased global outreach and engagement with multi-national capitalism, transitions to a market system, rapid economic growth and urbanisation, has seen immense changes in children's position in the family (Watson, 2000) and children's decisional power in families (Jing, 2000b), and such extreme differences in childhood experiences across generations is said to have created a generation gap (Yuhua, 2000). Societal changes in Chinese society have furthermore taken place within an increasingly scientifically oriented child-rearing scenario, in which parents heavily rely on and seek advice from 'objective' scientific sources such as biology, psychology, sociology and educational theories (Naftali, 2007). The role and authority of grandparents in the context of child-rearing has to some degree diminished (Ho, 1989; Zhu, 2010), although it is still common that grandparents care for grandchildren, particularly those below kindergarten age (children under three).

For the expanding middle class in urban metropolises such as Shanghai, children's daily life experiences are believed to have changed in particular ways over the last few decades, which has left a certain concern in educational and societal circles that urban Chinese children are 'spoiled little emperors' (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003; Jing, 2000a). The family planning policy, sometimes referred to as the single-child-policy, introduced in 1979, has been significant for the changing social position of children.⁵ Beyond regulating the family composition to one child per urban (Han) Chinese family, these policies are said to

have had an unintended consequence: The excessive amount of attention paid to one child by parents and two sets of grandparents, labeled the '4-2-1 family syndrome', has led to a generation of 'spoiled' children (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003; Jing, 2000b). Other labels used, such as the 'six-pockets syndrome' or the '4-2-1 indulgence factor' (French & Crabbe, 2010, p. 144), further underlines the perceived problems with these familial relationships. In this chapter, it is the perceived psychological consequences of emotional indulgence that is of concern, as it is considered to prevent children from coping well with (future) adversity.

There is a strong focus on enhancing children's qualifications, particularly in an academic sense but also in terms of artistic skills and competences, because it is considered important in preparing children for their competitive future lives (Naftali, 2007; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). In the kindergarten, such concerns were manifest in the emphasis on learning, as well as in the busy afternoon and weekend schedules of many children, where they engaged in extra-curricular activities to learn languages, storytelling or calligraphy, sports or other cultural activities (Lyså, 2018). Seeing that most of these single children are alone in carrying the future well-being of their families, such pressures might take on an additional strong meaning. In the kindergarten however, these pressures were not emphasised as problematic in children's everyday lives; rather, the excessive spoiling accompanying their status as single child was in focus.

3 Ethnographic Fieldwork in a Shanghainese Kindergarten

The empirical material in this chapter is from an ethnographic fieldwork in two kindergartens in Shanghai, China, during the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2012, as part of a doctoral project in interdisciplinary childhood research. I stayed close to one semester at each location, with children attending their last year in kindergarten before starting school, observing everyday routines and engaging with children and staff in their daily endeavors. I was accompanied by an interpreter three days a week, which greatly facilitated my understanding of the dialogues and practices among children and staff in the kindergartens.⁶ Alongside an adjusted form of participant observation, I also conducted qualitative interviews with children and teachers towards the end of my stay in both kindergartens, with the interpreter. The doctoral project was concerned with exploring disciplinarian practices in urban Chinese kindergartens, theorised as a relational form of practice, where children and teachers in daily interaction reinforce and reproduce practices of discipline and control (Lyså, 2018). The topic of this chapter, frustration education, was a related form

of educational practice, which directly spoke to the explicit concerns for children's contemporary and future well-being. In this chapter, I explore how such practices can also be understood as managing perceived future risks and concerns, relating increased individualisation in society and the increased significance of scientific authority to ways of approaching children in educational institutions such as the kindergarten (Beck, 1992).

The kindergarten represented in this chapter was an institution with many resources and a good reputation. Children and teachers could be considered of fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds, and the kindergarten was located in a relatively upscale area. There were around 30 children in the class, with equal gender representation, and two kindergarten teachers and some assistants staying with the children, often dividing the class in two groups. The kindergarten emphasised both individual children's emotional, academic and creative skills and abilities, as well as the 'collective grace' of belonging to the group, kindergarten and Chinese society. Such an emphasis reflected the contemporary societal aim of fostering individually strong and resilient children, while simultaneously stressing the significance and value of a relational sense of belonging (Lyså, 2018). Such values were manifest in everyday schedules and routines, such as morning calisthenics in the front yard, detailed lunch routines for mealtimes, or the rigorous practicing of sitting, standing and walking in straight lines. These practices were given great care and attention, providing a space for embodied knowledge and experience in values and ideals of order and control, correctness, evaluation and the public character of discipline (Lyså, 2018). This kindergarten also had a special ceremony each week, where the older children in the kindergarten, together with teachers and staff, would stand still and straight in lines and rows, respecting Chairman Mao and the flag of the People's Republic of China. Everyday routines, practices, values and concerns in the kindergarten mirror the larger societal and historical context in which it is located, a context whose transformations over the last few decades have also led to concerns for the contemporary and future well-being of China's urban child population. The following section will begin to explain how Ulrich Beck's theory of *risk society* (1992, 2000) connects with such concerns, how they can be understood as ways of managing future risk, and how they closely connect to historical change and the emergence of reflexive modernity and increased individualism in the Chinese context.

