



Identity and Culture: A personal reflection on childhood in China

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Aims: To develop an awareness of the lived experiences of children in China

- No answers ... rather raising questions
- Reflect on some of the changes that have taken place in China and their impact on children
- Highlight some of the challenges to be addressed

Personal perspective developed over 5 years

- Ongoing research using ethno-methodological, interpretivist approach.
- Observations and semi-structured interviews were carried out during 25 visits to 18 different settings. Together with a small scale Case Study. Thematic Analysis was used to interpret data.
- **Key Limitations:** carried out in urban locations: Beijing, Qingdao, Chongqing, Fuling
- Ethical considerations



Changing face of China

Significant changes over recent years - now second largest economy in the world -

'By 2030 it is projected that the Chinese economy will be twice as large as America's and larger than the European Union and America combined, accounting for one third of the global GDP (Jacques, 2014).

Between 2000 - 2006 China's GDP increased by 100%, resulting in a similar increase in people's disposable income and a growing 'middle class'

Inevitably (?), this will redefine existing culture which Clarke (2008) identifies as being fluid and determined by historical and cultural circumstances, reflecting current ideas, customs, and social behaviour.

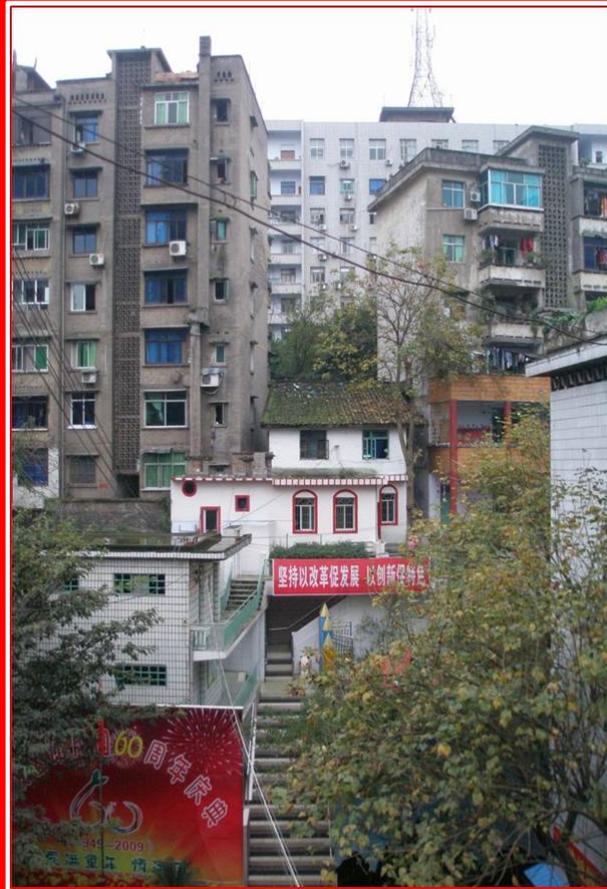
Impact of this on early years provision

- China's support for Human Capital theory (Schultz, 1960); this recognises the role of education in securing a country's future (Cornia, 2011; OECD, 1996) and an ongoing commitment to developing preschool provision.
- Pledge to spending 1.3-1.4% of education budget on kindergarten provision (Zhu, 2009). (Compared to 1.1% UK, 2007).
- This is still a 'drop in the ocean' when considering the size of the country and numbers of children. The resulting marketisation of preschool and the adoption of neo-liberal policy, has seen a shift from public to private early years provision (WGM, 2006; (Kessen, 1976).
- The growing middle class sector, together with the one child policy, has prompted a growing demand for early years provision.

