

Children's participation rights in Chinese early childhood education: a critical investigation of policy and research

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I dedicate this chapter to my mother who passed away in China March 2018 after brave fight against her illness.

Abstract

China has made great efforts to improve quality of early childhood provisions by addressing child-centredness in early childhood pedagogy since 1992 when China ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in the aftermath of China's Reform and Opening-Up policy. Children's rights have been addressed as part of the Chinese government efforts especially starting with the China Children Development Plan in the 1990s. The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) borne out of the social, economic and political developments guides educational reform and development in contemporary China. The Learning and Development Guidelines for Children of 3-6 Years Old (Ministry of Education 2012) alongside the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (Ministry of Education 2001) are the current statutory framework for early childhood settings in China. Through documentary analysis of key policy documents and existing research in relation to Chinese early childhood education in the last three decades, this chapter shows implicitness in addressing children's participation rights in policy documents alongside evidence from research that young children's participation takes place in schools, families, communities and society but with worrying aspects. Pressure from school learning restricts scope and depth of children's participation outside the school contexts whilst the urban-rural divide as a long-term issue needs to be tackled in order to widen children's participation in China.

Introduction

Children's participation has been one of the most debated and examined aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Lansdown 2010). According to the UNCRC, children's rights are broadly defined as three types: Survival and development rights, which are related to the resources, skills and contributions necessary for the survival and full development of the child; protection rights are concerned with protection from all forms of child abuse, neglect, exploitation and cruelty; and participation rights refer to that children are entitled to the freedom to express opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their lives (United Nations 1989). Research related to children's participation are often based on the UNCRC article 12 and article 13:

Article 12: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given the due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

Article 13: 'The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.'

Interestingly to note that the UNCRC put state governments' responsibilities to facilitate children's participation rights alongside recognition of child maturity followed by an explanation of what this right means. Accordingly, Flekkoy and Kaufman (1997) acknowledges that the competency of children go hand in hand with children's experiences as well as maturation in the context of realization of children's rights and participation rights in particular. The UNCRC predicts that it is not easy to fulfil children's rights without holding the governments to account. As Lansdown (2010) mentions, children's rights to participation will only remain rhetoric unless the governments make real efforts to introduce the necessary legislation, policy and practice. Hart (2011) points out other important issues such as power relations and children's struggle for equal rights toward the realization of children's participation rights. And this is especially so for disadvantaged children in the process to 'struggle against discrimination and repression and fight for their rights in solidarity with others' (Hart 2011: 84). When children's viewpoints are seriously listened to and

taken into account in decision making the power balance tips towards the child (Carr et al 2005).

The discourse of 'child participation' itself has invited debates among academics and researchers. Hill et al. (2004) argue that participation means children's direct involvement in decision-making about matters that affect their lives, whether individually or collectively, at 'the initiative of decision-makers or of children and their representatives' (Hill et al 2004: 83). Lansdown (2010) classifies children's participation into three types: consultative participation, in which adults seek children's views to build understanding of children's lives and experience; collaborative participation, which provides a greater extent of partnership between adults and children with opportunity for children's active engagement; and child-led participation when children are afforded the space and opportunity to 'identify issues of concern, initiate activities and advocate for themselves' (2010: 20). These three levels are operated in non-linear or hierarchy fashion, on the contrary, each of the three levels is appropriate in different contexts. The Childwatch International Research Network (2006) emphasizes the importance of understanding child participation in a broader sense within the social contexts and interrogating the power structures within systems created to realize child participation. Lansdown (2010) continues to argue that in order to research children's participation rights fully there is a great need to identify indicators to measure participation and then measure the extent, quality and impact of the actual participation children are engaged with.

Jones (2010) draws our attention to children's perspectives on child rights in the context of the UNICEF (2009): 'As the holders of the rights stipulated in the Convention, it is imperative that children know and understand their rights and are empowered to claim them' (cited in Jones 2010: 44). Raby (2014: 77) critically investigates the children's participation initiatives from a neoliberal economic and political context which 'prioritises middle class, western individualism and ultimately fosters children's deeper subjugation through self-governance'. Fitzgerald et al. (2010) argue that a dialogical approach to child participation urges researchers and practitioners to recognize the complex interplay between agency and power and hold the voice and status of children at the forefront. Similarly, the United Nations (2009: 26) consider effective and meaningful participation as 'ongoing processes' in which children are heard and participate must be 'transparent and informative, voluntary,

respectful and relevant, child-friendly, inclusive, supported by training, safe and sensitive to risk, accountable’.

