

CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND CHINA'S ASSERTIVE ONLY CHILDREN

By Ai Bai

I remember after I graduated from college and started working as a teacher in the early 1990s, older teachers would lament, “You can’t raise your hand against only children anymore.”

Throughout the thousands of years of Chinese tradition, beating and scolding students was almost a teacher’s right. If one was to conduct a survey of Chinese people over the age of 35, one would find that most have personally experienced corporal punishment from their teachers. Without exception, every one of my classmates in primary and junior middle schools was physically beaten, verbally abused, or publicly humiliated by the teacher. I remember how parents would often tell teachers, “If my child is disobedient, give him a good thrashing.” At home, parents adhered to a “spare the rod and spoil the child” philosophy. They believed that corporal punishment was a perfectly natural way to discipline children.

As a result of the rapid development of China’s economy and the successful implementation of the one-child policy, a generation of only children has emerged who not only enjoy more material wealth than their parents’ generation, but more respect as well. Striking children has become a rare occurrence within the household, and even rarer within the school system. If a teacher were to raise a hand against a student, he or she would have to face the outrage of the student’s family. As children are becoming less and less willing to turn the other cheek and suffer insults without question, teachers are warning one another: “Don’t hit an only child.”

I remember that in the school where I used to teach, my colleagues often discussed the fact that students who came from single child households talked back to them, did not look them straight in the eye, and showed no gratitude. One episode made a particularly deep impression on me.

On that occasion, the principal of our junior middle

school publicly scolded a first-year student, who was an only child from a relatively well-heeled family: “Your teacher works so hard to teach you, and your parents make so many sacrifices to raise you and provide for you, but you just won’t study. Aren’t you letting down your teacher? Aren’t

you letting down your parents?” By rights, one would have expected the student to lower his head in shame, but to everyone’s surprise the student coolly replied: “Preparing lessons and teaching is a teacher’s job and parents *have* to raise their children. I don’t owe them anything. Where does ‘letting them down’ come into it?” The teachers who witnessed the event had to catch their breath in astonishment that a student had the audacity to sass the principal. Such brazen public impertinence was unheard of. For years afterwards, teachers who were there would cite this student’s insolence as proof of the lack of respect and scruples characteristic of only children with respect to their teachers.

While I was writing this article, I phoned a teacher who was there that day. To my surprise, he felt that the student who had talked back to the principal had not been excessively brash. In fact, he believed the student had a point. But his last comment still had an air of resignation: “We’ve ended up putting students on pedestals and are afraid that if we’re in some way found wanting as teachers we’ll get in trouble with them and their parents. Being a teacher is getting harder and harder.” I couldn’t help but exclaim, “So, now it’s the students who are molding their teachers instead of the other way around?” Countless run-ins between students and teachers have practically turned the teacher-student relationship on its head. The question remains: Is this a step forward or a step backward?

Now that a whole generation of only children is finishing school and entering the job market, the media and the public are taking note of the perceived differences and characteristics attributed to only children. Only

children often lack tact and diplomatic skills. They are not afraid to contradict their superiors and frequently change jobs, a practice that has many parents worried. I found that with a number of parents, whether or not their children were right in contradicting their superiors is of little importance to them; their greatest concern is that their children are unable to compromise in order to protect themselves. They think that their children are, in plain Chinese, “immature” and “foolish.”

One of my former students (let’s call her Xiao Gao) was a case in point. Xiao Gao came from a wealthy family; both her parents were doctors, and she was the only child. After graduating from college, she began working for a government tax agency. She soon realized that her boss had a flawed interpretation of certain tax laws and government tax policies

and expected his subordinates to implement those policies according to his understanding. Though her coworkers were content to do as they were told, Xiao Gao decided to speak with her boss about which tax policies he had misunderstood. Her concerns were ignored, and she held her tongue. As time passed, she slowly realized that her boss had not misunderstood the tax legislation and policy at all, but had intentionally interpreted certain policies so that they worked in his favor, especially with respect to certain businesses in which he had invested. She was shocked to discover that her coworkers had all known about his illicit activities but had tacitly agreed to turn a blind eye. When Xiao Gao told her parents, they urged her not to stand out from her coworkers, to stay on her boss’s good side, and to count her blessings for having such a coveted job.

