

# **'This is My Life after all': Aspirations and Ways of Life in a Taiwanese Free School**

*Wai Lok Ng (Independent Researcher)*

## **Abstract**

*This article examines a Taiwanese 'free' school, which I name as Wholesome School, based on an ethnography of forty-six days participating and observing teachers' and students' lives on campus. Taiwan, a democratic country under the influence of the progressive education movement, provided fertile soil for education innovation. A group of educators detested the state's factory schooling model, which upholds a single ideal of academic success and the Confucius value of filial piety and obedience, and founded Wholesome. These teachers reinvented the social game rules of schooling and endowed students with liberty, equality, and independence. In the boarding school, students lived idiosyncratically and negotiated with the others on their freedom and responsibility. Responsible for their own choices, Wholesome students learned to discover their selves, make autonomous decisions, and respect individuality as well as diversity. From this research, it is evident that while social structures have a significant power in structuring habitus and limiting choices, social actors are aware of the rules of the structures they are embedded in and the serious stakes involved in playing the games and are capable of creatively accepting, rejecting, and modifying such rules by means of their agency and reflexivity.*

## Introduction

'This is my life after all,' Pai-han<sup>1</sup>, an eighteen-year-old Taiwanese student in his final secondary school year, answered solemnly when I asked about his parents' disapproval of him not pursuing a university degree. On his way home, Pai-han shared with me his lack of direction; 'I don't want to study something that I am not passionate about just for the sake of getting a degree... like all others do.' One year before taking his university entrance exams, Pai-han decided to drop out and enrol in an alternative school, which I will call Wholesome School. 'Using travelling as a metaphor, studying in Wholesome is like switching from a guided tour to a custom trip. I can finally listen to my voice and explore myself (tansuo ziji),' he surprised me again with his insights.

Similar to Summerhill School, Sudbury schools, and Neue Schule Hamburg, Wholesome called itself a 'free' school (ziyou xuexiao) with democratic education (minzhu jiaoyu). The students of the boarding school are responsible for their own education, and the school is governed by direct democracy with equal-weight votes from teachers and students. Despite the freedom granted by the school, Pai-han still felt pressured by the expectations of his parents, previous teachers, and schoolmates to enrol in a university. Having lived at the school for forty-six days, I was intrigued by the conflicting expectations among students, teachers, parents, and society. The students' stories of self-discovery prompted me to wonder: Why did these Taiwanese students at Wholesome put so much emphasis on leading a self-determined lifestyle and aspiring to professions that could fulfil their self-actualisation? How did the school as an institution help create this culture of individuality?

Climbing up the education ladder in Hong Kong, I had almost always been a 'good' studious student in my teachers' and parents' eyes. During my undergraduate Psychology degree, I met people from all sorts of backgrounds, with wonderful hobbies and elaborate

---

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms, following Taiwanese romanisation conventions of names, are employed to preserve privacy and Mandarin Chinese Pinyin is used to romanize the names.

repertoires of 'non-textbook' knowledge. I compared myself with them, feeling incompetent and disgruntled. Inspired by various developmental theories, I imagined who I would be, had I had a different upbringing. Fuelled by this personal query, I encountered the field of education innovation and decided to explore the issue in an Anthropology MA degree specializing in childhood, youth, and education. My goal was to investigate the lives of students attending schools different from conventional state institutions.

In Hong Kong, with the help of the principal of an alternative school, I landed a visit to Wholesome. On the way to the campus, the taxi driver rhetorically asked me, 'The school you're going to... it's the one where rich kids don't need to study, right'? At this moment, I knew I was going to the right place. Same as me, Wholesome's Taiwanese students were from an ethnic Chinese background which normally upholds academic success and obedience to authority. Yet, compared to my youth, these students grew up in an utterly different environment. In this article, I will delineate the historical and political constituents of Wholesome and the social structure as laid out by the teachers and make a case for how Wholesome students appropriated the value of self-determination and individuality from the school.

