

Proposal to the Harvard China Fund

Young People and Civic Engagement in a Changing Society

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Abstract

In the current climate of economic change Chinese educators face the challenge of making moral and civic education effective and relevant. The aims of modern Chinese society blend an individual, social and civic agenda for the cultivation of attributes that benefit both the individual and the community, and meet the demands of the competitive economic climate. In partnership with Chinese researchers and drawing on international studies we propose to explore how Chinese school students conceptualize and experience citizenship and civic and ethical decision-making, and what we can learn from this about both cultural factors and developmental processes. This will contribute both to Chinese education and to international scholarship. Using questionnaire measures and in-depth interviews in a rural and an urban setting, the proposed 18 month project will address how young people at two age points (12 and 15 years) conceptualize the good person and the good citizen, their own aspirations towards these, their civic and community actions, how they manage ethical and civic decision-making and social perspective-taking in considering civic and moral conflict situations, and the relationship between these and their level of socio-emotional functioning. These objectives, to understand and provide data on young people's experience and perspectives within specifically Chinese agendas, incorporate method and theory from international studies, and from the work of the coinvestigators.

Selman, Haste and Sang. First, interviews with 96 students and 18 teachers will derive an ethnographically valid picture of the Chinese cultural agenda and how it is experienced. Second, these data will provide input into questionnaire measures which will be administered in schools to 12 and 15 year olds in a rural and an urban setting (N=960). A Chinese Canadian, Zhao Xu, currently a doctoral student conducting research on young people's social and moral development with Selman and Haste, will take a major role in translation, design, training and administration in the project. Data will be collected by Sang's students from East China Normal University, under Zhao's direction. They will collaborate in the analysis of the data with doctoral and masters students at HGSE.