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0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang
Charles Stafford

Excerpt

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PART 1

BACKGROUND

Introduction

This book is about education. However, forgetting that for a moment, imagine a situation in which children already knew most of what they are *taught*, having learnt it while it was *not* being taught to them. In which case, a book about education would become a complicated thing to write. Everything that presented itself as educational would have to be understood as something else again.

Angang is a fishing community, a rural township (*xiang*) in southeastern Taiwan, and a place in which formal education seems of obvious importance, a central concern of daily life. Clamorous student rituals echo off the surrounding hills and down onto the villages, children spend entire days in school-related tasks, and many adults follow with interest events inside the school compounds. At times, the daily and seasonal routines of the community seem as geared to the requirements of learning as they do to fishing, or to the complicated demands of the lunar calendar.

One morning in Angang I saw an elementary school student, the daughter of one of the richest men in a local village, pulling a cardboard box towards the kitchen of her family home. I asked where she was going and, with what seemed to be a look of satisfaction, she replied: *shao keben!*, 'To burn textbooks!' I wanted to know more, but she had no further comment on the subject, silently and unceremoniously placing her books in the stove. This calm act of incineration came soon after the end of the examination period, during which even very young students in Taiwan are exhorted by parents and by themselves to *chenggong*, 'succeed' in their exams. Perhaps she had had enough. Children and adults in Angang say *lu thak lu cheq!*, which roughly means 'The more you study, the more it makes you crazy!'¹ In any case, her textbooks were soon reduced to ashes. This evoked for me, if not for her, the many things in Angang which are burnt (*shao*), including

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang
Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Background*

incense (*xiang*), in order to be commended to gods and other spirits.² These offerings are made in various locations, including temples and domestic altars, but also, from time to time, in kitchen stoves.

As children in Angang could not help but know, Chinese food-related symbolism is highly elaborated. Division of a stove is symbolic of family division, and the kitchen is also the location for worshipping, and burning offerings to, Cau Kun, the Stove God.³ People in Angang do not emphasise this particular cult, but most kitchen walls bear a faded image of the God, and villagers know of his important role in the activities surrounding the lunar New Year. He is said to watch the home throughout the year, at the end of which he is sent to Heaven. Then people may for a time freely do the things they usually do not do, or at least should not be doing, such as gambling. Cau Kun meanwhile presents to the higher authorities an annual report, the harshness of which may be lightened in view of the offerings burnt in his honour, detailing the involvement of the family in good and bad affairs (*haoshi/huaishi*).

When is a child said to have withstood this divine scrutiny, to have been good (*hao*)? According to her parents, the girl who burnt her textbooks in the stove at the end of the school year was good, in part *because* she was a better-than-average student, based on her marks in competitive examinations. On this account she had been sent, for a time and at considerable expense, to study in the capital of the county (*xian*). The schools there are thought better than those in the countryside, and she had also been fortunate, as everyone agreed, to attend evening revision sessions at an expensive supplementary school (*buxiban*). As a twelve-year-old, she thus spent a large part of every day studying and re-studying the textbooks which she would later burn in the home of the Stove God. *Lu thak lu cheq!*

Western students of modern Taiwanese education (partly basing their analyses on readings of these textbooks) have been struck by what is most obviously ‘Chinese’ about it: the teaching of a version of traditional Chinese moral values. Reading the textbooks, it is certainly hard to ignore, for example, the emphasis given to *xiao*, filial obedience, and *zhong*, loyalty/patriotism (see Wilson 1970, Martin 1975, Meyer 1988, Stafford 1992). But it is not clear that this moral emphasis (which, after all, forms only one part of Taiwanese education) is what stands out in the minds of students, teachers and parents in Angang. If it does not, it may be because it is more or less taken for granted (both the morality itself and the idea that moral instruction is a responsibility of schools). As one teacher told me when discussing middle school courses on ethics and morality, these topics are seen as ‘easy to teach and to learn’ (*haoxue, haojiao*). They are *changshi*, an