### **Social and Cultural Reproduction: Playing a 'Serious Game'**

Theories of social and cultural reproduction offer rich insights into the formation of one's values, desires, and habits. As Pierre Bourdieu theorised (1977; 1987), through their cumulative experience in a social structure, children acquire a 'habitus'. This concept refers to an unconsciously embodied cultural capital, which subsumes one's values, ways of life, dispositions, and a taste for what is appealing and what is not. To illustrate, Diane Reay (1995) researched girls' behaviour in two primary schools in the US. One school was predominantly attended by students of white middle-class families, while the other was mainly multi-ethnic and working-class. She discovered that the girls of the former school were more readily disrespectful of their teachers, causing trouble to the dinner ladies, and actively ignoring their classmates of ethnic minorities. Those in the latter school,

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

contrastingly, were more willing to help their classmates and less apt to challenge or demean their teachers. Reay argued that these children were exposed to different sets of social experience that were specific to their ethnicity, gender, and social class, and thus acquired distinct behaviours. In other words, individuals within a similar social context of class, race, gender, opportunity structures, and community norms tend to appreciate certain ways of life more than others.

However, ethnographic research has shown that children are not passive recipients of their social structures but active agents in negotiating interpersonal dynamics. This is due to the fact that an actor may live in multiple structures with contradicting values and thus can creatively interpret their idiosyncratic circumstances and choose which values to uphold or disdain (MacLeod 2009; Patthey-Chavez 1993). For example, as described in the seminal work of Paul Willis (1977), who spent time with a group of secondary students in an industrial neighbourhood in the UK, despite the school's promotion of meritocracy and obedience to authority, students from working-class families often formed gangs that resisted school cultures and instead valued labour-intensive jobs and delinquency. Echoing their blue-collar fathers, they perceived schoolwork and management-level jobs as soft and feminine. Moreover, they preferred themselves to be tough and masculine and prepared themselves for the hard, manual factory work that they would perform in the future. Therefore, the students' interactions with their parents, peers, and school authorities could function as an arena of cultural conflict and acculturation that moulded their habitus.

Capturing this idea that students are simultaneously structured by and restructuring their school culture, Bradley Levinson (2001) borrowed Sherry Ortner's notion of 'serious game' (1997) to study a Mexican secondary school. To bridge the ideas of structure and agency, as well as practice and theory, Ortner theorised that,

social life is culturally organised and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules and goals of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous

"agents"; and yet at the same time there is "agency," that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is "serious" is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high. (1997: 12)

Levinson (2001) discovered that despite coming from heterogenous backgrounds of ethnicity, class, and gender, Mexican secondary school students did not divide themselves across social positions and orientations. Instead, they appropriated the school's discourse on equality and solidarity and valued their similarities. For instance, pursuing individual excellence by outperforming the others was scorned by the students, but the practices of sharing homework and helping others received praise from their peers. Despite being aware of their social differences, the students continued to forge a culture of equality by welcoming, declining, and shaping the rules of the social game, and negotiating their positions within it. Drawing on this understanding of the 'serious game', this article investigates first, how Wholesome students make meaning out of their schooling experiences and interactions with other students, teachers, parents, and outsiders and secondly, how they construct their selves and ways of life through notions of individuality.

### **Free Schools and the Progressive Education Movement**

Free schools and democratic schools are alternative schooling models that have been devised by the progressive education movement. Dating back to the 1750s, the American and French Revolutions sparked the imagination of a fairer world with universal respect for reasoning, rule of law, and science (Reese 2001). In the movement, the conventional schooling system was deemed a 'factory model' that viewed teachers as 'superintendents' and children as 'subjects' to be 'banked' with knowledge that would allow them to serve businesses and factories (Cuban, 1972; Freire 2005; Katz, 1971; LeCompte 1978; Leland & Kasten 2002). Critics further condemned this form of child-rearing and schooling as 'mind-numbing, unnatural, and pernicious, a sin against childhood' (Reese 2001: 2).