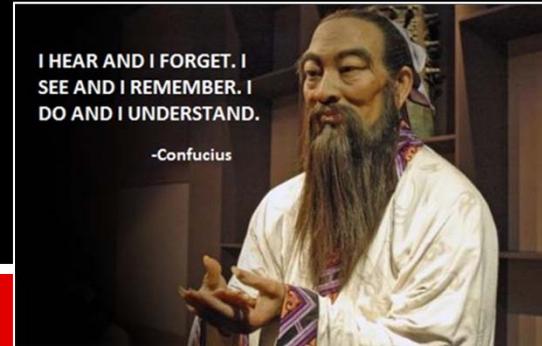
Putting this into context: China (UK)

- School starting age 6 (5) years
- 9 (13) years of compulsory education:
- 341,600 (16,971) primary schools
- 17,300,000 (4,093,710) children
- 150,000,000 (700,000) preschool children
- 3 types of early years provision:
 - nurseries 0-2 (creche/day care centres), government and private kindergartens. Caring for children from 2½ - 3 years; fee-paying (MoE; ONS(MoE; ONS, 2009)

Typical kindergartens in Beijing and Fuling



Confucianism



Confucian ideology is based on three underlying principles:

Education is serious;

Progress is achieved through hard work;

Everyone can succeed if they work hard enough.

The Chinese approach is based on Confucian ideology has strong moral overtones and an emphasis on co-operation, harmony, and respect for family and elders (Pang and Richey 2007; Chan 1999).

Although there is no statutory curriculum, curriculum guidance includes a strong focus on promoting love and respect for parents, elders, teachers and country (MOE, 2001).

Value is placed on education. Emphasis is placed on academic achievement and the learning of skills in order to become a productive member of society (Starr 2012; Tobin et al 1989; 2009; Chan 1999).

Children's early years experiences



Size of the preschools/kindergartens - on average 250 - 1000+ children. Some include boarding facilities. Ratios vary from 1:10 to 1:94 (Wu et al, 2012)

Similar issues to those in the UK regarding the status, and pay, of staff working within the early years. This is particularly exacerbated by the numbers of children '9 in 10 kindergarten teachers unqualified' (China Daily 2011)

New 'middle' class - value placed on Western styles of education. The importance placed on Academic Achievement and where this fits in with appropriate EY pedagogy. '

Some grandmothers will tell me - will you let my children learn more English, more knowledge, numbers ... [otherwise] they will [tell the] mother not to choose our kindergarten' (Interview)

Generally very structured daily routine which includes 2 hours of outdoor exercise/play and 2 hours of sleep for all pre-school children. The recognition in 2010 of English as the official 2nd language, and the desire for bilingual kindergartens, means that many private schools will also incorporate English 'lessons' into the timetable.

The 'elephant in the corner': a contemporary example of social engineering



<http://i.ytimg.com/vi/vLONuA2MNJg/hqdefault.jpg>

- Introduced in 1979

As the first generation are now coming of age ...

... only now are the implications becoming more fully understood



- Narrowed social environment; 4-2-1 syndrome (Little emperors - spoiled and over-indulged with little opportunity to develop social skills) - key role of kindergarten provision. The impact on behaviour.
- *'Many children here have not been to school before - have their Amah/Ayee... some not able to walk properly because of spoiling. Amah does not want child to [speak badly of them] or they lose their job, therefore [she] spoils [the] child (Interview)*
- Future employability - 'no single children' to apply (Cameron et al 2013) as they are seen as more self-centred, less co-operative, risk-averse



Children under pressure?

