

Chapter 6

Rethinking Children's Rights in Chinese Early Childhood Education Provision: Progress and Prospects



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Abstract Current early childhood education (ECE) in China is a hybrid of multiple discourses which mainly consist of traditional Confucianism, Soviet socialist values and Western educational theories. Among these discourses, children's rights, as one of the influential Western discourses, bring new ways of speaking and thinking about young children and their education to China. Based on a child right perspective, this chapter briefly reviews ECE policies in China in the last 30 years, summarizing key progress of Chinese government in achieving children's rights in ECE. One example of progress is that young children's rights have been gradually highlighted within policies, establishing a legislative link between children's rights and their citizenship. Another example of progress is that a rights-based perspective is now being infiltrated into ECE curricula and practices through a series of policies, which emphasize children's well-being, individuality and their rights to be heard. This paper argues that ECE in China has been influenced by multiple discourses, and therefore some contradictions about children's rights exist. More attempts to construct a context-specific approach to young children's rights are necessary and potential areas for future research are proposed and discussed.

Introduction

The Chinese government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter UNCRC, United Nations, 1989) in 1990. Since then, children's rights have been an increasingly recognized and accepted discourse within national policies (Committee on the Rights of the Child [CRC] 1996, 2013; Jiang 2019). As an influential international agreement, UNCRC has contributed to children's protection and education in China (Liu and Feng 2005; Qiu et al. 2015), including laws,

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policies and curriculum guidelines that ensure young children's rights to protection, provision and participation in early childhood settings (e.g. Ministry of Education 2001, 2012a, b; National People's Congress 1991; State Council of China 2010b).

Previous studies of children's rights in China have primarily focused on primary and secondary education (e.g. Cheng and Ge 2017; Naftali 2009), and ECE policy reviews in China (e.g. Feng 2017; Liu and Feng 2005; Li et al. 2016) have not addressed young children's rights in much detail. This article therefore seeks to review how young children's rights in China have gained expressions within policy discourses, from 1989 to the present, focusing on early childhood education (ECE).

A child right perspective is applied which is based on the established framework that children's rights are grouped into three categories: protection, provision and participation (Alderson 2008; Gaches and Gaffney 2019). These rights are closely related to children's citizenship which is "an entitlement to recognition, respect, and participation" (Smith 2010, p. 103). Once their citizenship rights are recognized, the above three categories of rights should be emphasized in the context of ECE policy, and their rights to exercise agency should be supported as well (Te One and Dalli 2009). As pointed out by Smith et al. (2009), agency for young children "involves a dynamic and reciprocal process of connecting to, and interacting with, other people" (p. 18).

The article encompasses three aspects: an analysis of the cultural and sociopolitical contexts that frame children's rights in China, a historical review on the progress of young children's rights in China over the last 30 years, and a discussion about prevalent and controversial discourses in order to reflect upon the challenges and prospects ahead.

Current ECE in China: A Hybrid of Cultural and Socio-political Threads

Nowadays China operates the largest ECE system in the world. In 2018, the gross enrolment ratio in kindergartens was 81.7% and around 46.56 million young children were enrolled in nearly 267,700 kindergartens (Ministry of Education 2019). There are mainly three types of ECE institutions in China: (1) nurseries for infants and toddlers from 0 to 3 years old, (2) kindergartens, the most common providers for young children between 3 and 6 years old, and (3) pre-primary classes for 5–6 or 7 years old that are usually attached to primary schools (Feng 2017).

The scope of review in this article is primarily children's rights in the context of kindergarten education, which is broadly defined as ECE in China. Based on the source of funding and management arrangements, kindergartens can be generally divided into public and private kindergartens. In both these types, children from different age groups (3–4, 4–5, and 5–6 years old) are divided into classes of around 25–35 children with two full-time and registered teachers, and one daycare worker. Kindergartens normally operate five school days per week and all teachers are

required to have qualification certificates and at least high school diplomas (Ministry of Education 2016).