“Whatever your boss says, you do. Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, or you’ll live to regret it.” Once again, Xiao Gao resolved to keep her misgivings to herself. Her boss, though, acted hostile and continued to ostracize her due to their first conversation. Provoked by his behavior, Xiao Gao erupted. She confronted her boss in a loud argument and wrote a report to his superiors

about his misconduct. But Xiao Gao’s report did not result in any official action. In the end, she felt completely disillusioned and handed in her resignation.¹ Xiao Gao’s parents later helped her find a job at a state-owned enterprise, but after six months she quit because she felt that the manager of her department was ignorant and made arbitrary decisions. She felt that there was nothing she could learn from him and quit. Xiao Gao is now working at a travel agency, a job she found herself, but again is very dissatisfied with her boss.

Stories of only children like Xiao Gao have become very common due largely to the environment in which they are growing up and their families’ economic circumstances. Because they are treated over-affectionately at home and leniently at school, many children from single child households

develop more assertive personalities. Most of them benefit from a proper education, and exposure to the outside world allows them to express their own opinions. Furthermore, only children usually come from relatively well-off families, so that if they are out of work, their parents can support

them. Consequently, they are not afraid to offend their boss, challenge authority, or quit their job.

In the not-so-distant past, Chinese children were subjected from a young age to physical and verbal discipline from their parents at home and lived in fear of their teachers’ authority at school. By the time they became adults, the contours of their personality had been whittled down to fit a certain mold and they had been programmed to work according to their boss’s dictum, regardless of right or wrong. At that time, most Chinese families had no savings to speak of, people had few job choices, and there was no sense of financial security. If someone lost their job, they faced destitution; if they had a family, that person risked the destitution of their whole family as well. Ordinary Chinese people simply could not afford to contradict their



Chinese children read after their teacher in a school in Guiyang suburb. Photo credit: CHINA OUT REUTERS/China Newsphoto SONG/mk.

supervisors or challenge authority. They had no choice but to make the best of a bad bargain and endure unfair treatment with extraordinary forbearance. Learning to cultivate good relations with authority figures became an essential survival skill.

However, I feel that some of the “defects” the Xiao Gaos of this world manifest are positive qualities that were sorely missing in previous generations of Chinese people. Aren’t parents inculcating a servile mentality by expecting their children to put up with bosses who “shoot the bird who takes the lead,” and place diplomacy over fairness in order to protect themselves? Isn’t a value system that insists on patient resignation and this particular kind of maturity the chief culprit and the breeding grounds of bureaucratism, a woeful lack of civility in the service sector, and all manners of social injustices?

Chinese people who have lived in a developed Western democracy may aver, with a sigh, that in the West it is government officials who fear the wrath of ordinary citizens, not the other way around, political leaders are genuine public servants, and even corporate executives treat their subordinates with respect. Whereas in China, so-called public servants are known and treated as “old masters” (*lao taiye* 老太爷). There are surely institutional factors at work, but in my opinion, the main reason our public servants have become “old masters” is that for far too long Chinese people have cultivated maturity in the form of tolerance and wisdom in the form of silence as protection mechanisms in an unfair society. The “immaturity” and “foolishness” exhibited by so many only children nowadays are precisely the laudable qualities that were most conspicuously lacking in their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

At school, only children made it clear that their teachers could not hit them,² and soon afterwards, talked back to teachers, which in some sense means that the students enjoy equal rights to speak their mind. Fearing that if they do a poor job they will get into trouble with students and their parents, teachers now realize that “being a teacher is getting harder and harder.”

As more and more only children enter every possible trade and profession, they are challenging authority and a variety of social ills. Government officials and managers at all levels are warning one another: “You had better think twice before you censure an employee who grew up as an only child.” If we ever see the day when government officials and managers are afraid that if they do a poor job they will get into trouble with ordinary citizens and start complaining that “being a government official is getting harder and harder,” Chinese society will have taken a huge step forward.

While it is true enough that this generation of only children who would not submit to corporal punishment will continue to pay dearly for their “immaturity” and inability to suffer in silence, there is little doubt that they will be a major driving force for social progress and the advancement of democracy in China.

Translated by Paul Frank

Notes

1. According to Xiao Gao, her former employer was later demoted because of her reports.
2. The decrease of corporal punishment in schools is no doubt due to stronger policies and laws, but I firmly believe that resistance from only children in the home has also played an important role in this as well.