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“Facing the Challenge” -- Drama and Citizenship Education in China

Jun Xu* Tao Yang

Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, China

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ABSTRACT

This essay will describe and discuss key ideas, trends and practices of citizenship and drama education in China. It will begin with a broad and brief reference to globalization as a means of explaining societal and education changes in China. The significance of citizenship education and drama education will be discussed in relation to how they exist in Chinese schools and in contexts beyond schools. Examples will be provided to demonstrate the challenges facing drama and citizenship teachers in China, either when working in their individual subject areas or attempting to find ways of working together.

There begin with the landmark policies and important events in the field of drama and citizenship education in latest years, and describes the promising future for the progress of Chinese drama education from the perspective of increasing number of teachers.

There will be references to other important drama theorists who have proved to be influential in China, particularly in the context of Drama and Citizenship education. In particular, the experiential reading project “Hunter Guolie” will be used to illuminate issues about the relationship between drama and citizenship education in China’s primary schools.

1. A Drama Practitioner’s Story

In the recent years, the development of drama education has taken a big step forward in China. Government interest and support have played the key role of in the development. Many Chinese teachers, including us, are looking for new approaches in their own field. Comparing with Hong Kong and Taiwan, drama education has been introduced and applied in diversity platform at least the 1990s, the development of People’s Republic of China is rapidly growing and remarkable.

Since it drew attention from policymakers in 2001, the

development of Chinese drama education has been relatively slow due to growth constraints in various regions of China. Aesthetic education is at the key essence of China’s education system. In September 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions of the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in School*^[1], which stipulates that aesthetic education must achieve groundbreaking development in schools by 2018. China’s development of drama education is closely related to the implementation of this document. The Ministry of Education had signed memo-

*Corresponding Author:

Jun Xu,

Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai, China;

Email: xujunsta@gmail.com

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randa of understanding (MoU) with different regions on aesthetic education reforms based on the situation of each province and city. According to information published on the official website of China's Ministry of Education, the ministry had signed an MoU with 31 provinces on aesthetic education reforms in schools as of December 14, 2020.

The development of citizenship education in the People's Republic of China reached a critical period in 1982, when the country proposed the inculcation of socialist civic consciousness in its draft constitutional amendment for the first time. The State Education Commission promulgated the *Outline on Secondary School Moral Education* in 1995. It also enacted the *Program for Improving Civic Morality* in 2001^[2]. The government then proposed to "comprehensively improve civic morality" in the Report of the 18th CPC National Congress. These measures mark the gradual clarification and emphasis on the concept of citizenship education in contemporary China^[3].

In this essay, we will describe China's education reforms based on Jun Xu's working experiences as a drama teacher. In 2013, She received a doctor's degree in drama from the Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA). In 2015, She started the 'experiential reading and drama education' project with the support of Shanghai Education Commission (Her project was supported by the Shanghai Drama Alliance for Students). This project was part of the MoU on aesthetic education reforms in schools between the Ministry of Education and Shanghai, which was one of the first cities to sign the MoU. This project gave me a better understanding of Chinese citizenship and drama education. In China, the STA, Yunnan Arts University and Central Academy of Drama set the direction of higher education in drama in 2005, 2011 and 2014, respectively. In addition, such as Beijing Normal University and Nanjing University of the Arts, were interested in the development of drama education. She led efforts to seek approval for the establishment of China's first drama education degree program at the STA in September 2018. The Ministry of Education approved my application in March 2019. As the only representative from mainland China, She attended the 2017 annual meeting of WAAE at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and the 2019 annual meeting of WAAE in Frankfurt, Germany. In 2019, She became a full member of IDEA. These personal experiences also indicate the rapid development and great vitality of Chinese drama education.

As a drama teacher, she is experiencing the outcomes of these reforms in China. She has encountered various challenges and development as experienced by many other Chinese drama teachers. Most of my experiences focus on Shanghai, but developments in Beijing and Hong Kong

will also be discussed.