ECE in China is currently a hybrid of various cultural threads (Li and Chen 2017; Yang and Li 2018a, b). ECE, as well as the construction of children and childhood, is rooted in traditional philosophies such as Confucianism. It has also been influenced by different philosophical and educational theories from other countries, such as Germany and the US (between 1920s and 1930s), the Soviet Union (1950s–1960s), and international educational theories and curriculum models associated with “reform and opening-up” policy in 1978. The discourses underlying children's rights in relation to ECE provision during these eras are briefly outlined below.

The Philosophy of Confucianism

Confucianism has been one of the most influential traditions in political and educational systems for thousands of years in China as well as in other East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea and Singapore (Tu 2002; Wang 2004). Confucianism emphasizes relationships and respect, which can be summarized in The Three Principle Relationships. These relationships contain three moral roles in social relations, which are “the officials should serve the sovereign, the son should serve the father, the wife should serve the husband” (Wang 2004, p. 433). Within the above pairs of relationships, status of all social members, including young children are defined (Wang 2004). For example, sons should be respectful to their fathers and in turn, fathers are required to shoulder the responsibilities of their children's learning and growth. In this regard, a person's rights, responsibilities and identities are secured or located in a complex web of hierarchical and authoritarian social relationships. These relationships also highlight “the integration of the family and the nation” (Wang 2004, p. 433), revealing a strong tendency toward collectivism.

In addition, in Confucian discourse, it is of great importance to teach ethical and moral values (e.g. courteousness, wisdom) from early childhood. The learning content in this period includes forming good moral values and habits (e.g. respecting parents and teachers) and acquiring the essential knowledge and skills to benefit the nation when they grow up (Choy 2017; Xu 2018). In sum, Confucian discourse emphasizes collectivism, ethical and moral values and academic learning from early childhood.

Early Influence of Western Ideologies and Pedagogies

Confucianism dominated education in China for nearly 2000 years until the early nineteenth century, when the government and academics in China started to import educational ideologies from Western countries such as Germany and the US (Li and Chen 2017; Zhu and Zhang 2008). However, Chinese academics soon realized that

these imported theories did not fit the social-cultural conditions in China and therefore began to develop localized early childhood curricula. One prominent example is the curriculum and practice in Nanjing Gulou Kindergarten in the 1920s (see Li and Chen 2017; Yu 2017). Based on John Dewey's educational ideologies such as child-centredness and play-centredness, Chen Heqin and Zhang Zhonglin, the founders of this kindergarten and also pioneers of China's early childhood education, developed a unique Chinese "unit-based integrated curriculum" (Yu 2017, p. 102). This curriculum recognized the importance of learning experiences and daily activities for young children. However, the localized effort by those pioneers was disrupted and replaced by the Soviet socialist values, outlined in the next section.

The Soviet Union's Influence

Chinese political and educational systems have been strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology especially in the 1950s, a period when the Soviet Union was the socialist partner and role model for China's educational reform (Feng 2017; Li and Chen 2017). At this time, Soviet thoughts dominated all levels of education. In early childhood education, a subject-based and teacher-centered curriculum replaced the previous that was play-centered and child-centered (Li and Chen 2017). The goal of early childhood education was seen as "conducting communist education for young children, helping them achieve comprehensive development before entering primary school, laying a solid foundation for cultivating socialist and communist contributors" (Ministry of Education 1957, as cited in Jiang 2019, p. 12¹). As summarized by Jiang (2019), under the influence of the Soviet Union, young children were viewed as the property of the country and the successors of the revolution. Their developmental stages were to be respected in education while they were not active social actors, but rather passive recipients of adult teaching and compliant contributors when they grew up. Young children, in this regard, were not recognized as significant or a separate entity. Their rights, consequently, were subdued in relation to the ethics of socialist ideology.

