

# How to Make a Grateful Child? Reflection on Gratitude Campaigns in China in Recent Years

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Shi Li<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Only-child generations in China are widely perceived as self-centered and lacking a grateful heart. Edward Gibbon says that gratitude may sometimes be costly. This article argues that family responsibility education with a focus on a sense of justice is a key solution for this social problem. The article examines the correlation between justice, responsibility, and gratitude by looking into the existing conceptual works on these aspects.

## Keywords

a grateful heart, gratitude, only child, discipline, justice, family responsibility education

“The Chinese one child policy is unique in the history of the world” (Potts, 2006, p. 361). It has been 35 years since the Chinese one-child policy was launched by the Chinese State Council in 1979. The root cause of this policy lies in an ideology that a falling birthrate offers a demographic dividend, as the economically productive proportion of the population grows more rapidly than the general population (Birdsall, Kelley, & Sinding, 2001; Feng & Mason, 2005). It is hard to contend that, without reductions in fertility, the living standards of the Chinese could have risen as high as those of today through its economic boom. However, criticism of the policy on human rights grounds has never ceased due to the great individual pain suffered particularly by those who, prevented from having more than one child, lost their only child. Apart from human rights concerns, one aspect of the policy that has alarmed the community over the last 30 years has been the “little emperors” syndrome—spoiled children in the 1980s and the early 1990s, and ungrateful children from the late 1990s up to the present. With a rapidly aging population and the first one-child cohort rearing their own child or children, ungratefulness in the one-child generations has become a serious social issue in China.

What is the root of this issue and how do you make a grateful child? This article examines the psychological development of a sense of gratitude that is regarded as a moral affect associated with one’s personality traits. First of all, the issue of lack of gratitude in the younger generations of China, school gratitude education, and the government’s measures to solve this issue are briefly introduced; then existing conceptual studies on gratitude are reviewed in the hope of revealing their properties and practice in other countries; after that, the correlation between justice, responsibility, and gratitude is

examined to establish the psychological development of gratitude.

## Social Issue of Gratitude in the One-Child Generations of China

The implementation of the one-child policy for over 30 years has engrained the notion “all for the child” in the minds of most Chinese parents of one-child generations, if not all, as their core value of life. However, their self-sacrifice often ends up disappointingly bitter, as it is often taken for granted by the child as their parents’ dutiful obligation. Many children have been nurtured into a mind-set that all the wealth or property that their parents generated are reserved for them. In a sense, parents owe them. As a result of this, these children possess an expectation to ask their parents for anything they desire. Parents feel that they are obliged to provide not only their child as good a life and education as they can but also work opportunities through their social connections, a wedding apartment (or at least a large share of the purchase), and then care of their grandchildren. As for the rewards of parenting, little expression of gratitude and/or few acts to repay their parents are shown in many of these young and grown-up children (Bi, 2007; Z. Chen & Zou, 2007; Deng, 2011; Huang, 2011; Li & Li, 2007; Tang, 2007; Xiaoshan,

<sup>1</sup>University of New England, Armidale, Australia

### Corresponding Author:

Shi Li, School of Arts, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales 2350, Australia.  
Email: shi.li@une.edu.au



2006; Zhou, 2008). Yu Yihua, head of the Department of Education in Guangxi Autonomous Region, bemoans that

with over-nurturing by parents, many an only child has become extremely overweening and willfully arrogant in ways that are manifested as indulging themselves by squandering hard-earned money of parents to keep up with the Joneses and only take without giving. They have regretfully diminished into generations of apathy and have given rise to no sense of gratitude and appreciation for not the least to their parents. (Z. Chen & Zou, 2007, p. Preamble)