China as a country which ratified the UNCRC in 1992 has made great efforts to improve quality of early childhood provisions by addressing child-centredness in early childhood pedagogy in the aftermath of China’s Reform and Opening-Up policy. Children’s rights have been addressed as part of the Chinese government efforts especially starting with the China Children Development Plan in the 1990s. This chapter adopts documentary analysis as methodological approach (Bowen 2009 & O’Leary 2014) and aims to provide a critical account of young children’s participation rights in Chinese contexts by analyzing key policy documents and existing research published since the 1990s. I am aware of challenges involved in selecting relevant sources and critically analyzing them and have decided that the main type of documents for the study are written texts available from relevant databases in traditional print form or electronic form such as policies, academic research, official reports in China and international contexts where relevant.

The following sections will investigate the following questions in order to enable readers to reflect on how children are positioned and how childhood is constructed in Chinese society through the focus of young children’s participation rights:

- How are young children’s participation rights reflected in Chinese key policy documents?
- In what way does children’s participation intersect with social, cultural, economic and political developments in contemporary China?
- What are the remaining challenges for China to widen children’s participation?

Children’s participation rights in Chinese context: a policy perspective

Introduction

This section analyzes some key policy documents with relevance to children’s rights since the 1990s. China’s Reform and Opening Up phase was led by President Deng Xiaoping and has continued through to current China led by President Xi Jinping. With Deng Xiaoping’s slogan in 1983 ‘Education must face modernisation, face the world, and face the future’ as a result of the Party’s agenda focus on socialist construction

(People 2017), the main focus of education policy shifted from the politicalised and moral dimensions during the Chairman Mao era to nurturing talents and promoting science in order to keep in pace with the Western world and Japan in particular (Vickers and Zeng 2017). The Law on Compulsory Education enacted in 1986 is an important milestone for Chinese education and school aged children are entitled to receive nine years of compulsory schooling whilst early childhood education covering 3 to 6 years of age in China is not part of compulsory education. Triggered by the Tian An Men Square Student Movement of 1989, educational policies have put more emphases on serving socialist construction, economic development and the needs of society since the 1990s (Liu 1999). The post-1997 has seen great developments in education from early childhood to higher education in terms of provisions and management reform, highlighting more the function of education as key to economic success.

The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (Ministry of Education 2010) is another milestone in the development of Chinese educational policy. As stated in the Plan, 'Education is the cornerstone of our national development and social progress. It is the fundamental way to improve the overall quality of our population and promote the all-round development of the people. Education carries the hope of hundreds of millions of Chinese families for a better life' (MoE 2010). The Plan clearly identifies three priorities: prioritize education in economic and social development planning, prioritize education funding in fiscal expenditure, and prioritize education and human resources in public resource allocation. The Plan pledges a substantial increase in education funding to raise the proportion of national fiscal education expenditure to 4% of the GDP by 2012 and to ensure the steady growth of this proportion in the future (MoE 2010).

Under the influence of the China Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan, early childhood education was addressed as key towards educational reform and development (Yuan 2010; Zhou 2011). Three phases of Early Childhood Education 3-year plans between 2010-2020 respectively set up goals in order to improve quality of kindergarten education, regulating kindergarten management, prevention of schoolification, and aiming for 85% enrolment of preschool children of 3-6 years of age by 2020 from 77.4% enrolment in 2017 across

China (Ministry of Education 2017). Early childhood education is funded both from public and private sector whilst there is a great need for the central government to increase the level of investment (Zhou 2011). According to Zhu (2015), contemporary early childhood education is becoming more diverse in its forms, funding sources and educational approaches in line with the increasingly open and diversified society influenced by the Chinese culture, socio-economic changes, political system and Western cultures.

Under the influence of the UNCRC, China published relevant policies related to children's survival, protection and development such as China Law on Protecting Children and Young People (1991), China Children Development Plans since the 1990s, China Law on Mother and Infant Health (1994), China's Education Law (1995), and On Prohibiting Children Workers (2002) etc. For analysis purpose in relation to children's participation rights in the context of early childhood education in China, three key relevant policy documents are to be focused on: China Children Development Plan in the 1990s (The State Council 1992), the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (MoE 2001), and the Learning and Development Guidelines for Children of 3-6 Years Old (MoE 2012).