2. Citizenship and Drama Education in China: Dates and Issues

China's citizenship education emerged around the May Fourth Movement. In 1919, the Association of National Education Committees proposed the compilation of teaching materials for citizenship education. The association drafted the Primary and Secondary Curriculum Standards to include citizenship education at primary and secondary schools in 1922. The Jiangsu Provincial Education Association, China Vocational Education Society and other groups launched a citizenship education movement nationwide in 1924. Two years later, the Jiangsu Provincial Education Association held a citizenship education workshop to formulate a tenet: Develop autonomy, cultivate a spirit of mutual assistance, advocate fair competition, observe public order, fulfill legal obligations, respect public property, pay attention to public health, and promote global empathy. It was agreed that a citizenship education week would be held from May 3 to May 9 every year.

Some scholars believe that the main content of modern civic education is to enhance citizens' cognition of the four aspects of system and law, the unified concept of rights and obligations, the thought of democracy and equality and the code of moral behavior. Some scholars also divide civic education into civic quality education, civic moral education and civic consciousness education "Education for citizens on how to become qualified citizens".

The resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Guidelines for the Construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 12th CPC Central Committee in 1986 pointed out: "cultivate socialist citizens with ideals, morality, culture and discipline." This is the first clearly defined goal of civic education in China.

After that, the Outline of Primary School Moral Education and the Outline of Middle School Moral Education issued by the State Education Commission in 1988 once again made it clear to cultivate socialist "Four Haves" through primary and secondary school moral education. And the Outline of Middle School Education in 1995 clearly stated that "the basic task of middle school moral education is to cultivate all students into law-abiding citizens with social morality and civilized behavior habits who love the socialist motherland."

On October 25, 2001, the Implementation Outline of Citizen Moral Construction promulgated and implemented by the CPC Central Committee clearly put forward the basic citizen moral standard system of "patriotism and

law-abiding, reason and integrity, unity and fraternity, diligent inspection and self-improvement, professionalism and dedication” for the first time, and defined the goal of citizen moral quality education.

As well as the role of government, NGOs in China are also played key role of citizenship education. Since Oxfam Hong Kong introduced the concept of citizenship education in mainland China a few years ago, NGOs have been promoting citizenship education. Preparatory training on the development of citizenship education was conducted in Beijing in April 2004 and in Hong Kong in July the same year. The relevant Chinese NGOs started holding activities to train teachers and young volunteers, in a bid to inculcate citizenship education into their work. During this process, these NGOs encountered difficulties such as unclear understanding of the concept, shortage of professional trainers, and a lack of diverse educational tools. With the assistance of Oxfam Hong Kong, the Friends of Nature, Green Network (Green Network Alliance) and Brooks partnered with the TOT Workshop to address the aforementioned difficulties by providing a platform for exchange of ideas among participants of the citizenship education network. It also developed a team of independent trainers, and resources for local education development that serve as references for conducting relevant education activities at the grassroots level.

According to our recent investigation, as the modern appeal of China’s education, citizenship education shows the new orientation of China’s education: (1) a good modern citizen must be a citizen of noble moral character; (2) the virtue of a good citizen is not only demonstrated in the emotional engagement to his/her country, but also in the rational cognition and political participation of the country; (3) the virtue of a good citizen also has to be proved by action, through which his/her moral sentiment and political wisdom was reflected. Because of the backdrop of globalization, the objectives of China’s citizenship education will focus on six aspects, namely independent personality, democratic consciousness, humanitarian feelings, human rights concept, public rationality and public liability. So far, the main body of citizenship education in China is still the school. On the whole, the public life of schools has citizenship education functions in four dimensions: the function of dialogue and understanding, the function of transformation between the objective and the subjective self, the function of reflection and criticism, and the function of rationality and action. By virtue of the school public life, the dialogue, understanding, criticism and action of citizen education will be constructed more efficiently, and the overall improvement of students’ citizenship quality will be comprehensively enhanced.

Meanwhile, Chinese drama started in 1907, with one strand beginning to explore the role of drama in education in the 1930s. However, the modern drama education system established until 1980’s. In 1984, Sun Jiaxiu’s *Tie about Britain* was published on *Foreign Drama*, which first appeared in Western educational theatre. In the 1990s, Professor Sun Huizhu of Shanghai Theatre Academy mentioned the Brazilian popular dramatist Augusto Boal in his works.