The Later Influence of Western Ideologies and Pedagogies

The reform and opening-up policy, manifested in 1978, signaled China's efforts to connect with the outside world (Li and Chen 2017; Zhu 2015). Like the ECE reform in the early 1900s, foreign educational ideologies and pedagogies (e.g. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and Vygotsky's social-cultural theory), and

¹In this article, all translations from Chinese are my own.

curriculum models (e.g. the American Project Approach and the Italian Reggio Emilia Approach) were introduced and adopted into Chinese context (Li and Chen 2017; Zhu 2015). Current ECE in China is being strongly influenced by all the above mentioned values or theories, while many recent studies (e.g. Lin et al. 2019; Yang and Li 2018a, b) have shown the intentions and attempts to balance Western influences and Eastern traditions in ECE curricula and pedagogies.

A Historical Review of Children's Rights in ECE Policies

This section provides a historical review on the development of children's rights in early childhood education in China over the last 30 years. As pointed out by Liu and Feng (2005), young children's rights "is something entirely different from the Chinese traditional perception of children and did not emerge until the 1990s" (p. 94). In the early 1980s, Chinese academics started to reflect on the Soviet influence on the perception of young children and early childhood education. Additionally, educational ideologies and curriculum approaches from Western countries such as the US and Italy began to be introduced and experimented within China's kindergartens (see Li and Chen 2017; Zhu 2015). UNCRC, and the global discourses of children's rights, contributed to China's ECE reform and brought different perspectives towards young children. One of the most important ideas brought by the rights discourse was "respecting children" (Liu and Feng 2005, p. 94), which contributed to China's ECE reform over the last 30 years.

The Ratification of UNCRC

The Chinese government signed UNCRC in 1990 and made it officially valid in 1992. The ratification of UNCRC by the Chinese government reveals the willingness and readiness to respect and protect children's rights (Li 1996; Naftali 2009). Since then, young children's basic rights, such as the rights to protection, provision and participation, have been increasingly acknowledged and respected by the Chinese government (Jiang 2019; Pang 2009), who have instated a series of laws and policies to emphasize the importance of protecting young children's rights. One of the key policies in this period was *Law on the Protection of Minors* (National People's Congress 1991) which was the first law in China dedicated to the protection of children's rights. This law defines "minors" as Chinese citizens under 18 years who enjoy the rights to survival, development, protection and participation regardless of their gender, ethnicity, social-economic status and religious belief (National People's Congress 1991). It also places the responsibility for protecting children's rights in the hands of national and provincial governments, and all the social institutions and groups (e.g. family, school, society, judicial and legal

system). Taking protection of children in schools and kindergartens as an example, some responsibilities include:

Teaching and administrative staff in schools and kindergartens shall respect the personal dignity of the minor and may not enforce corporal punishment or corporal punishment in disguised forms, or any other act that humiliates the personal dignity of the minors (Article 15).

Collective activities organized by schools and kindergartens for minor students and children, such as taking part in rallies, recreational activities and social practices, shall be conducive to the sound growth of minors; accidents endangering personal safety shall be prevented (Article 17).

Kindergartens shall do a good job in nursing care and education so as to promote the harmonious development of the children in physique, intellectual ability and moral values (Article 19). (National People's Congress 1991, chapter 3, para 1)

Other national laws such as *Teachers Law* (National People's Congress 1993) and *Education Law* (National People's Congress 1995) were subsequently released and supported the protection of children's rights. All these policies outline young children's rights and the responsibilities of governments, organizations and key stakeholders, laying a solid foundation for the development of children's rights (Wei 1996; Zhu 1996).

The Early Development of Children's Rights in China (1996–2009)

Since the second half of the 1990s, academics in China have gradually noticed and emphasized the importance of ECE in protecting young children's rights and implementing UNCRC. The second version of *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practices* (hereafter 1996 Regulations, National Education Committee² 1996) outlined the key responsibilities of kindergartens. Compared with the previous version, the 1996 Regulations stated that kindergarten education was a crucial stage of school education system, rather than a preparation stage for primary education.

In 1996, a national seminar was held which aimed at implementing UNCRC in ECE. The curriculum designers in China, Li Jimei, Feng Xiaoxia and Liu Yan, introduced the concept of children's rights into the field of ECE (Feng 1996; Li 1996; Liu 1996). As pointed out by Li (1996),

The accomplishment of the goals in UNCRC not only needs the global and national actions, also requires collaboration among all the social members and organizations. ECE is closely related to children, thus shouldering special and important responsibilities (p. 15).