China Children Development Plan in the 1990s

Influenced by the UNCRC, the China Children Development Plan in the 1990s was published aiming to reduce infant mortality, improve women pregnancy health, improve children's life quality and education experience, and provide more support for families (The State Council 1992) triggered by the World Children Affair Summit. The State Council required all levels of provincial and local governments to implement the Plan according to local situations. As stated in the Plan, 'children are the masters of the 21st century, children's survival, protection and development are base for improvement of population civilization and premise for human future development.' Thus, the Party and Government have made great efforts to promote children's survival, protection and development by urging the whole society to 'protect children, educate children, be role model for children, and work for children' (The State Council 1992).

The Plan set up objectives for improving children's living conditions, educational opportunities and services, and legal process to protect children's entitled rights. For

example, the Plan aimed for a 30% decrease of infant mortality, a 50% decrease of malnutrition for children under five. The Plan recognized the importance of after-school activities for children by urging all provinces, cities and 90% of the counties should set up more than one type of after-school education or activity centres for children. The Plan also aimed to address equity issues around minority ethnic groups, children with disabilities and children from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Education was seen as key to socialist modernization and the importance of early childhood education was highlighted in the Plan. The Plan recognized the need to 'proactively develop early childhood education' by inviting different stakeholders and using various means to raise funding. The Plan set up aim for 70% enrolment of city children 3-6 years old in kindergartens and 60% of children in countryside. The Plan addresses the importance of women's role in educating children and the important part that community and families play in promoting children's development. The Plan also urged relevant parties to take responsibilities to achieve objectives with awareness of localities. The Plan also addressed the important role of international collaboration and exchange activities in helping to implement the Plan.

It is interesting to note that there was very little explicit mentioning of children's rights in the Plan although the Plan was borne out of the context of the UNCRC. It clearly shows though that the Plan is more related to children's survival and development rights rather than children's participation rights. What I can relate the Plan to children's participation rights is when the Plan addressed the importance of opportunities for children to participate apart from school contexts, such as physical activities, cultural events, entertainment and after-school educational activities. However, it is not clear though the role of children in the process of participating such as after-school activities. In addition, these questions remain rather unclear: Are children encouraged to take part according to their own interests and likes? What is the relationship between children and adults involved in decision making such as these?

The Kindergarten Education Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2001)

In the context of China Education Law (1995) and the Kindergarten Work Guidelines (1996), the Kindergarten Education Guidelines was published by Ministry of

Education in 2001. The Kindergarten Education Guidelines (MoE 2001) still acts as the current statutory framework for kindergartens across China. The Guidelines are divided into four main sections including principles, education content and requirements, implementation, and evaluation. The principles clearly address the importance of happy childhood alongside positive learning experience for children and respecting children's personalities, rights and dispositions. The guidelines see kindergarten education as an important part of elementary education for children and as foundation for schooling and life-long learning. At the same time, 'play as basic activity' and opportunities for children to develop their individuality and personality in kindergartens are addressed (MoE 2001). The Guidelines recognized the holistic emergent nature of young children's learning and explained content and requirements in terms of how to support children's five learning areas including health, language, social development, science and arts.

It is interesting to note that 'respecting children's rights' is addressed in the section of overall principles but 'children's rights' is not explicitly mentioned in the remaining parts of the guidelines. However, there are areas related to children's participation rights clearly stated in the guidelines. For example, opportunities are provided for children to express themselves and kindergarten teachers offer space and time to listen to children too via supporting children's learning and development such as language, social development and arts (MoE 2001). Regarding health development, the Guidelines established a balanced view in terms of kindergarten teachers' role in protecting children and caring responsibility whilst respecting children's own needs of independence and autonomy to avoid over-protection of children. The Guidelines address the importance of providing various activities for children's active participation. For instance, there are clear mentioning of 'creating free and loose environment, encourage and support children to communicate with adults, peers and others to experience fun of communicating via language' whilst children are encouraged to express themselves clearly and promote language development (MoE 2001: p.4).

Similarly, regarding social development, children are encouraged to participate in collective activities and experience fun of being together with teachers and peers. This aims to help children to develop right attitudes towards self and others and learn basic social skills including self-regulation and respecting others. Very importantly,

the Guidelines recommend that it is important to provide free opportunities to support children to choose, plan activities and encourage them to solve problems and not to give up facing difficulties in the area of science or arts. Regarding the section of evaluation in the Guidelines, it is clear that the role of children is recognized as important as other key stakeholders such as the kindergarten leadership team, teachers and parents being part of the evaluation team, which is further highlighted in the Guidelines as ‘evaluation process is one in which all parties participate and support as well as collaboration’ (MoE, 2001: p.16).