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang

Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

expression usually translated as ‘common sense’, but which could also be rendered as ‘ordinary knowledge’.⁴

One thing I hope to describe in this book is the extent to which the ‘ordinary’ morality of Taiwanese education is similar to, while not being the same as, the everyday morality of family life in Angang. An important difference between the school-based version and the community-based version is that the former is taught, in a direct and recognisable way, whereas the latter almost seems ‘not to be taught’. The emphasis in schools on moral transmission is in contrast to a seeming lack of concern with moral *transmission* (as opposed to morality) in the family, and even in local religious practice. Children obviously learn from their parents in many ways, but explicit and public moralising is usually the business of schools, and is in some cases actually frowned upon in community life. I will later discuss the possibility that parental instruction takes place in private, but here I should at least mention that in Angang there is little scope for privacy. Although I lived for some months with the family of the girl who burnt her textbooks, I very rarely heard her mother and father directly discuss with her anything which might resemble *daode*, ‘morality’, in the classroom or textbook sense. On the other hand, I regularly heard them demand that she *thak cheq!*, ‘read books!’

If people in Angang are not struck by the common-sensical morality of the educational system, what are they struck by? Certainly, among other things, by the competitiveness of it. Parents, teachers and children in Angang invariably comment on this (perhaps in part because their schools are very low in the Taiwanese hierarchy). With an eye to classroom rivalry, parents invest in the schooling of their children, and demand that they study. The reason commonly given for this is that parents expect, in line with traditional Chinese morality, that they will be ‘respectfully supported’ (*fengyang*) in retirement, and even in the after-life, by their children. It is in the interest of parents for their children to be as successful as possible, and educational achievement is seen as one of the most important and accessible paths to success. For this reason, the pressure driving the system is widely seen to come from parents, and not from the schools or the state; indeed, the supplementary classes attended by children in the cities are mostly illegal.

From the perspective of those involved in it, Taiwanese education is not then primarily concerned with the teaching of traditional Chinese moral values (such as filial obedience) because these are viewed as ‘ordinary knowledge’. It may not, to them, even be primarily concerned with learning, in the strict sense, of *any* kind. By contrast, education *is* often described as if it were a competitive field, or a platform for success. This

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang

Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Background*

concern with school-based rivalry is, in turn, described as a product of the traditional morality of filial obedience. In other words, the content of the moral lessons which are so heavily transmitted in schools almost seems to be made redundant by the pragmatic concerns of a family-based morality which is 'not transmitted' (i.e. not explicitly) in the township. Instead, I will argue, children learn about this morality in other ways, for example through transfers of food and money, through participation in rituals, and so on.

Childhood in Angang is in part a shifting back and forth between these ways of learning. My description is therefore somewhat discontinuous, and it is far removed from an ethnography of education. Instead I will describe the frightening away of souls, textbook stories of girls who become good sons, the partaking of red turtles, teachers who are patterns, the self-mutilation of divining children, the dispensation of red envelopes, rituals of fire-walking and so on. I will suggest that children in Angang, as they encounter representations of childhood, have their attention drawn to certain things, including various forms of identification. At times, certain relationships and social connexions are pointed out, or highlighted, and *that*, inside and outside the school, forms a crucially important part of learning. This process is the theme of my book about Angang.

A Chinese version of education

It seems uncontroversial to say that 'education is important in Angang', or perhaps even throughout East Asia. But what does this statement mean? Education is an English word (from Latin terms meaning 'to raise' and 'to lead forth') and not a universal category. To ask 'What are the features of Chinese *education*?' is thus already to ask a biased question. Even using the Chinese term *jiaoyu*, 'education', which is used in expressions such as *jiaoyubu*, Ministry of Education, may be misleading. This is partly because the complexities of meaning behind the terms are difficult to condense into English.