This seminar marked a turning point because young children's rights were no longer limited to legislation relations between their rights and citizenship. Moreover, just as autonomy and participation are emphasized in UNCRC, young children are

²The Chinese National Education Committee was renamed the Ministry of Education during the restructuring of the State Council in 1998.

therefore viewed as “active and creative subjects with their own rights” (Liu 1996, p. 18). This perspective challenged the traditional Confucianism and Soviet educational theories and contributed to transforming the teacher-centered and subject-centered curriculum model in China. In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued the first national ECE curriculum in the twenty-first century, *Guidelines for kindergarten education practices (Trial Version)* (hereafter 2001 Guidelines, Ministry of Education 2001), which was influenced by Western theories and ideas rather than those of Soviet Union. Respecting young children’s rights was a fundamental principle in this document, as it is stated that:

Kindergarten education should respect young children’s personalities and rights, and respect their development levels and learning dispositions. Play is the fundamental activity in kindergartens. Care and education should be equally emphasized. Teachers should focus on young children’s individual differences and support every child’s development. (Ministry of Education 2001, p. 1)

I tend to regard this period as a preliminary stage in progressing young children’s rights as more than half of Chinese children did not get the chance to receive kindergarten education until 2009 (see Fig. 6.1). As pointed out by Zhou et al. (2016), albeit specific goals for children’s survival in rural areas of China were stated in national documents such as *Chinese Children Development Guidelines (2001–2010)* (State Council of China 2001), providing universally accessible ECE was not mentioned. In addition, the number and quality of kindergartens saw an overall decline as the central government failed to provide sufficient support to the development of kindergartens. Some major problems include insufficient financial support; the

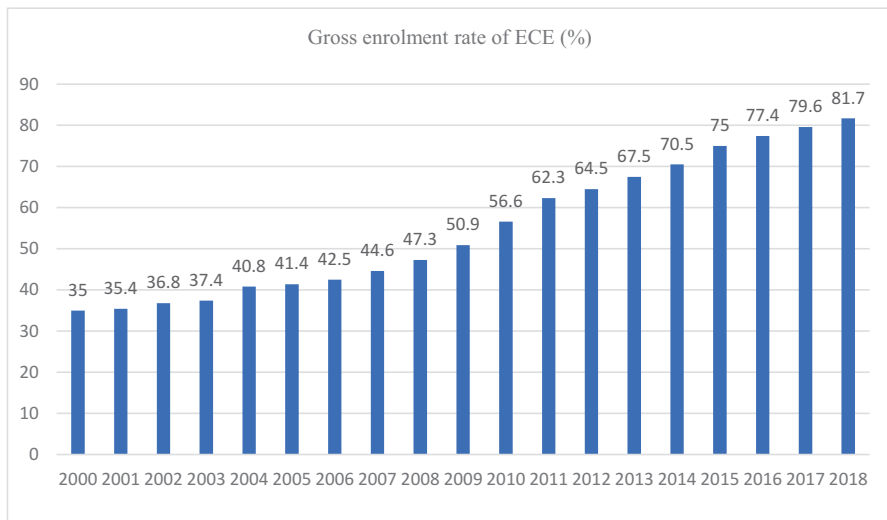


Fig. 6.1 Gross enrolment ratio (GER) in early childhood education in China, 2000–2018. (Sources: Ministry of Education 2019; NWCCW, NBS & UNICEF 2018)

declining number of qualified teachers; the administrative units of ECE in governments were eliminated or weakened (see Li et al. 2016).