The Chinese government began to place an emphasis on art education in 2001. As stated in the *Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Further Enhancing and Improving Art Education in Primary and Secondary Schools* in 2007, “schools should establish groups for various extra-curricular arts activities such as vocal music, dance, drama and fine arts”^[4]. In September 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued the *Opinions of the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools*^[5], which stipulates that aesthetic education should achieve groundbreaking development in schools by 2018. As the result of the development of Chinese government’s policy, according to information published on the official website, the ministry had signed an MoU with 31 provinces on aesthetic education reforms in schools as of December 14, 2020. The number of aesthetic educators increased from 599,000 in 2015 to 748,000 in 2019. During the last year of the 2010-2020 plan, it also aimed to build an aesthetic education curriculum that links kindergarten, primary and secondary schools as well as universities to gradually improve the teaching model of “artistic aesthetic experience + basic artistic knowledge and skills + art expertise”^[6]. Moreover, the document promotes aesthetic education evaluation reforms, and studies the inclusion of art subjects in the pilot reforms of the high school entrance examination^[6].

The leading higher education institutions play more and more important role in the field of drama education in China, such as The Central Academy of Drama and Shanghai Theatre Academy. Secondly, related curriculums were set up in Beijing Normal University, Yunnan Arts University, Nanjing University of the Arts, East China Normal University in Shanghai, and other institutions.

Drama pedagogy activities also organized by NGOs have emerged since 2007, such as “Friends of Nature”, “Development Education” and “Green Net” in Beijing, “Green Root Power”, “Saturday Theater”, “Edification Education Theater”, “Xiahe Micang” in Shanghai, “Kapok Theatre” in Guangzhou, “Solar Troupe”, “Huadan” of Beijing, and in Guizhou, Inner Mongolia, Yunnan and Sichuan. In 2008, some enterprises promoted drama education as part of their corporate social responsibility

initiatives. These included the Beijing Drama Rainbow Children's Drama School and Beijing Care for the Future Education and Technology Institution. Additionally, some training institutions also became the valuable part of drama education of China in recent years, such as IDEC (an Associate member of IDEA) and Chinese Association for the Promotion of Children Drama Education Committee and other training institutions.

At the invitation of Yuan Xu et al. from mainland China, Taiwanese drama education expert Prof. Xiaohua Zhang completed an education and teaching research project titled "Research and Practice of Educational Drama Innovation Model for Collaborative Cultivation of Key Abilities in Children aged 3-12" in December 2018. The project won the second prize of national teaching achievement.

In summary, drama and citizenship education in China are strongly supported by the government and have shown an increasingly momentum of development. However, because of regional differences, the degree of the development of drama and citizenship education varies significantly different from city to city.

3. Shanghai as an Example

As an important city in China, Shanghai is the birthplace of modern Chinese drama and always takes the lead in the development of drama. In this section, we will introduce some influential figures of drama education in Shanghai.

The ideological trends of these professional experimental dramas influence the recognition of school drama. We will cite the results of a recent survey to explain the distribution and development of drama education in schools across Shanghai. Between 2014 to 2015, a survey suggested that drama pedagogy in primary and secondary schools in Shanghai can be divided into four practical modes: (1) Dramatic teaching methods in liberal arts teaching. (2) Drama club cultivates students' all-round quality. The activities of drama clubs are all held during the participants' spare time. The frequency of activities varies from once to twice a week and lasts 1.5 to 2 hours each time. (3) The creation of a drama curriculum. (4) The preliminary engagement of educational drama. The survey involved teachers, students, division school leaders and parents of six primary and secondary schools and two drama studios in Shanghai^[7].

Supported by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, the experiential reading and drama education project is an integral part of aesthetic education at Shanghai schools. It explores the inheritance of traditional and folk cultures as well as the drama curriculum in primary

schools, including China Art Museum's *The Jade Hairpin*, an experiential reading drama adapted from Kunqu opera, *Hunter Guolie*, an experiential reading drama created in collaboration with Save the Children UK for migrant children in Shanghai, the classroom drama *Hunter Guolie* workshop, and *Traveling with Little Shoes* and *Pangmei's Store*, experiential dramas adapted from books published by the China Children's Press & Publication Group.