In fact, moral education came into the curriculum of schools in China in 1992 (Wansheng & Wujie, 2004) and so has been in existence for over 20 years. This was then strengthened by the Guidelines for Ideology and Morality in Full-time Compulsory Education (Experimental Version) that was put into practice in 2003 (People's Republic of China Ministry of Education [PRCME], 2003). In 2011, the Guideline was finalized and came into effect after an experimental process of 8 years (PRCME, 2011). In the course of moral education curriculum experimental reforms, along with existing qualities such as honesty, diligence, self-esteem, and patriotism, humanistic dimensions such as caring and empathy were added to the Guidelines. The guiding principles of moral education remained the same as patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, underpinned by communist theories such as Marxism–Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory. Thus, the ultimate goal of moral education for Chinese children remained unchanged; in that it was to work, serve, and sacrifice for the country. In the last decades, filial piety, seen as a vital virtue of Confucian morality, was also added to the school curriculum (China National Institute for Educational Research [CNIER], 2002), advocating respect for parents. Despite all the aforementioned efforts, against a backdrop of the current educational and social settings that overwhelmingly underscore academic performance and future material success (Deng, 2011), moral education in China's schools apparently has not functioned properly to mitigate the trend of lack of gratitude in young children.

In the views of the Party (Chinese Communist Party), much of the responsibility for this social problem is customarily sheeted home to degenerate foreign elements, such as selfishness arising from economy marketization and bourgeois liberalization in ideological dynamics, in which people were apt to lose themselves in maximizing personal interest that made a direct impact on younger generations. Alongside this, so-called rotten Western culture also infiltrated its values of individualism and hedonism into modern China, giving rise to a loss of faith, lack of responsibility, and even moral degeneration (C. Chen & Liu, 2006; Huang, 2011; Zhu, 2011). Based on its own self-interested interpretations, the Party had recourse to its traditional means of ideological work to address this social problem, campaigns. Recently, widespread gratitude campaigns have been launched across

China by the Chinese government at all levels of education, from primary school to university. In 2005, gratitude education was introduced into the School Students' Rules of Shanghai; in 2006, campaigns of gratitude education were unveiled in all primary, middle, and vocational schools of Guangxi Autonomous Region; in 2010, Uygur Autonomous Region campaigned a series of gratitude education activities at all levels of the Communist Youth League and the Young Pioneers; in 2012, the Activity Month of Gratitude Education for adolescents was launched across Heilongjiang Province, along with the Quantification Project of University Student Quality Education with gratitude education as its core. Gratitude education activities ranged from regular themed class meetings, school mobilization assemblies, school commendatory meetings, theme activity week/month, and symposiums, to touring report groups such as the Long Marches for Gratitude Education of China on Campus, and to massive publications of books and articles on gratitude to reinforce ideological education. Students were required to sing songs and/or write articles in praise of the greatness of parental love, observe Mum doing housework, listen to parents' bitter and sad stories, say a word of thank you, give them a hug, serve them a cup of tea, wash their feet once, and share some of the family housework to express their gratitude to parents.

Is it likely to truly develop a grateful heart through these actions? Or is it possible to develop a grateful heart through simple ideological indoctrination or moral exhortation in social media and schools? Let us first look into what the literature review may tell us.

## Literature Review

Although “gratitude seems out of fashion in modern life” (McAdams & Bauer, 2004) is a bit overstated, unlike empathy, sympathy, or shame, gratitude is one of the most neglected emotions and virtues in psychology (Emmons, 2004; Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000; Solomon, 2004). It is not that modern people do not unthinkingly say thank you to a waitress for bringing a cup of coffee to the table, as understanding gratitude as a manifestation of politeness falls into a sociological sphere (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines gratitude as “the quality or condition of being thankful; the appreciation of an inclination to return kindness” (p. 1135). In psychological parlance, gratitude is seen as the positive recognition of benefits received (Emmons, 2004; Harned, 1998; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006), or “the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience” (Bertocci & Millard, 1963, p. 389). Herein, Emmons (2004) also uses *undeserved merit* as an alternative of unearned benefits. Yet, his notion of *undeserved merit* that he sees as the cornerstone of gratitude may be inappropriate when considering parental devotion to their young children to be either undeserved merit that children are expected to repay or