Consider the following interconnexions between several Chinese expressions related to learning. (Bearing in mind that these are *pinyin* transcriptions of Mandarin pronunciations of Chinese characters.) *Jiaoyu* ('education') implies, as does the Latin root of education, 'raising or nurturing' (e.g., to *yu miao* is to 'cultivate seedlings'). *Jiao* itself means 'to educate', and is also used for 'religion' or 'doctrine' (e.g., in *fojiao*, Buddhism). *Jiao* is also used in one of the expressions for teacher: *jiaoshi*, 'teaching master'. A *shi* is a 'master', but also, in other contexts, an 'example, pattern, or model', an extended definition consistent with Chinese notions of learning (in

which, e.g., students imitate the calligraphy of masters). The most common expression for teacher is *laoshi*, 'venerable master'. More simply, *lao* means 'old and experienced'. By contrast, the expression for student, *xuesheng*, means 'new to learning'; *sheng* can also mean 'to be born, to be uncooked, unripe, savage, untamed'. *Sheng* is also used in one of the respectful forms of address for male teachers (commonly used for men in general), *xian-sheng*, which literally means 'born earlier'.

Of course, Chinese 'words about education' are actually *zi*, characters, and as such are quite different from English words.⁵ For example, the left side of the character *jiao*, 'to educate', at least according to one commentator, is made up of strokes showing the 'influence' (of the master) over the 'disciple' (or 'son'). The right side of the character shows the master bearing a 'rod' (Wieger 1940:109,120). The strokes in *yu* (from *jiaoyu*, 'education') apparently mean 'to feed a child (or an animal), so that it becomes fleshy, strong, fat' (1940:235). The rather dramatic explanation given for the strokes in *xue*, 'to learn', is 'both hands of the master acting from above upon the darkness which covers the mind of the disciple' (1940:109).

These explanations may well be historically inaccurate but they are of the sort commonly used by students. What I am trying to emphasise here, rather than the etymology of specific characters, is a *potential*, and one which helps us to understand how culturally distinct a Chinese notion of 'education' might be. Return for a moment to the girl who burnt her textbooks. Throughout the year she copies various characters time and again, perhaps including the character *jiao*, while practising calligraphy (*shufa*). To what extent, if at all, does she internalise the connexion (regardless of etymology) between the characters for 'education' (*jiao*) and 'filial obedience' (*xiao*)? The left side of *jiao* could easily be mistaken for (and is often written the same as) the character *xiao*. *Xiao* ('filial obedience') very clearly is comprised of the strokes for *lao*, 'old' or 'senior', placed above the strokes for *zi*, 'son' ('descendants', 'seed'); as Karlgren puts it, the character shows 'son beneath old man' (Karlgrén 1923:71).

Might a girl copying out these characters also learn principles seemingly embedded in them? One of these is hierarchy/seniority ('filial obedience' shows the elderly above their descendants; 'education' shows the influence of a master upon a son-disciple). Another principle is the significance attached to transmission (of kinship and doctrine) through men: both the descendants and the disciples are 'seed', i.e. 'sons'. It could be misleading to overstate the significance of these embedded meanings, which might not ever occur to a student. But the potential in the characters is one which does not exist in English, at least not in a remotely similar way. How much of the

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang

Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Background*

meaning of the Chinese character *jiao*, including its historical associations, could be translated by a single English word, 'education'? In our notion of education, how significant is calligraphy? For the tracing of characters is often described as if it were the definitive act of Chinese learning.

Learning as 'part of life'

But the difficulty here is not simply that of cultural variation in notions, or even systems, of education. The larger problem is that 'education', by any definition, is itself a strange way of classifying an area of social activity. This it shares with the category 'religion'.⁶ Where is it to be located? In Taiwan the lives of children and young people seem dominated by universal, mandatory education, which takes place in clearly set off, modern institutions. These institutions seem, in many respects, to be Western in form and inspiration and, in other respects, to be recognisably Chinese. Is education what takes place in these *buildings*? Education (or *jiaoyu*) in Angang might be conceptualised as a classroom interaction, or as the content of lessons, or as the stories in textbooks. But textbooks are also written by people: perhaps one should study the histories of these writers? Or the histories of schoolgirls, or of parents who insist that their daughters should 'read books!' Education is not a discrete category, and someone trying to conceptualise it inevitably has their attention drawn to other difficult to define areas of social life: religion, kinship, economics and so on.

