Adolescents’ Perspectives on China’s Social Problems

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Two thousand years ago, Confucius told his followers, “When the [good] way prevails in the state, speak boldly and act boldly. When the state has lost the way, act boldly and speak softly.” He encouraged them to take social responsibilities, but also emphasized caution and tact at times when open criticism of the system jeopardizes individual safety. How do Chinese youth make sense of the civic context in China today? How do they perceive their responsibility and ability to act and speak as citizens? This chapter explores the different ways in which Chinese adolescents understand the civic roles of the individual in relation to the state. We report on an analysis of their explanations of the causes and possible solutions for social problems in contemporary China. We also examine what they consider to be appropriate civic actions in their responses to a recent civil protest by a Chinese teenager named Chen Yihua, a case widely described in the Chinese media.

This chapter is also based on empirical data from the 2011 project. Here we introduce findings from the 11th graders who participated in eight focus groups (N=32). From their explanations of the social problems facing China, we identified three ways of constructing the individual-state relationship. The two dominant ones may be characterized as the cynical and compliant narratives, and an emerging one as the skeptical narrative. We consider the subcultural factors that give rise to the two dominant narratives, but also point out that, as different as these two narratives are, there is a shared feature between them, which is the focus on self-discipline, self-protection, and self-survival. This focus and the societal conditions that foster it are exemplified by the participants’ responses
to the civil protest by Chen Yihua. But first, before we delve into these youths’ perceptions of the social problems and of Chen Yihua’s action, we first contextualize our discussion by briefly introducing the major social problems facing China, the official agenda of civic education, and the emerging discourse of individual civic participation in Chinese society.

The Social Problems Facing China

As China rises to become the world’s second largest economy, it also faces unprecedented challenges to address grave social problems such as environmental pollution, social discrimination, food safety, and, as noted in chapter 5, a widely perceived crisis of moral character. Salient urban problems include dangerous chemical additives in food, high housing prices, lack of a functioning social security system, high unemployment rates among college graduates, as well as air pollution. Severe rural problems include water pollution caused by chemical discharge from factories, high suicide rates among women, and the forced demolition of rural homes by local government and project developers. In recent years, the social problems have reached astonishing levels and have frequently made international headlines. On top of the list of public concerns are the problems of deep government corruption, huge income disparity, severe environmental pollution, and the risk of a sharp increase in the unemployment rate that could lead to social catastrophe in China and the rest of the world (PewResearchCenter, 2013). In the long run, China’s successes and failures in addressing these problems depend on how its youth today are being socialized to take responsibility as individuals and as citizens (H. Wang, 2012).

Moral and Political Education in the Context of Social Change

Through both education and propaganda, the Chinese government plays an active role in socializing Chinese youth from a very early age about their roles in society, especially in relation to the state. Before 2003, moral and political education in Chinese schools focused on cultivating patriotism, collectivism, and socialism in the young (Liu, 1998; Meyer, 1990). In 2003, the curriculum was reformed to include the teaching of individualism, consumerism, pro-social behaviors, and humanistic values (Li, Zhong, & Lin, 2004; Lu & Gao, 2004; Zhu & Liu, 2004). However, rapid economic and technological development, including extensive English language competence, has increased at least urban Chinese youth’s exposure to Western values and forms of life, which makes it harder to maintain the official socialist ideology (Qi & Tang, 2004; Zhao, 2013).