4 Chinese Individualism and Urban Risk Society

Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society is generally attributed to Western societies, but as will be demonstrated, processes of individualisation as a result of

modernisation are also significant in China (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010; Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2010a). According to Beck, “in advanced modernity the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production or *risks*” (1992, p. 19, original emphasis). Through technoeconomic developments and ‘releasing’ human beings from traditional constraints, an increasing amount of energy and time is spent into managing, controlling and dealing with risk, created by the very condition of modernity (Beck, 1992). Risk can be defined as “a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself” (Beck, 1992, p. 21); or said differently, the ‘unintended consequences’ of the logic of control that dominates modernity (Beck, 2000, p. 215). In the case of contemporary Chinese urban childhoods and the following analysis, these ‘unintended consequences’ are connected to the problem of ‘little emperors’.

Using a comparative perspective, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010) explore variations of individualisation, stressing how the European form of individualisation is not a template, an authentic or original form that should be translated into all other contexts, but rather one amongst many varieties of such processes. Individualisation is a process parallel to modernisation, which is connected to three dimensions: economic production and reproduction, sociocultural integration and politics (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, pp. xv–xvi). In China, processes of individualisation are not embedded in democracy, welfare state thought or human rights philosophy such as in some European contexts; the close state-individualisation connection is of a different kind (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, p. xvii). In the Chinese context, individualism is not about emancipation, but rather about earning your rights, relating to collectivity, saving the nation and building a strong nation state (Yan, 2010b, pp. 29–31). Yan (2010a) emphasises how China’s state-sponsored quest for modernity since the mid-20th century has led to the rise of the individual and processes of individualisation. According to Yan, party-state loyalty has replaced the role of family and kin to individuals, and Maoist socialism has thus (ironically) introduced a partial and collective kind of individualisation in Chinese society (2010a). Yan shows how a transformation in the individual-ancestor/family axis to an individual-state axis provided a party-state to which an individual’s sense of belonging and becoming was strengthened (Yan, 2010a). In this chapter, the project of analysing and managing individual children’s (contemporary, but perhaps particularly future) emotional state was at the core of practices aiming to create resilient children. Such a focus can exemplify how cultural definitions leave their imprint on risks, as risks directly or indirectly relate to contextual standards of what should be considered tolerable or intolerable in a given context (Beck, 2000); in our case, in an urban Chinese kindergarten in Shanghai.

Risks are not necessarily visible for the human eye, but rather identified by and accessed through theory and science; i.e. risk is part of a “*scientized* consciousness, even in the everyday consciousness of risks” (Beck, 1992, p. 28, original emphasis). It is the not-yet-knowing and relying on expert rationality, which is significant in risk society, as societies of knowledge and risks open up a space of uncertainty (Beck, 2000). The power of and ways of coping with risk, lies in the power of *knowledge* and thus *awareness* of the hazards; it is connected to potentiality and judgements about probabilities (Beck, 2000, p. 213). The *perception* of threat and risk determines how risk concern is manifest in thought and action (Beck, 2000, p. 213). Frustration education can be explored as one such ‘scientised consciousness’; as an increased concern with children’s resilience in the urban Chinese context, connected to the strengthened role of scientific perspectives in childrearing in China (Naftali, 2007).

According to Beck, the concept of risk reverses the relationship of past, present and future – rather than the past determining the present, it is the future – something yet to occur, or something that could occur were we not to change course – which is the determining factor for present action (Beck, 2000). In addition, processes of individualisation have in some sense disentangled the individual from being mainly determined by class distinctions, leading to an *individualisation of social risk* whereby social problems and inequalities that exist are explained in terms of individual traits and inadequacies and psychological dispositions (Beck, 1992, p. 100). Such matters will be exemplified below, through how frustration education engages in practices that speak directly to the analysis of individual children’s emotional health and well-being.