In an ethnographic setting where education was largely informal, and not organised by a Ministry of Education, this loose boundary is perhaps what would be expected. Learning would then be 'part of life'. For some reason it is more difficult to ignore the boundaries of schools once they have been established.⁷ Many sociologists have, of course, questioned the point of simply studying the formal aspects of formal schooling. Instead they have framed their questions 'about education' very broadly, and have tried to understand Western schooling in a more general social and historical context (e.g., Durkheim 1972:203–18, Bernstein 1975, Willis 1977, Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).⁸

Anthropologists have, for their part, questioned the very distinction between formal (e.g. school-based) and informal learning, and questioned the way in which we apply the distinction. For instance, Akinnaso (1992) points out that learning in non-literate societies is at times quite formal, and argues that it is therefore mistaken to automatically associate the development of schools with the advent of literacy. Akinnaso thus provides examples of non-literate school-like institutions as evidence against the view that learning in non-literate societies is always informal, simply part of

life. Borofsky (1987), in turn, describes Pukapukan learning as it takes place in various contexts, each with its own characteristics and levels of formality. He emphasises the importance of these contexts for the ways in which Pukapukan knowledge is not only passed on, but also approved and disapproved of, and thus made.⁹

So, while sociologists have said that formal Western education must be seen beyond the boundaries of schools, anthropologists have questioned the supposed unboundedness and informality of non-Western learning. This examination of the contrast between types of education is part of a much broader question: what are the implications of transmitting *knowledge* in an increasingly fixed, formalised, organised or institutionalised way? This is, in fact, a series of questions, which anthropologists have addressed from many perspectives. (For instance, in debates on the fixity of ritual, the formalisation of medical knowledge, the introduction of literacy, etc.)

Bourdieu has discussed the rise of educational institutions within the context of these broader questions. His notion of habitus includes a model of learning without institutions: if people have certain ‘dispositions’ (e.g., to react or behave in particular ways) it is because they have been *inculcated* with these dispositions. The word inculcation comes from a Latin term meaning ‘to tread’, and Bourdieu focuses especially on informal, pervasive, ‘physical’, unconscious, and non-verbal transmissions of knowledge. (I have already implied that children in Angang sometimes learn outside school in this way.) Bourdieu notes the immanence of this style of education in traditional societies, its location virtually everywhere and at all times, and contrasts this with formalised instruction:

So long as the work of education is not clearly institutionalized as a specific, autonomous practice, and it is a whole group and a whole symbolically structured environment, without specialized agents or specific moments, which exerts an anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action, the essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. (1977:87)

One of the implications of this passage may *seem* to be that traditional informal education (through an ‘anonymous, pervasive pedagogic action’) is ultimately *replaced* by modern formal education (through ‘specialised agents’ and ‘specific moments’). However, the contrast between these types of learning in a single location is, of course, one that anthropologists have often described, especially in colonial settings (and one that Bourdieu himself draws out, see below). Firth (1970), for example, stressed the difference between traditional Tikopian education and that brought by

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang

Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Background*

Europeans. The former was continuous (temporally and socially), it was 'an activity of kinsfolk', and it was practical in that it arose 'from actual situations in daily life'. By contrast, European-style education was periodic, segregated from village life, taught by strangers, and not related to practical concerns (1970:75–6).¹⁰ A somewhat similar contrast might be drawn between school and non-school learning in Angang.