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

Progressive educators and philosophers instead proclaim that children are active, innocent, and curious learners in need of a pedagogy that liberates them and provides them with basic human rights (Archard, 2004; Reese 2001). Several new schools with alternative educational approaches have been established over the years, such as Maria Montessori's schools in Italy (Thayer-Bacon 2012), Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf schools in Germany (Uhrmacher 1995), and A.S. Neill's Summerhill School in the UK (Stronach & Piper 2008). In particular, the Summerhill School, the Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts in the US, and the Democratic School of Hadera in Israel are examples of 'free' schools (Graubard 1972). Their teachers aim at enabling students to explore and express their selves by allowing them to take initiative in their learning and to participate in school governance.

Taiwanese education has undergone its own progressive movement over the years. According to Chang Kyung-Sup, East Asian societies have recently been experiencing a 'compressed modernity', whereby 'economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system' (2010: 444). Taiwan, which is also undergoing rapid transformation, currently exhibits a clash of fundamentally contradictory values among its pre-existing tradition, colonial and postcolonial cultural components, as well as modern and postmodern temporalities. At the focal point of social change, schooling and parenting strategies are in a state of constant contestation and morphing (Lan 2018).

Prior to the collapse of Chinese Imperialism, the government in Taiwan appointed civil servants on the basis of Keju, an examination that evaluates students on their understanding of Confucianism, a philosophy that emphasises respect for authority and tradition (Chou & Ching, 2012). The modern education system was introduced to the island during Japanese colonisation between 1895 and 1945. In 1949, after the defeat in the civil war with the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) retreated to Taiwan and claimed independence from the mainland. With the assistance of the US, which held Taiwan as the strategic frontline against communism during the Cold

War (Lan 2018), the country developed its modernised education system with an 'overt emphasis on the imported, US-based, English-oriented "official knowledge"' (Chou & Ching 2012: 73). The government, eager to support the industry and export-driven economy, sought to improve the country's educational level and workers' qualifications. Since then, state schools have adopted the American model of six primary, six secondary, and four tertiary school years.

The lifting of martial law in 1987 led to democratisation, introduced the values of liberty and multiculturalism, and incorporated people's voice into educational reform (Chou & Ching, 2012). In 1994, many Taiwanese citizens blamed the unacceptably high student suicide rate on the existing educational structure, which had an overly centralised curriculum and an ultra-competitive examination system. They marched on the streets in the April Tenth March to demand an education that valued 'humanism, democratisation, diversification, the development of science and technology, and internationalisation' (Kwok 2017: 56). The government implemented a reform that encouraged alternative pathways to universities, but public examinations' competitiveness was still intolerable among parents, teachers and students (Chou & Ching 2012; Lin & Tsai 2002). In the meantime, the introduction of the Western idea of providing children a 'happy childhood' (Lan 2018) turned Taiwan's highly competitive education system even more controversial.

Opposing the state-led educational system, some Taiwanese people soon began to found their own alternative pedagogies and schools, such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Confucius schools, as well as non-academic institutions, including technical, art, culinary, and indigenous schools. In response to these challenges, the government finally passed the Three-Type Acts of Experimental Education in 2014, which permitted citizens to legally establish and study in schools that do not abide by the government's mandatory curriculum (Liu 2015). From then on, schools that follow the government curriculum and those that do not are respectively called *tizhinei* (government schools) and *tizhiwai* (out-of-the-system experimental/alternative schools) (Wang 2018). It was in this historical and political context that in 1995 a group of protestors in the April Tenth March founded Wholesome School as a free democratic school.

## **The Site and Research**

Wholesome is located on a 500-metre-high forested mountain in central Taiwan. Reaching the school by car and on foot from the nearest town requires fifteen minutes and one hour respectively. The students-to-teachers ratio is kept within seventy to ten. At the time of my research, the students were aged from ten to nineteen, but the teachers were also planning to branch out to primary education. Wholesome is a boarding school, and the students follow a bi-weekly schedule of ten consecutive school days followed by four days-off.