deserved merit that they need not worry about. When coming to the definition of “the positive recognition,” Fitzgerald’s (1998) three components of gratitude that focus on a sense of appreciation or a disposition to act may be too vague, as behavioral expressions of gratitude do not indicate definitively that a person has experienced grateful emotions, and it does not naturally lead to substantial “acts” to return kindness. “Acts” to return kindness can involve something as simple as a word of “thanks” or a cup of tea, but could also be a substantial investment that requires a massive input of time, labor, energy, health, wisdom, respect, and financial resources, such as filial duty in the East. Therefore, “the distinguishing mark of gratitude is an act to repay” (as cited in Weiss, 1985, p. 49). In sum, gratitude should be comprehended not just as a desire to show appreciation for, but more importantly, an act of returning kindness.

Literature review shows that the examination of the properties of gratitude in most psychological studies, if not all, revolves around a moral affect or emotion (Cohen, 2006; Emmons, 2004; Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000; McAdams & Bauer, 2004; McCullough, Emmons, Kilpatrick, & Larson, 2001), its positive and negative effects (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Fredrickson, 1998, 2004; Watkins, 2004), its attributions as cognitive components (Davidson & Ekman, 1994; Graham & Barker, 1990; Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992; McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough & Tasang, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1979), or its morally relevant personality traits (Bergler, 1945; Cheung, Conger, Hau, Lew, & Lau, 1992; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996; Lane & Anderson, 1976; McWilliams & Lependorf, 1990; Saucier & Goldberg, 1998; Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968). As yet, no research has made an attempt to describe the psychological development of gratitude, by seeing gratitude as a personality trait that is not inherent and needs to be trained. Scant data also indicate that little research has been done to manifest the ethnographic scenario of gratitude in different countries, except for a survey undertaken in Japan and Thailand in 2006, which investigated more than 200 university students in each country.

Dan (2010) vaguely refers to the sense of responsibility as a source of gratitude but failed to justify it. A number of studies correlated the sense of responsibility with gratitude, yet they saw gratitude as the premise for the sense of responsibility rather than vice versa (Li & Li, 2007; Tang, 2007; Xiaoshan, 2006). Bi (2007) suggests gratitude arising from developing independence in children by engaging in daily housework chores. Yet, clearly, independence is different from a sense of responsibility, as the former only accepts responsibility for one’s self, whereas the latter can also consider for others, which is where gratitude resides. While acknowledging the importance of love and care, Rawls (1963) suggests that responsibility originates in forms of interdependence through the development of a sense of justice. Then, let us examine how the conceptual framework of

gratitude is developed by looking at the correlation of justice, responsibility, and gratitude.

## Conceptual Framework

Gratitude, as a moral agent associated with personality traits, has to conform to the rules of moral development. With regard to how morality enters the lives of children, while most of the contentions in theories of moral development revolve around the functioning of the underpinning principle of reciprocity and the importance of a capacity for sympathy (Piaget, 1965; Rawls, 1963; Reid, 1990), there has been consensus on justice as a fundamental role in moral development (Deigh, 1982; Hume, 1888; Kohlberg, 1981; Piaget, 1965; Rawls, 1963). The following is to demonstrate the conceptualization of gratitude through the psychological development of justice, responsibility, and gratitude.