The experiential reading and drama education project has been exploring the path of innovative drama education in the context of aesthetic education since 2015. The project is based on experiential learning, which is invented by an American educator David Kolb. "Experiential learning", a children-centered learning approach, which starts from teaching purpose, through defined teaching design to create a scene that is appropriate for the teaching content and raising students' emotional experience. The "Experiential reading" project aims to promote students' active-learning and critical thinking skills, enhance their aesthetic abilities, improve their social skills and establish positive attitude to their study lives.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era, a document that mentions strengthening the integration of aesthetic education with moral education, intellectual education, physical education and labor education. Vigorously carry out interdisciplinary education and extra-curricular out-of-school practical activities with aesthetic education. These documents pointed out the direction of development for drama education in China, and the main purposes and the methods of teaching, research and practice for Chinese drama educator.

The *Hunter Guolie*, which is the part of the "Experiential reading" Project, developed in collaboration with Save the Children China, was originally created for migrant children and their families. These families experienced changes in their hometown before relocating to Shanghai, where their children studied alongside Shanghai-born children. *Hunter Guolie* is a Chinese folk tale that tells the story of the young titular character battling against a tiger in the harsh environment of their hometown. Populations most vulnerable to natural disasters are those who live in areas prone to climate change hazards and whose livelihoods largely depend on the climate due to lack of resources and the ability to cope. *Hunter Guolie* was influenced by Heathcote's teacher in role approach, whereby teachers are involved from a distance while Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed concept is adopted to turn the audience from passive spectators to actors who create real action that changes events in the theater. Thus,

the teacher acts as the village chief who guides all participating children as villagers in the folktale that took place in ancient China among the Chinese Miao people. In various scenes, including the “village meeting” and “Guolie’s choice”, the children go to the polls in their character as villagers and discuss their opinions to determine the most important political activity of the village—how to protect the villagers from natural disasters, whether they need to relocate and how to prevent the recurrence of natural disasters, as well as learn to protect and respect the diversity of folk culture to promote sustainable progress of the civil society. In *Hunter Guolie*, drama serves as a medium for children to understand the relationship between human vulnerability and environmental degradation. As stated in the *Climate Change and Poverty: A Case Study of China*, a report jointly released by the international environmental protection organization Greenpeace and international poverty alleviation organization Oxfam on June 17, 2009, there is a high correlation between poverty-stricken areas and environmentally vulnerable regions in the country, as well as a high degree of consistency in geographical distribution. Climate change causes poverty and recurrent poverty in poor areas of China^[8]. Ninety-five percent of destitute Chinese live in areas vulnerable to natural disasters, an unavoidable issue in the development of the Chinese civil society.

4. Conclusions

In summary, China’s drama and citizenship education have made certain achievements. However, questions have emerged on the heels of this breakthrough. We can see the positive impact of policies on drama and citizenship education in recent years, but many shortcomings remain in terms of implementation.

The concept of citizenship education has gradually been clarified and given emphasis in contemporary China, but it is still common for schools to replace citizenship education with moral education. Citizenship education has yet to improve in basic education and higher education.

Compared with music and art in aesthetic education, drama education is lagging behind. One of the main causes can be attributed to the late introduction of drama education. Another reason is that it is very difficult to design a drama curriculum that links kindergartens, primary and secondary schools as well as universities. Third, some traditional education ideas restrict its development. For example, teachers are still focused on participating in drama competitions. In addition, critical thinking in education is not well-developed yet^[4]. However, the development of creative thinking is encouraged and the integration of dra-

ma with other disciplines is being explored.

Interdisciplinary education which based on the theme of aesthetic education is being emphasized and is being developed in a multidimensional way. The integration of aesthetic education, especially drama pedagogy with multiple disciplines is becoming a new future-oriented option for Chinese teachers. Dialogue is the basis of understanding, after dialogue and understanding, criticism and action will be produced to achieve our modern educational goals. However, obstruction, misunderstanding and antagonism lead to the gap between Chinese drama and citizenship education and social needs. Over all, there is a positive education climate in China with increasing support for public education, in higher education institutions, more and more students have turned their attention to advanced education, and an increasing number of students have chosen to further their studies in Western countries. Various training institutions with overseas backgrounds are becoming more established, and the private-funded education is also promising in the long-term development of education in China.

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