The Post-2010 Development of Children's Rights in China (2010-Now)

Since 2010, as China entered the “Golden Era” of ECE (Li et al. 2016, p. 10), the protection of young children's rights has been further strengthened and guaranteed. In 2010, the Chinese government released the ten-year educational plan, *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* (hereafter 2010 Plan, State Council of China 2010a). In this blueprint for China's education reform for the next 10 years, ECE is emphasized, for the first time, as the foundational stage in the national education system. Three missions for ECE are confirmed as: (1) basically universalizing ECE for 3–6 years old young children, (2) clarifying the responsibilities of government, (3) strengthening ECE in rural areas (State Council of China 2010a). Moreover, it is stated that ECE should not only be accessible to all the young children, but also of high quality which could enable young children to play and participate. In order to accomplish the above missions, the State Council of China (2010b) released *Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education by the State Council*. This document laid out ten strategies for developing ECE which mainly cover strengthening the role of ECE in the national education system, improving the quality of kindergarten teachers, increasing financial input, and strengthening the management and evaluation of kindergarten education. In particular, this policy emphasized the responsibility of governments to support ECE in rural areas. 400 billion RMB (around 57 billion USD) was invested in ECE from 2011 to 2015, focusing specifically on the rural and less developed areas in China (Ministry of Education 2015b).

Another key pedagogical policy after 2010 was the introduction of a new iteration of early childhood curriculum document, *Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3 to 6 Years* (hereafter 2012 Guidelines, Ministry of Education 2012a). Although this curriculum did not explicitly mention young children's rights, it inherited the key statements from the 2001 Guidelines and represented a further step towards recognizing and guaranteeing young children's rights to high-quality education in early years. As it is stated that:

The Guidelines [2012 Guidelines] aim to help teachers and parents build a solid foundation for young children's subsequent school learning and their lifelong development. The basic goal of the Guidelines is to promote the well-rounded development of young children, including their physical well-being, cognitive growth, moral strength, and aesthetic sensibility. (Ministry of Education 2012a, p. 1)

After that, several policies were released in recent years to further ensure children's access to ECE and improving the quality of working staff, facilities and materials in

kindergartens. These include *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers* (Ministry of Education 2012b); *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Principals* (Ministry of Education 2015a); *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practices* (hereafter 2016 Regulations, Ministry of Education 2016); *Measures for Supervision and Evaluation of Kindergarten Management and Education* (Ministry of Education 2017); *Standard Design Sample of Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development 2019).

In addition, recent evidence has shown that the Chinese government and academics started to emphasize early care and education for 0–3 years old in order to ensure their rights and address the declining birth rate (e.g. Ministry of Education 2013; State Council of China 2011, 2019). Despite these policies, 0–3 ECE in China is still in an early period of development and more efforts are needed to support 0–3 childcare services such as clarifying the responsibilities of governments, increasing the number of 0–3 childcare providers and teachers, and establishing quality standards for childcare services (Hong and Tao 2019; Pang et al. 2019).

The Progress of Young Children's Rights in China

Based on the above historical review of Chinese ECE policies over the last 30 years, the progress in terms of children's rights includes: (a) a legislative link between rights and citizenship of young children has been gradually established, (b) a rights-based perspective is now being infiltrated into ECE curricula and pedagogies.

A Legislative Link Between Children's Rights and Citizenship

One example of progress resulting from rights discourse is that a legislative link has been gradually established between young children's rights and their citizenship, especially their rights to protection and provision. This can be seen, as mentioned above, in a series of laws and policies that highlight young children's rights and clarify the responsibilities of government, kindergarten, family and other social institutions.

The right to education, which has been primarily emphasized and guaranteed within policy discourse in the last 30 years, is fundamental to young children's rights. Before the reform and opening-up in 1978, the proportion of children enrolled in early childhood education was relatively low due to the limited social wealth and economic development. In the recent two decades, along with the significant progress in economic development, primary attention has been paid to guaranteeing young children's rights to provision. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) in early childhood education has steadily increased (see Fig. 6.1), surpassing 50% in 2009 and reaching nearly 80% in 2017. In 2020, this ratio is expected to arrive at 85% (State Council of China 2017). In the long-term educational plan, the Chinese

government aims for 100% enrolment quality early childhood education in 2035 (Central Committee of CPC and State Council of China 2019).