Justice is defined by Hume (1960) as a social convention that contains human selfishness, stabilizes and safeguards external goods, which bases the social principles of obligations, rights, and benefits in human moral development. Kohlberg (1984), in his cognitive-development theory, describes justice as a fundamental footstone for moral development. Rawls also elevated it as a true sentiment of heart enlightened in his work *The Sense of Justice* (Rawls, 1963). Rawls’s (1999) theory of justice is grounded in notions of reciprocity in which “neither concern for others nor for self has priority, for all are equal, and the balance between persons is given by the principles of justice” (p. 485). Hume (1960) suggests that parents should instill children with a deeply rooted concern for the rules of justice in their moral development. In terms of how to develop a sense of justice, Piaget pioneered a two-stage theory of moral development, consisting of Stage 1, heteronomous morality, and Stage 2, autonomous reality (Craig & Dunn, 2010). In the first stage of moral development, children follow strict rules and are completely obedient to authority to develop a sense of justice before moving onto the second stage of respecting with and caring for other children in cooperation. Piaget’s theory of moral stage development is endorsed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1976) in his cognitive-developmental theory, the most influential theory of moral development in the last half century. Kohlberg divides moral development into three levels comprising six stages. He maintains that this is an invariant and irreversible order; one cannot advance to a higher stage until one has gone through each of the preceding stages. It is extremely rare to regress in stages, though the understanding gained in each stage can be retained in later stages. In his three-level development, Kohlberg (1984) concurs with Piaget that, to seed justice into children’s moral development, children’s action starts by being “motivated by avoidance of punishment” (p. 52), then moves into the second level of mutual understanding and social conscience, such as respect for law and morality, which further lays a groundwork for the third level of autonomy. Although Kohlberg has

received considerable challenge, such as being criticized for underestimating the complexity and strength of an ethic of care and compassion (Gilligan, 1982) and empathy (Damon, 1988; Gibbs, 2003; Hoffman, 1979) in his gradual, level-like development in morality, there has been no argument on the first and foremost functioning of authority or discipline in children's moral development. There has been consensus that without disciplinary authority, or without having gone through the first disciplinary level, no moral sense of justice would be developed.

Responsibility is a product of human socialization or interdependence (Kuang & Ye, 2008), underpinned by justice, which reflects the principle of reciprocity between responsibility, rights, and benefits. The sense of responsibility is an individual's feeling toward responsibility, an active and spontaneous emotion or attitude (Sun, Mu, & Liu, 1996; Zhang & Ma, 1999), considered as a core idiosyncrasy of one's personality for gauging one's quality of morality (Yang, 2005). Human nature tends to pursue and maximize material and spiritual comfort for itself. People are more concerned about their own interests than others' and therefore likely to refuse to bear responsibility for others (Montada, 2001). It is the sense of responsibility, rather than human or natural personal affection, which disciplines oneself from self-indulgence and mostly drives people to sacrifice to repay kindness. Thus, it can be concluded that a sense of responsibility, featuring a self-disciplined psychology and behavioral disposition (Auhagen & Bierhoff, 2001), is formed by developing a sense of justice in a disciplinary manner.

Pritchard (1991) suggests that an "ethic of care" would not come into being until it has gone through the development of an "ethic of justice," which transcends egoistic reasoning and motivation. This is the time of a care orientation that, as Gilligan (1982) describes, places great emphasis on acceptance of responsibility for the needs of others. In the same vein, it is the time for a gratitude orientation that one has had a vicarious understanding of and mutual respect for contributions and sacrifices others have made, which enables one to repay the kindness received at no matter what cost.

In summary, moral development theories make clear that discipline is the first and foremost factor to imbed a sense of justice in moral development, which enables a sense of responsibility to come forward naturally through mutual understanding and respect of law and morality, leading to gratitude. Again, this is not to deny the importance of other moral emotions such as love and empathy in one's moral development, but confirms that responsibility originates in forms of interdependence through the development of a sense of justice (Rawls, 1963).

## Discussion

Grounded on the aforementioned conceptual framework, the gratitude education campaigns of the Chinese government clearly focus on raising the awareness of gratitude without

realizing that gratitude, as a personality trait, needs to be trained by discipline. Such training is about an internalizing process of one's acts to return kindness. Important as children's consciousness of gratitude is, it is crucial to develop in them the habit of undertaking acts "to repay" the dedicated contributions of parents in their early years. These tasks potentially require an immense investment in terms of labor, energy, time, money, health, even freedom, and lifestyle when their elderly parents need aged care. The following section discusses how a sense of justice has not been developed in one-child families in China and how it has led to ingratitude in these children.