The Learning and Development Guidelines for Children of 3-6 Years Old (Ministry of Education, 2012)

The Learning and Development Guidelines for Children of 3-6 Years Old is built on the 2001 Guidelines but expand illustration of educational guidance in order to help kindergarten teachers and parents learn about basic stages and features of children’s learning and development from 3 to 6 years and thus help them to ‘establish reasonable expectations, implement scientific care and education, and enable children to have happy and meaningful childhood’. The guidelines emphasize principles regarding children’s learning and development expanded from the 2001 Guidelines – holistic learning and development, children’s individual differences, the importance of first hand experience through play and daily activities, importance of children’s learning quality, and recognition of children’s positive attitudes and behaviour. It clearly states to ‘fully respect and protect children’s curiosity and interest, help children to become motivated, focused, face difficulty, brave to explore and try, love to imagine and create’ (MoE, 2012: 5), which is believed to provide good foundation for children’s schooling and life-long learning in the Guidelines. The Guidelines also maintain the strong tone set up in the 2001 Guidelines in terms of supporting children to have ‘happy and meaningful childhood’ and address the importance of setting up essential early childhood programs and policies to target all children alongside addressing the most disadvantaged populations.

The guidelines 2012 are in line with the 2001 Guidelines regarding the five learning areas but provide detailed illustration of learning goals and educational guidance based on 3-4 year olds, 4-5 year olds and 5-6 year olds. For example, it explains with more detail about what children of 3-4 year olds should know, be able to do,

shall be able to do with support and suggestions of methods and strategies are provided for kindergarten teachers and parents to support children. Regarding health, the Guidelines (2012) divides health into three main areas including physical and emotional health, motor skills, life habits and skills and there are objectives set up for each of the three areas within health. The Guidelines (2012) set up detailed goals for each area. For example, in terms of children of 3-4 year olds, they should be able to dress and undress themselves with help and be able to put away toys and books; 4-5 year olds should be able to dress and undress themselves without help and should be able to organize own objects; and 5-6 year olds should be able to change clothes in different weather, be able to tie shoe laces, be able to organize and sort out own objects. In terms of supporting children to achieve these goals, kindergarten teachers and parents shall encourage children to do things under own capacity and be positive towards children's efforts to promote children's independence and autonomy.

Similar to the 2001 Guidelines, the 2012 Guidelines encourages kindergarten teachers and parents to provide opportunities and set up environment for children to take initiatives and engage with activities related to the five learning areas. Children's participation rights are not explicitly mentioned in the 2012 Guidelines but again it is clear that opportunities for children to participate and get involved are recognized as important to support children's learning and development. This might indicate that opportunities for child participation serve learning and development purpose but not for the rights perspective. Therefore, it is rather difficult to tell what role of the UNCRC and learning/development theories play in the formation of the Guidelines (2012).

Children's participation rights in Chinese context: a research perspective

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified in China in 1992. With China's rapid economic, social and cultural changes in the last three decades, it is important to investigate practices of children's participation rights in Chinese context. This section aims to provide a research perspective focusing on

the most relevant research published at national and international contexts during the last three decades. It is important to note that the review process has to be selective due to time, geographic location, language, significance of research and other accessibility factors. I have tried to review national research in China published in Chinese as well as international and comparative research published in English with relevance to children's rights and child participation in Chinese context. Bearing in mind China's geographic, demographic, economic and cultural diversity and large population, this section acts as a snapshot of children's participation rights in China and does not aim to generalize.

China has made great efforts to implement the UNCRC via various means including enactment of policies, founding institutions, organizing conferences, and international collaborations (Wei 1996). Wei (1996) reviewed important aspects around children's rights in China based on two conference discussions in 1995 and 1996 held in Beijing on China's implementation of the UNCRC. Apart from developments of policies, China also encouraged all levels of governments and the whole society to create appropriate environment for children's development by investing on children's education and health to ensure children's survival and development rights.