But what is the *significance* of such a contrast? The style of transmission (e.g., the existence or expansion of formal schooling) might (or might not) influence how and what people learn, but also the social relations within which they live. That is, it might have both cognitive and political implications (cf. Bloch 1989:106–36). Bourdieu, for instance, describes the advent of formal education in traditional societies as introducing new forms of learning, but also as part of a broader shift in relations of power (1977:183–97). The actual impact of formal education in specific historical circumstances is a matter for analysis. For example, it has at times been externally imposed and specifically directed against local traditions with dramatic consequences (e.g., see Godelier 1986:191–224). Eickelman has argued (from a political perspective) that 'mass higher education in the Arab and Muslim worlds is reshaping conceptions of self, religion, nation and politics' (1992:643). But Bloch has argued (from a cognitive perspective) that in one Zafimaniry village 'neither writing nor schooling have made any significant difference to the basic organising principles governing the evaluation of knowledge' (Bloch 1993:106).

Cognition, representation and learning

In *Reproduction*, Bourdieu & Passeron (1990:1–68) have outlined two ways of transmitting knowledge.¹¹ The first is through 'the unconscious inculcation of principles'; the second is through the organised transmission of 'articulated and even formalized principles (explicit pedagogy)' (1990:46–7). The discussion which follows makes clear that the two modes of transmission (through 'unconscious inculcation' and through 'explicit pedagogy') overlap and that both may co-exist in one place and time. Because learning is irreversible, the unconscious development of a 'primary habitus' in childhood will shape the understanding of everything else that follows, including 'explicit pedagogy'. It is 'the basis for the formation of any other habitus' (1990:42).

Schools are one way of organising the transmission of knowledge, and there are other imaginable ways. The nature of the transmission (e.g., skilful, inept, written, unwritten, explicit, unconscious) might influence what is learnt, as might the way in which the knowledge itself is systema-

Cambridge University Press

0521026563 - The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang
Charles Stafford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

tised. But learning does not stop and start simply because people set about *organising* the transmission of knowledge. If learning is seen through children, the boundary between school and non-school becomes confused. After all, the question of what people *learn* is, or at least should be, partly distinct from the question of what they are *taught* (Boyer 1993:34). From this perspective, children in Angang could be said to bring 'life' (i.e., what they have learnt) into the school, while outside they continue to learn in informal and somewhat formal ways.

However, as Bloch (1989) has noted, it is also clearly inadequate to say that people learn by simply absorbing whatever knowledge is there (be it formally transmitted or otherwise). Cognitive anthropologists have shown, among other things, that human learning is fundamentally interactive (i.e., not passive), and they have argued that most anthropological accounts of how people acquire concepts are psychologically implausible (Lave 1988, Lave & Wenger 1991, Toren 1990, Bloch 1991, Boyer 1993). How people actually *learn* (as opposed to how societies organise learning) is scarcely understood by anthropologists.

This book does not address questions of cognition, as such, because I do not have the material necessary for such an analysis. As Boyer points out in his discussion of cognition and religious symbolism, material to help us understand cognitive frameworks 'may not be within the range of ordinary anthropological fieldwork, and may require quasi-experimental methods' (Boyer 1993:33; see also Toren 1990, 1993). But I also do not wish to imply that children in Angang simply learn ready-made identities as they internalise cultural patterns. Instead, I want to outline certain things to which their attention *may* be drawn during childhood, and about which they produce *their own* representations. In order to do this I will borrow two ideas from cognitive anthropology, without claiming to have studied cognition, as such.

The first idea – 'drawing attention to' – is partly inspired by Sperber and Wilson (1986), and especially by their discussion of the 'cognitive environments' in which people think.¹² They attach particular importance to ostension, i.e. behaviour which shows (or says) something to someone (1986:38–54, *passim*). As their discussion makes clear, ostensive behaviour is a central feature of human communication and cognition. Sperber and Wilson focus primarily on spontaneous, intentional communication and behaviour (e.g., utterances and conversations between individuals) rather than on social contexts of the kind described in this book (e.g., participation in rituals). Although some form of ostension is undoubtedly present in all of these settings, it is worth stressing at the outset the considerable difference