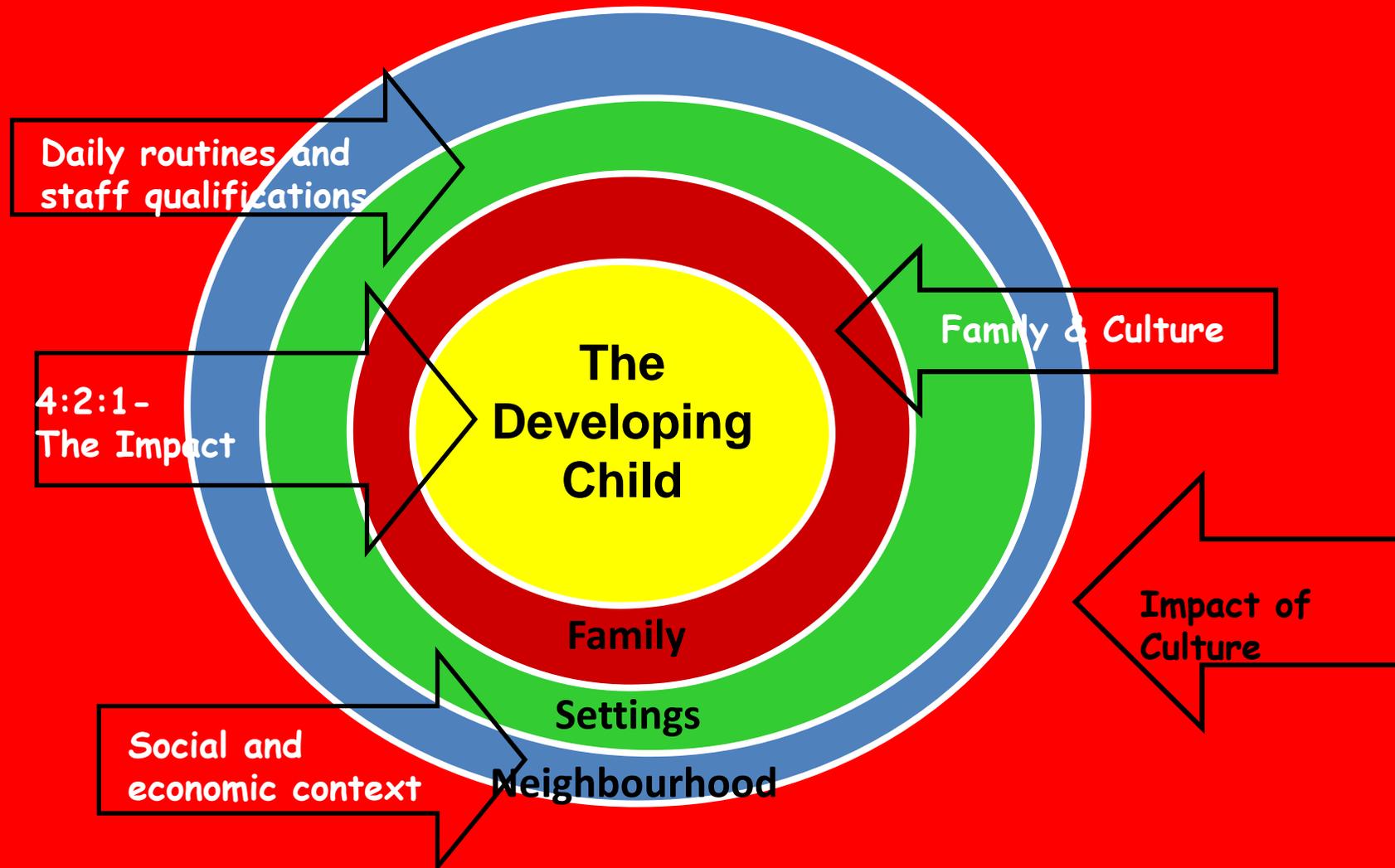
- As an only child parents have high academic expectations with university being a common aspiration (Oppenheimer 1992)
- But the numbers involved mean intense competition for good schools and universities, which only have 20 places for every 1000 students
- Consequently examinations dominate the education system, **including kindergartens** who are pressurised to adopt formal academic curriculum and test-oriented teacher centred approaches (Chan & Chan, 2003)
- *'All children will have to take an examination to get into primary school and the result of this will depend upon whether they get into the school of their choice/or not.'*
(Interview)

Reflective comment from a student following a residential visit



- *'From discussion it was also clear that there was no thought that a child would not succeed and pass exams. [] The amount of pressure on the children to achieve was enormous. If a good mark was not gained, the choice of the next provision would be limited. Following school we were advised that children would go home and probably engage in another 4-6 hours study, depending on their age.'*

Making links between theory, culture and practice systems (Adapted from Bronfenbrenner 1979)



Ticking time bomb ...

- It is suggested that by 2050 one in three Chinese will be over the age of 60, with too few children to contribute to economy and care of an ageing population (Morelle, 2013; Kanedo, 2006)
- 'They say the huge supply of labour that has fed fast-growing cities will peter out and the current glut of workers will hit retiring age in large numbers.
- A smaller generation that follows, made smaller still by the country's one-child policy, will be unable to fill their place to keep growth on track'. (Monk, E. 12th July 2015)
- The more educated that people become the more they are likely to challenge existing practices.

But despite these pressures there is still excitement at exploring new things ...



Thankyou.



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