A snapshot of research about children's participation in China

Children's rights perspective in the context of the UNCRC has shaped early childhood education, especially in the 1990s. This is reflected in Liu's (1996a) discussion of the importance of rethinking education function via children's rights perspective and she strongly suggested that teachers shift ideas of educational function from 'educator' and 'being educated' to an equal relationship between them and children in line with children's rights perspective. Liu (1999) argues for the role of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and the UNCRC (1989) in shifting views of children in Chinese context from traditional instrumentalist views of children to views of children as human being with entitled rights. Liu (1999) discussed respecting and protecting children as one of the principles guiding Chinese early childhood education practice by respecting children's dignity, learning interests and

differences and establishing equal democratic relationships between teachers and children to ensure the realization of children's rights in China. Kindergarten teaching shifts from focusing on textbooks to children, teachers' role from being an instructor to supporter, collaborator and guide in children's learning and play to enable them to respect children's development rights (Chen 2003). As Liu, Pan and Sun (2005) observed, 'group lessons' remain the basic reference that young children used to describe kindergarten activities whilst increasing spacing and time are provided in kindergartens for children's play with the introduction of 'interest corner' activities and they consider this as positive change in the process of early childhood reform addressing respect of children's rights to play.

There are research focusing on the importance of children's participation in terms of its contribution to children's development and life. For example, Liu (1995a) strongly argues play as children's rights to learning and development in the context of the UNCRC (1989) and play as the basic activity in line with the Kindergarten Work Regulations (Ministry of Education 1989). Wei (2014) argues that children's participation is important process in which children can develop their subjectivity, and take actions based on their increasing independence, power of judgment and personal sense of responsibility. With regard to child development, participation is beneficial to children's personality and enable children to build confidence and capacity to integrate into society and strengthen social interactions. Thus, children's participation can promote an effective change and social improvement (Wei 2014). Regarding school, children's participation is indispensable for the creation of a sociable environment in the classroom, which stimulates cooperation and mutual support needed for child-centered interactive learning. Only through direct participation, can children have a real interest in democracy and form a sense of competence and a sense of responsibility. Similarly, China National Children's Centre finds correlation between children's participation and their cognition, emotional and psychological development (Yuan, Huo and Ding 2017). In the case of children affected by AIDS, Zhang et al. (2009) suggest that children with responsibilities in housework and caregiving for family members experienced personal growth and emotional maturity.

Children's participation outside school contexts such as home, community and society has also been relatively new focus of research. The most recent large scale

study commissioned by China National Children's Centre (Yuan, Huo and Ding 2017) investigated 8847 children of primary to secondary schools from 7 cities in the West, Middle and East part of China including Beijing as the largest city. The study is based on seven dimensions of child participation including family participation, school participation, after school activities, social interactions, extracurricular education, website involvement and public affair participation. Interesting results come out, for example, regarding parent-child communication, the most frequent topic is about children's learning whilst there are some parents who talk about how to deal with feelings and emotions with their children. Pressure for learning seems to be most expressed regarding school participation, after school activities and extracurricular education. As China National Children's Centre (2017) comment, children have great motivation to participate however there are factors holding back them to fully participate. As Goh (2014) argues, Chinese children are experiencing shifting socialisation pressures to an increasingly exclusive focus on academic achievement as education is seen as the main and achievable route to upward social mobility. Unlike Western societies, where children's participation in housework is seen as either a means of socialisation or a source of domestic labour, housework is considered as a distraction to academic work in Chinese context.

Based on the two main aspects of child participation rights regarding opportunities for children to express viewpoints and engage with decision making, Qin (2017) argues that children are encouraged to express their views in the context of schools and homes whilst there might be less tolerance and support from schools in rural areas to facilitate children's freedom of expression than cities schools in China. Yeh and Yang (2006) argue that Chinese children are more likely to respect the advice of adult authorities associated with more important issues in decision making and children are likely to let adults make decisions for them if they think they could benefit from doing this (Chen et al. 2013). Qin (2017) argues that there were contrasting studies about children's rights to decision making in family: on the one hand, due to Confucian ethical principles Chinese parents are overly involved in their children's decision making process and reluctant to encourage independence and autonomy in their children; on the other hand, some studies address that Chinese family culture is under transformation as parents are not authoritarian but more likely to support children's independence and encourage them to express their views and

make choices of their own among those with high levels of education and greater socio-economic status (Gong, Liu & Wei 2012).

Children's participation in virtual environment or digital community is another area of research in the last decade. As stated in the UNICEF's latest report *The State of the World Children 2017*, digital technology has the potential in transforming the world's most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and break cycles of poverty and disadvantage by allowing them to connect with families, friends and make decisions for themselves. Online connectivity has opened new avenues for civic engagement, social inclusion and other opportunities. According to China National Children's Centre study (2017), $\frac{3}{4}$ of children from primary schools and secondary schools have own mobile phones and half of the children have own computers and majority of the children have Chinese social media account such as QQ and Wechat for messaging, watching videos, play games and shopping rather than learning purpose. It is rather unknown though whether there is a gap between urban and rural areas regarding children's engagement with digital technology and it is rather unclear about the role of digital technology in disadvantaged and vulnerable children's lives.

