

***Abstract***

**An ethnographic study of ‘Steiner Fever’ in China: Why are Chinese parents turning away from mainstream education towards the holistic ‘way’ of Steiner education?**

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In the past decade, China has seen a major expansion of alternative education, an aspect of which is the ‘Steiner Fever’, which refers to Steiner (Waldorf) education’s rapid growth in this country. I approached my doctoral study with an overarching question: What is at stake in the feverish manner in which Steiner education has been embraced in China? I have explored the ‘Steiner Fever’ by investigating choices, perceptions and experiences of parents and teachers in relation to Steiner education in China. I have taken a transdisciplinary, dialectical approach, with a conceptual framework inspired by the notion of ‘Tao’ in which events are never thought of as occurring in isolation but embedded in a meaningful whole.

The research employed a two-sited ethnographic design, and I spent four months each at two Steiner schools in China in 2017. The data generation methods included interviews with parents and teachers and participant observations. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Findings show that parents and teachers raised critical comments based on instrumentalism to challenge the Chinese state school system and its examination-oriented form of education, and they concerned about the spiritual, ecological crisis in the wider materialism-oriented society in China. They saw Steiner schools would support a happy, healthy and holistic childhood for the children and enable them to ‘become who they are’.

Scholars (e.g. Houghton, 2012) have noted the establishment of Steiner schools outside of Europe could be considered a form of spiritual colonialism. I suggest that Steiner education has not simply imported a Western version of spirituality available only to middle-class Chinese parents, rather that Steiner education’s presence in China should be understood dialectically. That is to say, the seeds of its origin were sown in the means-to-an-end nature of the Chinese state education system, which ‘forgets’ the spiritual dimension within human life. Steiner’s focus on the organic unfolding of an individual’s spirit appears to be in line with Taoist and Confucian thinking. Chinese traditional values can be understood to be in a paratactical relationship with Steiner education values, with the notion of ‘holism’ providing the central position around which these frameworks orbit. I argue that Steiner education offers a potential pathway for Chinese people to reconnect with aspects of their own traditional ways of being, which had become disembedded in the course of the modernisation process after the Opium Wars.