5 Frustration in the Barracks and the Analysis of Tears

Frustration education was an educational strategy used in everyday situations and interactional processes in the kindergarten, where teachers would make a game a little more difficult or present an obstacle in children’s activities, for them to learn to cope with hardship. The kindergarten leadership emphasised how this was related to changes in focus. Previously their kindergarten focused ‘too much on talking’ and teaching children about moral education and collective concepts. The focus now was rather to educate the children ‘in context’, as ‘natural education’. Teachers were trained to leave space for the children, to let them do things themselves. Letting children feel free, engage in self-help, was considered a way of protection. The training in the army school was also included in such discussions and the kindergarten leadership had also made sure the experience was shaped in certain ways, such as asking for male

coaches and guides, as there as mostly female teachers in the kindergarten – as well as asking that primary school children were kept in separate areas at the army school premises, to create a better context for training for the children.

Although the kindergarten had traveled to the army school several times, visiting army schools was not common practice for kindergartens in Shanghai; rather something primary school children would experience. The kindergarten made this trip for several reasons; it was part of the kindergarten play curriculum, where role play (simulation) was both valued for educational purposes as well as considered fun for the children. In addition, the experience would teach the children about responsibility and self-discipline, which was also connected to the kindergarten-school transition. The idea of *frustration education* furthermore constituted a significant part of the trip. Frustration education was about putting the child in a position where she or he faced something new and unexpected and see how he or she would cope. The trip itself was also part of this, as the children did not usually go on trips without their parents.

While at the army school, the children engaged with different military activities, such as marching or following orders for different movements, watching a small rocket launch, running and climbing a large wooden obstacle, gun practice and having lunch in the canteen. After lunch, they were subject to frustration education. Children and teachers walked together to the army barracks (where soldiers sleep), and small groups of children were placed in rooms together with an army coach. The rooms were equipped with six steel bunk beds alongside the walls, each containing thin mattresses and green-grey colored pillow and sheets, and the children sat down at the lower beds. The children were then informed that they would stay in these rooms instead of returning to their parents.⁷ The children were then informed of where the toilets were, after which the doors were closed and the teachers left the hallway and gathered outside the building at the opposite side of the house. The teachers stood outside for around five minutes, after which they returned to the hallway. A lot of activity followed, with teachers opening and closing the doors of the rooms, telling children how long they would stay, asking if anyone cried, telling them to not cry, but also saying that those who cried because they missed their parents could go home, and then the teachers closed the doors again. There was a lot of commotion during this time, and several children were crying. The children were asked to be brave, be good army people, and not cry. The analysing and explaining of the children's tears was the focus for teachers in the aftermath of the frustration education.

After the frustration education in the barracks, everybody gathered in a large room to have a group song contest, organised by the army instructor. The children were sitting in lines on the floor, while the teachers were sitting

on chairs behind them. *Do you regret crying?* an army instructor asked the children. *Yes, a man should be brave,* someone answered. The principal, vice principal and teacher Liu were sitting in front of us, and we proceeded to talk about the frustration education. The principal said: *The children used to say 'blood, sweat and no tears', but in context they cried.* She emphasised that if the children had cried because they were nervous, this was considered normal and good. The kindergarten staff explained how it was good for the children to cry, to have tears, because they needed the *release*. Although some children might experience challenges in their daily lives, which could help them get this 'release', this was not the case for every child. Rather, many children had a general *lack* of frustration in their life because of their life situation – being single children with four to six people (parents and grandparents) to take care of them. She further explained that there could be several reasons for why the children would *not* cry; first, mature children could treat the experience as not being real, not believing that they had to spend time there alone, and therefore did not cry. These children had a mature approach to the situation of frustration, which informed the teachers that they coped well with the challenging situation they found themselves in. Second, some children might have considered it as a task that they had to finish and accept this. This was also considered positive, as these children's approach was also mature. The third reason for why a child would not cry was because they do not know how to release their emotions, and this was considered problematic and something the teachers had to pay attention to. In such ways, the teachers would analyze the children's reactions, find out why the children would cry or not and what this could tell them about the children's psychology and emotional state. The presence or absence of tears was not the issue – rather, individual children's reactions and tears were individually assessed.

The trip to the army school had been debated and discussed by the kindergarten leadership prior to taking place. They expressed strongly that the goal was never to make children cry or play tricks on them. Rather, the experience the children gain during this trip was considered valuable for them; just like the activities the children engage in during role play in the kindergarten, the army trip would let children engage with the reality of army life. The kindergarten staff explained: *this happens in the army every day, it is real life. It is not easy for the army uncles, they miss their parents too, it is not easy for them.* Another kindergarten staff added that she had disagreed to do the dormitory activity in the beginning before realising that it was frustration education. *She continued: The army life is that way, army men must live far away from their parents, and kids will know that army life is not easy for the men. This is simulation.*⁸ Simulating real life situations through role play or army activities, boys and girl in the

kindergarten would get experiences they might also encounter in the 'outside' world, which would give them a stronger basis from which they could meet future life challenges and experiences. The frustration education experience was thus a psychological experience or test that would both help the teachers understand the children better, as well as provide useful life experiences for the children. A scholarly psychological explanation, simulation, was offered by kindergarten staff to explain the significance and meaning behind frustration education. Scholarly authority thus informed the practice, shaping the 'scientised consciousness' regarding child well-being for the kindergarten staff.