Some international or comparative research further illustrates similarities and differences between China and other countries regarding ways how children participate and reasons behind. For example, through a cross-cultural study in Bangkok, Mumbai, Sydney and Beijing 2004-2006, Mason and Bolzan (2010) argue with their colleagues that the cultural context and traditions were pivotal in understanding 'child participation'. Participation is often associated with concepts of obligation in Asia-Pacific countries, where the ethos of collectivism has been dominant thus responsibility to family and community has traditionally taken precedence over individual rights. Australia on the contrary is more associated with individualistic connotation of 'participation' in the context of neo-liberalism. Children's participation rights were not being consistently or significantly operationalised in the Asia-Pacific region countries with some recognition but limited evidence about implementation. They also observe that child participation appears to relate to family interactions around clothing, family consumption and extra-curricular activities and there are tensions in child-adult relations around sharing power (Mason and Bolzan, 2010). For example, some Chinese children challenge rights asserted by adult in

decision making of friendship and emotional involvement due to impacts of one child policy.

With awareness of the UNCRC and international efforts to promote children's rights globally, national and international events in relation to children's participation have been held in China. For example, children reporters began to participate China's most important national conferences such as National People's Congress and China People Political Consultative Conference in 2003. In 2007, a reporter team made of children took part in China's 17th National People's Congress news report, which was a break-through in China's media history. The bilateral cooperation between Vietnam and China started with the children's forum on the prevention of trafficking, organized in Hanoi in 2006 (UNICEF 2009). This was the first joint children's forum on cross-border trafficking between the two countries, implemented collaboratively by the Viet Nam Women's Union and All China Women's Federation, with technical assistance and support from UNICEF in both countries. 120 children from border provinces in Vietnam and China attended the forum expressing their views and concerns and provided recommendations on prevention and protection of child victims of cross-border trafficking. These directly fed into the development of national strategies, policies and bilateral Vietnam-China cooperation plans on prevention and protection of child victims of trafficking. Chinese children's participation in International Summit on 'For Children' stood out as they proposed ideas for the society to tackle problems such as children's need of safe environment, social issues in relation to children, children's role in building friendly society and designing living spaces (Xiao, Chen and He 2017 in Yuan, Huo and Ding 2017).

The UNCRC and national policies related to children's welfare might have drawn academics' and researchers' attention to the urban-rural divide in China. For instance, Qin (1995) observed that primary schooling tendency existed in rural areas preschool education with a lack of play time but heavy reliance on reading and writing as well as low quality of staffing and facilities. Zhu (1995) investigated some rural areas in Hunan Province and discovered issues around preschool maths education in that there was a lack of opportunities for children to do hands on activities with rote learning as main activity through teachers' direct instruction via textbooks. Meanwhile, at the time of China's economic development a large number of people have migrated from countryside to cities to find more work opportunities

and consequently issues arise around education of their children, living quality, work conditions and social status (Sun 2002; Lu and Zhang 2004; Tobin et al. 2009). Education of children of migrant workers in cities was caught great attention. Cheng (2002), Liu (2002) and Zhang (2005) reported their voluntary work on supporting migrant worker's children in Beijing through developing programme called 'Si Huan Play Group' initiated by Professor Zhang Yan and students from Beijing Normal University. Si Huan Play Group as informal programme was set up in the community where migrant workers work and live to participate in their community and children were provided with materials and activities and developed communication, language and social skills by playing and interacting with other children and student helpers. Si Huan Play Group mirrors society's efforts to address social issues at the time.

Similarly, issues around the 'left-behind children' since the last decade came out. The 'left behind' children are those under 18 years of age who live with a single parent or their extended family in rural areas while one or both of their parents are away seeking employment in urban settings (Ding and Bao 2014; Sudworth 2016). In 2009, 11% of the population, around 145 million people, moved from the countryside to large cities to find employment sometimes without family ties (Hu 2012). The problems concerned with left-behind children are most severe in Anhui, Henan and Sichuan provinces, where 44 per cent of rural children live without their mother or father. The left-behind children in rural China have encountered various issues ranging from access to education, quality family life, relationships with caregivers and parents, and participating in family activities and consequently are the negative effects on children's emotional, social, psychological, health and academic developments (Luo et al. 2008; Luo et al. 2012; Wang 2018). Consequently, the chances for the left behind children's participation are scarce in comparison to city children.