As GER increases, the government also pays more attention to young children in less developed areas. As mentioned above, strengthening ECE in rural areas in China was a key mission of the 2010 Plan and the State Council of China (2010b) proposed to launch the first 3-year action plan at provincial level, which facilitated the national missions of ECE to be accomplished in different regions of China. Currently, all the provinces in China are in the process of the third 3-year action plan and have made significant progress on ECE provision. Taking Gansu, a western and less-developed province as an example, the government of Gansu launched the first two rounds of ECE 3-year action plan in 2011 and 2014, aiming at increasing the enrollment rate and the number of kindergarten teachers. When the second round of the action plan was finished in 2016, the GER increased from 39.8% (2010) to 90% (2016). The number of kindergarten teachers rose from 13,600 (2010) to 39,400 (2016) (Government of Gansu 2017).

In addition, young children's right to high-quality education has been increasingly emphasized since 2010. Recent policies (e.g. Ministry of Education 2016, 2017) have revealed the rationale of quality kindergartens, which comprises:

- conditions of kindergarten (e.g. location of kindergarten, size of class, provision of materials and picture books);
- safety and sanitation (e.g. provision of meals, sanitary disinfection, safety education);
- care and education (e.g. respecting young children and their development stages, young children's daily life is well-ordered, activities should focus on children's experience);
- faculty members (e.g. providing teachers with various type of training program, paying attention to teachers' morality and professionalism);
- kindergarten management (e.g. system of public notice about fees for young children, financial regulations).

All these elements interdependently contribute to positive outcomes and holistic development for young children by improving the structural elements of quality such as the size of class and the provision of teaching materials, then the process quality that focuses on the relationship and interaction between young children and adults. Enabling children to access ECE provision, providing accessible and affordable quality ECE to young children, do not only guarantee children's rights to education, but further promote their chances to "the full and harmonious development" and become "fully prepared to live an individual life in society" (United Nations 1989, p. 3).

A Rights-Based Perspective in ECE Curriculum and Practices

Another example of progress is that a rights-based perspective is now being infiltrated into ECE curricula and practices through a series of curriculum and regulation policies (e.g. Ministry of Education 2001, 2012a, b). Young children's health and well-being, individuality and opinions are emphasized in ECE curricula and practices. This is in line with the statements in UNCRC, especially the principles proposed by CRC in 2005, which are:

- right to life, survival and development
- right to non-discrimination
- best interests of the child
- respect for the views and feelings of the young child.

In Chinese ECE, a key focus is about young children's rights to health and health services. As stated in UNCRC, "States parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health" (United Nations 1989, p. 8), and to create conditions to promote the well-being of young children in early years (CRC 2005, p. 4). To guarantee this right, education should cover health and well-being to make young children stay healthy, both mentally and physically. In China, children's physical health has been constantly emphasized in ECE policy while mental health did not gain attention until the late 1980s. In 1988, young children's mental health was stated in policy documents for the first time, as it is stated that "kindergartens should promote young children's physical and mental health, ensuring their safety and well-being" (Ministry of Education 1988, cited in Jiang 2019, p. 17). In addition, as discussed above, sanitary disinfection is also a key quality standard for kindergartens (e.g. Ministry of Education 2017). Besides, in both 2001 and 2012 Guidelines, young children's health is listed as the foundation of the five curriculum domains, which covers physical and mental health and social adaptability. As stated in 2012 Guidelines,

Health refers to the well-being of a child's physical, mental, and social adaptability. Early childhood is not only a period of rapid physical and cognitive development, but also a critical stage for fostering optimistic attitudes and a sense of security. Physical development, mental wellness, motor coordination, healthy habits, and acquisition of basic life skills are all important indicators of children's physical and mental health. They also serve as cornerstones for children's learning and development in other domains. (Ministry of Education 2012a, p. 3)

Furthermore, the arrangement of curriculum areas and content should be "respectful of their [children] individuality and growing capacities" (CRC 2005, p. 3). For example, 2012 Guidelines point out,

It is important [for educators] to understand and fully respect the individual difference of young children and allow them to proceed with the development 'ladder' stated in the Guidelines [2012 Guidelines] at her/his own pace with her/his preferred approach. (Ministry of Education 2012a, p. 2)

In this regard, kindergarten teachers are suggested to provide various types of materials for young children to choose. For example, when teachers are designing learning environments, they can provide young children with blank paper and pencils for decoration, and small boxes for making dollhouse furniture (Ministry of Education 2012a). This is also consistent with the statement that young children's learning and development are best supported when they are provided with space, time and guidance to participate in play-based learning contexts with their peers and adults (CRC 2005).