From the children's point of view, the army day contained both fun and exciting, as well as negative experiences. Several children talked about how it was very exciting to do the gun exercise, the army training and climbing experience, as well as watching the rocket launch. Several children talked in negative terms about the food options, expressing that the soup 'tasted like something from the river'. There was some discussion regarding who had cried or not during the frustration education, but most children did not want to talk much about that part of the day. The general feedback was however that they did not want to go back, and one explicitly said the children would be unhappy if they had to stay there.

6 Balancing (Future) Minds through Frustration Education

The urban Chinese *risk society* is manifest in practices such as 'frustration education', where success in life is connected to individual accomplishments. In the kindergarten children's well-being and emotional state were subject to concern, due to future uncertainties and beliefs that life would offer many hardships and strong competition. To combat the potential failures of individual children, their emotional state became subject for attention and analysis. In this context, childhood comes to signify and encompass other challenges and concerns than prior generations, as the unintended consequences of modernity had presented novel challenges for this generation of children.

From the 1970s and onwards, the rise of – and changing possibilities for – the individual, as well as structural changes from institutional reforms policy and the impact of the market economy, has led to an individualisation of the social structure in China (Yan, 2010a). Such changes include the opening up of the labor market, labor migration and rural-urban mobility, privatisation of housing, marketisation of education and medical care – all forcing individuals to take more responsibility for own lives, be actively engaged with market-based competition, assume more risks and be more reflexive (Yan, 2010a).

Furthermore, rights awareness and rights movements have contributed to changing the “balance in the structured relations among the individual, social groups and institutions” (Yan, 2010a, p. 501). This has increased the significance of individual choice and the workings of ‘the Chinese dream’, where notions of hard work and networks can help individuals be whoever they want to be, as well as engage in the individual pursuit of happiness (Yan, 2010a). Reformation of the self and search for individual identity have been celebrated and negotiated in the public space, and this has enabled the presence of a more proactive self who works towards success, but who may simultaneously still be patriotic and nationalist (Yan, 2010a).

In the kindergarten, the careful attention towards individual children’s ‘psychology’ is illustrative of the effort made to build strong individuals. Although the assessments and analysis of the children’s reactions to frustration education was in many ways meant to help children to be prepared for the future and cope with difficulties, there was also a strong emphasis on the group and the collective. This parallel focus illustrates the relational nature of individualism in context. As stressed by the kindergarten staff, frustration education does not just meet the personality needs of children, but also offers space for ‘collective grace’ and collective emotion. The ‘single family’ was mentioned by kindergarten staff as something that had to be emphasised when talking about Chinese childhoods; a group of children for which emotional ability was particularly important to develop, alongside strengthened partner relation and collective interaction. The future competition in life for these single children, which also includes their future responsibility for their families, demands action according to the kindergarten staff to safeguard *both* individual children’s and families’ futures. Social risk in this situation is about individual *pathology*, since successes and failures rest on and in the individual.

Frustration education has been a popular educational method in China in the 21st century, as illustrated in (translated) book titles of educational literature such as *To Give Children the Best Setback Education*⁹ and *Setback Education Excellent Children Come from Adversity*,¹⁰ *Frustration Education (Educational Method)*,¹¹ as well as in discussions taking place on online resource portals in China.¹² The main message is that we inevitably will experience setbacks. Children who do not suffer hardship and learn how to cope with it, become like ‘flowers’ in a greenhouse, unable to adapt, and individuals who cannot cope with frustration are bound to be unsuccessful. According to Wang, “society is a school and setback is the best teacher” because it enables learning about striving, struggling, maturing, simultaneously fostering knowledge, wisdom and persistence, as well as optimism and happiness (2016, p. 247). More than only being considered an educational method or a sort of test, it can also be

considered a way of “teaching people how to break through adversity and overcome difficulties” (Wang, 2016, p. 247). This educational method is not the same as tradition and parents’ experience, but another kind of ‘unconscious’ education (Wang, 2016); a novel form of education aimed at the intangible, the risks associated with lack of suffering in daily life, which is not necessarily visible to the human eye, and which can create hardships in the future. This is perceived to improve people’s tolerance of suffering and make them more relaxed, and is seen to be needed in schools as well as family education, but it is important that it is accompanied by proper psychological guidance (Wang, 2016). Setback or frustration education is thus emphasised as not only teaching children and individuals to become stronger, but also cultivating happiness.