Factors that might have promoted children's participation

Macro-level structural factors such as policy developments undoubtedly have played a big part in promoting, protecting and implementing children's rights in China. Among the earliest cohort of countries that ratified the UNCRC, China has made great efforts to further develop national policies to promote and implement children's

rights. The most important national policies include the China Children's Development in the 1990s, China Children's Development Plan 2001-2010, China Children's Development Plan 2010-2020 and China National Medium-Long Term Plan for Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 alongside some specific early childhood policies such as the Kindergarten Work Regulations (1989), the Kindergarten Education Guidelines (2001) and the Guidelines for Development of Children of 3-6 years old (2012). These policies were borne out of China's own needs in the context of globalization with focus on quality education, equity, children's holistic development, self exploration and collaborative learning (Gu et al. 2010; Shi 2003). Some of the policies made direct reference to the UNCRC whilst there are not explicit or detailed mention of children's participation rights in others. However, it is fair to say children's participation would not happen if not influenced by these policies in Chinese context.

Other macro-level structural factors such as establishments of national and regional organizations, institutions or agencies have contributed to promoting children's participation in Chinese context. Creating an awareness, understanding and knowledge of the UNCRC has been a strategy pursued by government-led agencies such as the Women's Federation, and taken up by Civil Affairs Bureaux which are responsible for welfare homes and care of street children (West 2002). China's first after school education institution – Da Lian Children's Palace was founded in 1949 followed by establishment of China Youth Pioneer Team, International Children's Day was adopted in 1950, and Small Trumpet radio broadcast began as the first programme for preschool children in 1956. China National Children's Centre was founded in 1982 as a leading force in promoting children's participation across China focusing on children's creativity, social interaction, morality, positive attitudes and healthy personality (Yuan, Huo and Ding 2017). China National Children's Centre has also played a central role in promoting international collaboration for children's participation in education, cultural and arts events.

Early childhood pedagogical and curricular changes influenced by the West together tied in with own traditions promoted to a great deal children's participation in Chinese kindergartens. For example, the impacts of Constructivism on kindergarten curriculum reform include children's first hand experience, and children's active learning in constructing understanding as reflected by Wang (2004a and 2004b),

Yao and Wu (2004) and Sun and Sun (2006). Teaching in kindergartens shifts from focusing on textbooks to children, teacher's role from being an instructor to supporter, collaborator and guide in children's learning and play. This enables teachers to respect children's development rights and follow children's interest, needs and differences (Chen 2003). This is also reflected in Tobin, Yeh & Mayumi (2009) and Tobin & Hayashi (2011) who argue that influenced by the Western ideas Chinese kindergartens provided more chances for children to participate in daily activities such as story telling, providing constructive feedback to peers, and election events with relevance to children themselves. As Bae (2009) argues, everyday interactions and communications with the staff influence the realisation of children's participation rights in the case of Oslo, Norway. This also echoes in Chinese kindergarten practices where teachers have paid attention to children's voices and provide children with opportunities to participate in decision making (Liu, Pang and Sun 2005; Zhu 2015).

Culturally, China society possess elements traditionally connecting children closely to family. Traditional ideas of family education with kindness to children, respecting the elder, loyalty to family etc as basic principles in guiding child rearing have been maintained for centuries in China (Wu 2006). Although criticized by some scholars due to closedness based on blood relationship (Wei 1996), this family tradition in some degree has contributed to children's participation in families and communities. Having been borne and having grown up as a child in rural area China, I clearly remember my experience of participating in family life and village events during childhood. As the oldest child in my family, I helped my mother from a young age with pride prepare and cook meals, do housework, feed chickens and pigs, and harvest in the fields with my mother as my father was working for a school and educational authority in the town. I also enjoyed participating during Chinese New Year or other important events in my village. My childhood experience contrasts a great deal to the experiences of the 'left-behind children' discussed earlier due to social, economic and demographic changes over the years. It is rather worrying with the potential loss of this connectivity between children, families and communities as catalyst for children's participation in rural areas.

