

CHINESE EXPERIENCE OF WALDORF SCHOOL

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Waldorf school is an example of harmonious education

The article deals with the activities of Waldorf schools in China. The features of the educational process, curricular design, students' upbringing, parents' participation, teacher's role and professional training are revealed. Challenges and coping strategies are under consideration too.

Introduction. The state policy of China is aimed at further improving the education system. More and more parents and students are showing interest in changing the nature of school's activities, in having the non-traditional forms of education, that are characterized by the construction of individual training routes, personal creative potential development.

Modern times are characterized by wide access to the theory and practice of foreign progressive thought where the heritage of Waldorf pedagogy occupies a specific place. Rudolf Steiner laid the foundations of a holistic and original theory, which was embodied in the creation of Waldorf schools that have spread all over the world, including China. However, it is important to determine their place in the system of Chinese alternative education, to analyze the experience of such schools, to identify challenges and find appropriate coping strategies.

Main part. Waldorf education, founded by Rudolf Steiner in 1919, was introduced to China in 2004 with the establishment of the first Waldorf school in Chengdu. Since then, it has gained significant traction, particularly among middle-class families seeking for an alternative way to a highly competitive and exam-oriented mainstream education system. Since its introduction, Waldorf education has seen remarkable growth in China. By 2017 in China over 60 Waldorf schools and more than 500 kindergartens have been established, reflecting a growing interest in this educational approach. This rapid expansion is not only a testament to the adaptability of Waldorf

education but also to its alignment with traditional Chinese values and modern educational needs. The first Waldorf school in China was initiated by parents and educators were inspired by Steiner's principles, aiming to create a learning environment that nurtures the holistic development of children.

Waldorf schools in China typically operate as non-profit organizations, the core of its governance follows Rudolf Steiner's "three-way social order theory" (cultural freedom, political equality, economic mutual assistance), emphasizing the organic synergy of spirit, rights and economy, with a governance structure that includes a board of directors, teachers, and parent representatives [1]. This collective decision-making model reflects the Waldorf principle of fostering a strong sense of community. The board of directors is responsible for strategic planning, financial management, and ensuring the school's compliance with regulatory requirements. Teachers play a central role in curriculum development and daily educational activities, while parent representatives contribute to school management through participation in decision-making processes and community-building initiatives. For example, in Chengdu Sunshine Waldorf School, "teachers discuss class problems in regular meetings every Thursday, and learn anthroposophy theory collectively on Friday". The school clearly states the principle of "no dividend, no shares", the income is used for operation and development, and the financial report is disclosed to the board, teachers and parents on a regular basis. The Chengdu Waldorf School converted an abandoned farm into a campus, maintained its operations through tuition fees

and social donations, and publicized the flow of funds. The school also integrates traditional Chinese culture into its curriculum, such as celebrating Chinese festivals and teaching calligraphy. Regarding teacher qualifications, the school in Shandong has established a “Teacher Development Fund” to support teachers without national certification in obtaining their qualifications, while continuing to offer Anthroposophy training.

The core principles of Waldorf education emphasize the development of the whole child-body, soul, and spirit. This holistic approach includes a strong focus on artistic expression, nature-based learning, and the importance of moral education. Waldorf schools aim to create an environment where children can develop at their own pace, guided by their natural curiosity and creativity. The curriculum is designed to support the developmental stages of children, ensuring that academic learning is balanced with artistic and practical activities. The core principles of Waldorf education align with several traditional Chinese educational values [2].

Steiner’s theory of child development, which divides childhood into three seven-year stages, has also been influential in shaping the Waldorf curriculum in China. The first stage (0–7 years) focuses on physical development and sensory exploration, the second stage (7–14 years) emphasizes emotional and imaginative growth, and the third stage (14–21 years) encourages intellectual and critical thinking skills. This developmental approach aligns with the Chinese educational tradition of respecting the natural growth of children, rather than pushing them into early academic achievement.

The curriculum in Waldorf schools in China is designed to align with the developmental stages of children, focusing on hands-on learning, artistic activities, and nature-based education. Waldorf education underlines a holistic approach that integrates cultural, social and environmental awareness into the curriculum. As Jonathan M. Code (2020) highlights, this approach is particularly relevant in fostering global citizenship. In China, Waldorf schools have adapted this global curriculum to reflect local cultural values and educational needs. For instance, traditional Chinese festivals, calligraphy, and martial arts are integrated into the curriculum, enriching the educational experience and bridging the gap between Western educational practices and Chinese cultural context. This cultural integration is a key innovation that has contributed to the success and acceptance of Waldorf education in China.