Last but not least, from a child right perspective, young children are provided with opportunities to express their thoughts, share their ideas and ask questions, which is in line with Articles 12 (respect for the views of the child) and 13 (freedom of expression) in UNCRC. In this regard, teachers are suggested to create opportunities for children to speak and express themselves, and to ensure sufficient time available for talking with children. Moreover, young children's ways of speaking and their opinions should be respected regardless of their abilities to express themselves (Ministry of Education 2012a, b). More importantly, young children will be encouraged to join the decision-making progress about the plans and other important issues in classrooms and kindergartens. For example, one of the educational suggestions for teachers in 2012 Guidelines is "asking young children to make decisions through group discussion on major events and plans in their kindergarten and class" (Ministry of Education 2012a, p. 30). Besides, as stated by CRC (2005), ensuring young children's rights to freely express and be heard requires educators to listen to young children patiently and respect their points of view. This can be seen in the statements in *Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers* (Ministry of Education 2012b) such as "focusing on young children's daily performance and promoting their initiative and confidence" and "be a good and amiable listener to young children" (p. 5).

Closing Discussion

Young children's rights, as a foremost Western discourse, bring ECE in China a new pattern of speaking and thinking about young children. This can be seen in an increasingly strengthened legislative link between young children and their rights as citizens, and an advocacy for implementing a child right perspective in kindergarten education. However, it should be noticed that young children's rights are introduced as part of a broader transformation of Western education theories and discourses. As stated by Li and Chen (2017), current ECE in China is a "hybrid" that formed through the interaction and interconnections among traditional Chinese culture especially Confucianism, socialist values influenced by the Soviet Union, and Western values and pedagogies. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2014), all these discourses form an interdiscursive mix on young children where various discourses are constantly struggling to define meaning and to dominate the discursive field of

children's rights, bringing fusions and collisions on the construction of young children and their rights.

Taking play as an example, as stated in Article 31 in UNCRC, young children's right to engage in play and recreational activities should be recognized (United Nations 1989). In China, the importance of play has been realized by the introduction and implementation of Western ECE pedagogies and curriculum models since the 1980s. The 2012 Guidelines and 2016 Regulations have further strengthened the priority of play in kindergarten curriculum and outlined the basic requirements for play in kindergartens such as establishing more play areas, providing various types of play tools and guaranteeing sufficient time for children to play. However, under the influence of traditional Confucianism and the downward pressure on young children results from the exam-oriented education system (Lin et al. 2019, p. 12), Chinese parents still emphasize young children's academic learning over play in order to "avoid being left behind at the starting point" (Lu 2015, para. 1) even though the current ECE curriculum and policies state that, as mentioned above, play should be the basic activity in kindergartens.

The above example of play reveals the contradictions brought by multiple discourses. As discussed previously, Confucianism highlights young children's duties and responsibilities as sons/daughters, brothers/sisters and subjects of the empire, focusing on "what children should do" rather than "what children can do" (Liu 1996, p. 18). This is contradictory to young children as rights holders and active participants. However, Confucianism also highlights "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude" and "teaching benefits teachers as well as students" (Gu 2019, p. 7), which emphasizes children's individuality and the reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Recent studies (Qi and Shen 2015; Wang and Huang 2019) have attempted to construct a context-specific approach to rights and citizenship based on Chinese traditional philosophies such as Confucianism and Western philosophies, while the possibility in ECE still needs further exploration.

In summary, this article briefly summarizes the progress of young children's rights in the policy context of Chinese ECE over the last 30 years. Future research could usefully explore and address the gap between policy and practice. For example, under the influence of multiple discourses, young children's enactment of rights and adults' opinions towards young children's rights. Besides, more research priority should be given to the rights of children from 0 to 3 years old.

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