Barriers to implementing children's participation rights

Despite the progress, children's participation still faces some major challenges in China (Wei 2014). As argued by Liu (1996a), China's awareness of children's rights might have originated in history with Confucius' concept of 'ci you', which means treating children with kindness by caring, loving and protecting children, to serve the family and state's stability from an instrumentalist perspective. However, there is a lack of awareness and understanding of children's rights (Liu 1996a and Liu 1996b) and children's participation rights in particular although national policies with regard to children's rights have been established since the 1990s. As mentioned earlier, the macro-level structural factors have contributed to the promotion of children's rights in China. There is still a great need to create and develop micro-level efforts ranging from understanding children's rights, promoting awareness of children's rights, and implementing children's rights across schools, families, community and society.

Traditional views of children and childhood addressing obedience, respect and duty towards parents as well as pressure to perform at school might have restricted the scope and depth of children's participation in family, community and society including decision making in local and governmental affairs (West 2002). When adults perceive children as independent human being entitled with rights and perceive childhood as a period which is care free and play based distinctive from adulthood, children might be provided with more opportunities and allowed to explore and participate out of their interest. The other way around, children might be deprived of opportunities as such but more often need to conform to adult subscriptions. In many cases, traditional customs made it inappropriate or disrespectful for a young person to challenge the position taken by an adult or even to voice an opinion (UNICEF 2009). Under the UNCRC, children's best interests are defined as the prime principle to children's participation in decision making process. However, questions arise here: What are children's best interest? How children's best interest be defined? How children's best interest be communicated effectively between children and adults involved? Who make the final decisions regarding what to take children's best interest and how to use children's best interest in their participation process etc are far complicated? More often, adults decide for children what can be good for them even though children have their own interest and preferences.

Children's participation rights stand out as a difficult domain for Chinese educational reform due to competitive school learning, pressure from university entrance examination, family expectation together with international influences regarding child-centredness (China National Children's Centre 2017). Under this climate, children's participation is more related to school contexts but not widely spread outside schools. Children's participation in after school activities become an extension of school education focusing on extracurricular activities to help with disciplinary learning in preparation for university entry examination (Yuan, Huo and Ding 2017). In addition, child poverty and social issues such as education of migrant workers' children in cities alongside the left-behind children in rural areas since the last two decades are another area to hold back children's participation. Children's participation can only remain rhetorical in rural areas if issues due to urban-rural divide are not resolved in China.

Conclusion

China is a country with great geographic, demographic, economic and cultural diversity. Therefore, the chapter here based on some national and international data cannot represent all localities of China. In addition, due to the relatively small sampling from various research nationally and internationally, the study of children's participation in this chapter cannot apply to all children in China, either. Through the documentary analysis of relevant policies and research in national and international contexts, the study here only provides a snapshot for children's participation rights in China since the 1990s till the present. With the significant influence of the UNCRC starting in the 1990s, Chinese government has made great effort to develop policies and initiatives to implement children's rights. Although research directly on children's participation rights in Chinese context is relatively limited, there is clear evidence from research in the field of early childhood education showing that there are opportunities for children to express their views and be listened to and there is space for children to participate in kindergartens and homes (Yao and Fang 2002; Sun and Zhang 2006). More space and time are provided for child-centredness, respect for children and meaningful dialogue between teachers and children in early childhood education in the context of China's National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for

Education Reform and Development 2010-2020 and the Learning and Development Guidelines for Children of 3-6 Years Old (MoE 2012).

China has paid great attention to children's participation rights by ratifying the UNCRC, enacting relevant policies, and developing initiatives in the last three decades. However, evidence from research shows that children's participation is more related to school contexts and opportunities for children to engage with families, communities and society are rather limited due to increasing pressure from schooling and academic achievements for higher education entry examination. In addition, the urban-rural divide brings in another major issue around education of migrant workers' children in cities and more currently the left-behind children in rural areas in China. Promoting equity in terms of distribution of resources, quality of education, and equal opportunities for children's development is considered as a prime principle for Chinese education policy, especially in the context of the China National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (Gu et al. 2010). The urban-rural divide has to be tackled in order to widen children's participation in China.

To further implement children's participation rights in China, opportunities also open up. China must strive to promote awareness of the UNCRC and children's participation rights in particular. There is also a great need in China to conduct research to further raise people's awareness of children's participation rights, explore ways to widen children's participation outside of school contexts, and work towards the notion of 'authentic participation', in which children are empowered to take initiatives alongside opportunities for meaningful dialogues with adults involved (UNICEF 2004, cited in Mason & Bolzan 2010; United Nations 2013). It is rather a long way for China to go beyond the tokenistic approach to authentic participation but clearly it is the family, school, community and society together that can make this happen.

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