In the Waldorf education system, there are two principles known as the “golden rules” of Waldorf education: “art” and “experience”. The artistic aspect of Waldorf education in China is reflected in two

ways: learning through artistic means and learning the content of art. The so-called artistic means require teachers to fully mobilize artistic methods in teaching. At the same time, each educational theme in Waldorf strives to integrate the content of nature, humanities, and art. This construction process is open and creative. Subjects such as math, science, and language arts are integrated with music, painting and crafts to create a balanced and holistic learning experience. For example, students may be engaged in gardening, woodworking or traditional Chinese arts as part of their curriculum.

Waldorf schools in China also employ innovative teaching methods, such as project-based training, which encourage students to explore and discover knowledge through direct experience. Assessment in Waldorf schools is a multifaceted process that goes beyond traditional standardized testing. Waldorf education employs a variety of assessment methods, including observation, student portfolios and narrative reports. These methods provide a more comprehensive view of a child’s progress and development, focusing on the whole child rather than just academic achievement.

One of the unique aspects of the Waldorf curriculum is its emphasis on rhythm and routine. Each day is structured around a predictable rhythm that includes periods of focused academic work, artistic activities and outdoor play. This rhythm helps children feel secure and allows them to fully engage in their learning. For example, a typical day in a Waldorf school may begin with a morning circle, where students sing songs, recite poems and participate in movement exercises. This is followed by a key lesson, which focuses on a particular subject such as math or history. The key lesson is often taught in a block format, where the same subject is studied intensively for several weeks before moving on to a new topic [3].

A typical example of interdisciplinary and culturally adapted practice can be seen in the “Rice Course” at a Waldorf primary school in Chengdu. This comprehensive program is divided into four stages: stage 1 is science, students plant rice and record its growth cycle and ecological data. At the second stage they write observation diaries and adapt the ancient poem “Mín Nóng” into modern poetry. At the stage 3 students create straw weaving art with rice stalks and learn traditional woodworking skills for agricultural tools. At stage 4 they hold a “Harvest Festival”, selling organic rice to parents and donating part of the proceeds. This course integrates science, language arts, art, and community engagement, reflecting a holistic approach to education that connects students with nature, culture, and society.

Chinese Waldorf schools have established a student growth model centered on “nature

immersion” and “community symbiosis” through systematic daily activities and in-depth community participation. In daily practice, students draw nourishment for growth from farming and artistic creation. For example, kindergarten children participate in vegetable planting and harvesting at the school farm once a week, using the harvested crops for lunch cooking. They also create “nature journals”, recording the plant growth cycle with watercolors to integrate scientific observation with artistic expression. Morning circle activities begin with localized poetry recitation and rhythmic dances. For instance, the poem “Jiān Jiā” from the Book of Songs is adapted into a collective physical movement to cultivate a sense of rhythm and teamwork.

Community co-building is a tripartite collaborative network involving families, schools, and communities. Waldorf schools regard the community as an extension of the educational ecosystem, forming a collaborative network of “parents-teachers-students-society”. They utilize an in-depth parent participation mechanism to allow parents to shape the campus environment through volunteer labor. At a Waldorf kindergarten in Beijing, parents built outdoor play facilities using discarded tires and planted local herbs to create a “herb garden” where students observe the symbiotic relationship between insects and plants. Monthly “parent workshops” invite parents with diverse professional backgrounds to share their expertise. For example, parents from traditional Chinese medicine families teach herb planting, architect parents guide the construction of “eco-cabin” models, and intangible cultural heritage inheritors offer paper-cutting and tie-dye courses.

Intergenerational connection projects are also a part of social service and ecological actions. Middle school students visit nursing homes every semester, not only performing traditional Chinese music such as the guzheng piece “High Mountains and Flowing Water”, but also conducting oral history interviews to record the life stories of the elderly, compiling them into booklets and organizing community exhibitions. Sustainable practices are also evident, such as the “zero-waste campus” initiative launched by a Waldorf school in Shanghai. Student teams designed a closed-loop system of “food waste composting-organic farming-canteen catering”, reducing waste by 70% and sharing their experience with surrounding communities.