There are also counter-voices to the method of setback- or frustration education, arguing that this method is harming the children of China.¹³ For the kindergarten staff on the other hand, frustration education is considered a strong and positive educational method, particularly useful and valuable for the single children in urban China who are emotionally spoiled by their surrounding adults. The amount of attention children receive from parents and grandparents requires a need to emphasise more on children’s emotional state, to avoid that parents ‘drown their children with love’ (Fung, 1999; Wu, 1995) and create ‘greenhouse flowers’ that are bound to fail in real life. The kindergarten staff used scholarly conclusions and understandings to engage reflexive practices that responded to future concerns; the uncertainty of the future in this way informed current practices. Frustration education therefore serves as an example of how perceptions of risks are directly related to cultural understanding and considerations of what is considered a good and proper life situation (Beck, 2000) such as having a balanced mind, where both pleasure and pressure are considered valuable in order to create fuller human beings who can cope well with challenges in life. Frustration education could thus be understood as a method for creating resilient and strong ‘flowers’ that can survive and thrive outside the walls of greenhouses, i.e. in Chinese society at large.

7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how an urban Chinese kindergarten deals with one of the unforeseen consequences of the family planning policy and the societal transformation and socioeconomic developments among its urban population in a well-to-do neighborhood in Shanghai. While the family planning policies with one child in each family was thought to create balance in society, it has created children with ‘unbalanced’ and ‘spoiled’ minds. Using

the notion of risk, I explored how the practice of frustration education was used to manage uncertainties and securing success in the future lives of individual children and consequently the nation state of China. According to the kindergarten staff, who also engaged in research activities themselves, due to better living standards and the excessive attention received by older generations, single children were emotionally spoiled or fragile, and this was something they needed to deal with and respond to. The kindergarten staff engaged with practices of frustration education with the purpose of strengthening children's emotional balance, in order to prepare the children for contemporary and future difficulties in their lives, and in such ways engage in processes of transforming the generation of 'emotionally spoiled little emperors' to resilient citizens in Chinese society.

Since its conception, the UNCRC is a result of compromise, and its global reach requires a certain openness and flexibility for the possibilities of member states to engage with and interpret the articles (Alston, 1994). The Convention already contains inherent internal tensions, for example between articles promoting caretaking or liberation, i.e. the need to protect children and the need to let children participate with their perspectives in matters concerning them (Archard, 1993). Cultural variation and interpretation furthermore add to the expanded and varied meanings that the articles contain in different contexts. As demonstrated in this chapter, frustration education is considered an adequate way to work towards safeguarding the future success of children, whose life experiences are seen to rob them of important life lessons. This form of practice is thus made with children's best interest in mind, considered a responsible action made towards the unintended consequence of the so-called one-child policy. For the kindergarten staff, the best interest of the child is to be strong individuals who can cope with challenges that will come and be better prepared for future risks. It is through experiencing hardship and frustration, and through balancing out children's emotions, that this can best be done.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on fieldwork (2011–2012) conducted for a PhD project resulting in the dissertation entitled *Duties and Privileges: an Ethnographic Study of Discipline as Relational Practice in two Urban Chinese Kindergartens* (Lyså, 2018). Chapter 11 in the dissertation particularly relates to the phenomenon of frustration education.
- 2 Chinese translation of frustration education is 挫折教育 (cuo zhe jiao yu). 'Setback education' is sometimes used as the 'foreign name' of this educational method.

- 3 United Nations Treaty Collection, Status of Treaties, Convention on the Rights of the Child. Member states overview. Status as at 6 April 2020. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtmsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=_en#EndDec (accessed 7 April 2020).
- 4 Four guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> (accessed 9 April 2020).
- 5 Since 2016, this policy has changed, and couples are now encouraged to have two children.
- 6 See Lyså (2018) for an elaboration on the complexities inherent to practices of translation in a research encounter, as well as the potential benefits and intricacies that such practices might entail.
- 7 See Lyså (2018) for a more detailed reconstruction of the event in the army barracks.
- 8 *Simulation* (móni, 模拟).
- 9 *To Give Children the Best Setback Education* is written by Zhang Duanran (2013), Qingdao Publishing Group (Chinese edition). Information found on <https://www.amazon.in/Give-Children-Best-Setback-Education/dp/7543651084> (accessed 18 October 2019).
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