In contemporary China, it has become common knowledge that there is little training on justice by parents in one-child families. Academic performance is the only focus of these Chinese parents. Under their pet phrase "you do not need to worry about anything but your study," only few children do any chores at home. Some mothers even go to rent an apartment near the school at which their children study from Year 10 to Year 12, doing the cooking and cleaning every day to help their children be better prepared for the national university entrance examinations. It appears that the only practice in family education on gratitude is the role modeling of parents who wish to influence their child with their hardworking and great spirit of sacrifice. These parents born between the 1950s and 1970s experienced challenging times, including the Cultural Revolution, and learned the skills to survive and flourish. These people will do everything they can to prevent what they suffered from occurring to their child. Parents' "overweight" sense of responsibility results in an underweight or even weightless sense of responsibility in the child, and this sense of no justice accustoms the child to taking without having any thought of giving (Meng, 2007). This lack of justice education makes children unaware of their responsibility in the family that results in ingratitude to their parents. Therefore, it can be seen, in the psychological development of the one-child generations of China, there has been no element of justice education, which will naturally result in no sense of responsibility and an ungrateful child.

Despite the gravity of the situation concerning the lack of a grateful heart in Chinese younger generations, neither do I wish to understate the importance of exemplary influence, nor do I deny other factors that can contribute to the complexity of moral development, such as regulation, situational and dispositional emotionality (Eisenberg, 2000). It is not my intention to argue that family relationships are constituted only by justice, without caring and love. However, it is my view that morality development lays a solid foundation for a grateful heart. Only a good sense of responsibility can exercise the acts of expressing gratitude when coming to costly situations such as filial piety. Thus, while acknowledging that there is a need for reforms in education or other areas at the macro level, I suggest that learning to take responsibility is vital for developing a child's moral sense, in particular, and more specifically, a grateful heart.

## Conclusion

In this final section, I would like to briefly describe the conceptual framework of justice, responsibility, and gratitude. To express gratitude or repay kindness sometimes involves a considerable input in terms of time, effort, money, and the like that require a high extent of sacrifice. In the face of human nature which prefers to avert responsibility and pursue material comfort, it is the development of a sense of justice through disciplinary practices that will generate a sense of responsibility, which then internalizes gratitude for a person. Discipline is the cornerstone for the development of a sense of justice that underpins a sense of responsibility, which becomes the vital drive for acts of gratitude. Gratitude needs a sense of responsibility to fulfill. Without ensuring development of a sense of responsibility, unrequited parents may more likely bring up only self-centered children. It is noted that family responsibility, as a fundamental feature of children's psychological development, also needs to link the context of a particular historical moment and a specific cultural community to general developmental processes and individual differences (Elder & Conger, 2000; Hewlett, 1996; Weisner, 2001). The findings of the study aim to shed light on parents seeking ways of developing a grateful heart in the younger generations of China, and beyond.

There are some limitations in this study, which also give some directions for future research. First of all, all the data used in this study are from existing research. Empirical studies are encouraged to validate the conceptual conclusion; second, detailed mechanisms for the development of gratitude need to be explored; third, the findings of this study may not generalize to other non-one-child families without rigorous research investigation; finally, cultural elements were not taken into consideration in this study. Further research may look into the function of justice in different cultures. Having said this, the study is the first to suggest that gratitude, as a moral personality trait, needs to be trained through the development of a sense of justice and a sense of responsibility in a disciplinary manner.

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### Author Biography

**Shi Li** received undergraduate and postgraduate education in China and worked in schools and a Chinese municipal government for more than 10 years before coming to Australia where he pursued his study of MBA and PhD. Since 2005, he has started to teach Chinese language, contemporary Chinese culture, and Chinese calligraphy at Australian universities.