Another feature of Chinese Waldorf schools is collaboration and emotional management. Teacher logs show that in 85% of group activities, such as drama rehearsals and community sales, students can negotiate roles independently and resolve conflicts, compared to a 90% teacher intervention

rate in traditional schools. Rooted in local culture: 80% of Waldorf students can skillfully demonstrate the customs of the 24 solar terms, such as making green rice balls during the Qingming Festival or measuring the sun’s shadow during the Winter Solstice, and participate in intangible cultural heritage protection projects, such as designing patterns for Nanjing Yunjin brocade, compared to a 50% penetration rate in traditional schools.

A typical case is the “Rice Community” project in Chengdu, a chain education initiative co-designed by parents, teachers and students throughout the year. In the spring, younger students plant rice and record germination rates and growth curves, demonstrating the integration of mathematics and science. In summer, middle-grade students adapt rice culture into a shadow puppet play called “The Legend of the Rice God”, which is performed in the community, demonstrating the integration of language arts and art. At the end, older students design a “rice economy” simulation system, raising 30,000 yuan through the sale of organic rice to fund the construction of a library corner for a primary school in the mountains of Yunnan, demonstrating the integration of social and business practices.

These case studies highlight the importance of cultural adaptation, community involvement, and innovative teaching methods in the success of Waldorf schools in China. They also demonstrate the challenges of operating within a highly regulated educational system and the need for creative solutions to ensure sustainability. By integrating Chinese cultural elements and fostering strong community partnerships, Waldorf schools in China can better meet the needs of local families while maintaining the core principles of Waldorf education.

In the Waldorf education system, parents are not only supporters but also co-builders of school governance. Through parent committees, parents directly participate in school decision-making. For example, at the Chengdu Waldorf School, regular meetings are held where parents propose suggestions on curriculum localization and financial transparency, forming a democratic model of shared management between home and school. Parents also contribute through resource support, such as fundraising and campus renovation and volunteer services, like guiding handicraft classes and farming activities. This deep integration into school operations makes them a driving force for the school’s development. This role transcends the traditional parent-school relationship, granting parents substantial voice in management.

The collaboration between family and school runs through the entire educational process. In curriculum development, parents assist in designing “career experience workshops” based on their professional backgrounds or collect

local stories to integrate into history teaching. During festivals, parents and teachers jointly plan ceremonies such as the Winter Solstice Lantern Festival, reinforcing cultural identity through activities like lantern making and drama arrangement. For individual student issues, home and school hold “case conferences” together, such as creating a “daily rhythm chart” to address inattention, achieving two-way linkage in educational intervention. These activities transform the family into an extended field of education, achieving unity of concept and action.

The parent participation mechanism in Waldorf schools has built a tripartite educational community of “home-school-community”. Parents have shifted from being passive cooperators to active creators, promoting education from a closed system to an open ecosystem through role empowerment, joint activity creation, and conceptual resonance. This mechanism not only enhances educational effectiveness but also gives birth to a subcultural community that values nature, art and collaboration, providing a replicable model for social educational innovation [4].

Parental involvement is considered to be a cornerstone of Waldorf education in China. Schools organize regular parent-teacher meetings, workshops and community events to foster collaboration between parents and educators. Parents are encouraged to engage in workshops and seminars to better understand the Waldorf philosophy and support their children’s learning at home. For example, parents might participate in the creation of a daily rhythm at home that includes time for play, rest and family meals, aligning with the principles of Waldorf education. They may also limit screen time and encourage creative activities such as drawing, painting and storytelling. By integrating Waldorf principles into their home life, parents can reinforce the values and practices that their children are learning at school, creating a cohesive educational experience. This high level of involvement helps create a strong sense of community and support for the school. Parents are also encouraged to participate in workshops and seminars to better understand the Waldorf philosophy and how they can support their children’s learning at home. This collaborative approach between parents and teachers helps create a supportive and nurturing environment for children. In addition to participating

in school activities, parents are also encouraged to incorporate Waldorf principles into their home life. For example, they may create a daily rhythm that includes time for play, rest and family meals. By aligning their home environment with the principles of Waldorf education, parents can help reinforce the values and practices that their children are learning at school.

Conclusion. Waldorf education has the potential to make a significant impact on Chinese society, by emphasizing holistic development and love for learning. Waldorf schools can help cultivate well-rounded individuals who are not just academically proficient but also emotionally and socially competent. This approach aligns with the broader goals of education in China, which increasingly recognizes the importance of developing the whole child. As Waldorf education continues to grow in China, it will be important to monitor its impact on students, families and wide public to understand in what way this alternative educational model can contribute to the development of a more balanced and harmonious society.

Literature

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