Wholesome parents come from all walks of life, such as project managers, professors, artists, politicians, and small business owners. The school charges a high school fee, NT\$300,000 (£7500) per annum when the mean Taiwanese income at the time of my research was NT\$573,708 (£14,300) (Ministry of Finance, Taiwan, 2017). This meant that the average Taiwanese parents had to spend more than half of their income on tuition fees. In contrast, public schools in Taipei City costs less than NT\$16,000 (£400) and most private schools charge around NT\$120,000 (£3000) (Taipei City Government, 2016). In a nutshell, during my research, alternative public and private schools were much cheaper and affordable than Wholesome. In this regard, most Wholesome families belong to the middle-class.

In total, I spent forty-six days among Wholesome students and teachers between April and July 2018. I lived in the teachers' dormitory, and while I could enter all rooms on campus freely, with the exception of the school office, I always asked for students' permission before entering their rooms. Due to the frequent visits by guests, the students appeared comfortable with my presence. I conducted my research in Mandarin, which I had previously learned in Hong Kong. I chatted informally with students and teachers, attended classes, meals, meetings, ceremonies, performances, open days, admission talks, and conferences. I tended to be quiet in order to minimise my intrusion and took brief observational notes in my notebook or smartphone, which I later developed fully on my laptop. I also examined the school's magazines, website, Facebook page, and meeting minutes.



Although I tried to interact with as many students as possible, regardless of their gender, personalities, and interests, I formed closer relationships with more sociable students, in particular three boys and three girls. Owing to the limited time and budget to complete my one-year self-financed Master's thesis, this investigation was restricted to the lives of current teachers and students for a short period of time, and did not address the lives of alumni and external social actors. Nonetheless, the participant observation, the written materials, and ordinary conversations under examination here provided a rich amount of information that helped me uncover the inner workings of the school.

### **Wholesome School**

Sometimes, we need to protect students from their parents and persuade them to let their children be and wait and see how they will grow. We do talk with the students too to see if they are still up for the education here. If they are not, they could always choose other schools.

Kuan-lin, the school's headteacher, explained what the Three-Party Meeting (sanfanghuitan) between teachers, parents and students was. It was the teachers' intention to set up Wholesome as a boarding school in order to isolate the students from the rest of their families and other communities and curtail the influence of outsiders (Liu 2015). As such, Wholesome can be seen as a subculture, defined by Stephen Duncombe as 'a group that has been cut off, or more likely has cut itself off, from the dominant society in order to create a shared, inclusive set of cultural values and practices' (2002: 7), and as a form of cultural resistance that challenges society's dominant educational ideology (Duncombe, 2007). This section will explain Wholesome's rationale to be isolated from the greater society and expound their reconstructed pedagogy.

### **Filial Piety: The Obstacle of Self-Actualisation**

Wholesome teachers thought that students should be protected from the conventional teaching and parenting styles that 'dehumanised' (qurenxinghua) students by forcing them to renounce their individual selves for the collective 'good'. In particular, Wholesome principal, Chih-wei, interpreted the value of filial piety as a 'deep-rooted cultural structure of the East' (dongfang shencengciwenhua). Originated from ancient China, the Confucius philosophy of filial piety (xiao) was thought to be one of the major moral and behavioural codes in East Asia (Ikels 2004; Remmert 2020). Although the concept encompasses a gamut of ethical interpretations, it is generally understood as an intergenerational contract, whereby parents are obligated to provide emotional and material care for their children in childhood and, in return, children ought to assist their parents until old age. This code of exchange is also applicable to other relationships including husbands and wives, governors and citizens, and the senior and the junior (Jordan 1998). Across time and space, the particular content and manifestation of this behavioural code has changed with the idiosyncratic historical development of various societies, leaving the contract to have multiple versions in different East Asian countries (e.g. Kim, Kim, & Hurh 1991; Ikels 2004; Phua & Lou 2008; Sun 2017).

In modern urban Taiwan, the social debate on the fatal cases of children neglecting their dying parents amplified the moral obligation of young Taiwanese to provide for the elderly, but recent economic stagnation intensified the competition between them as earning enough resources became more difficult (Hsu 2007). This translates into high academic expectations, which connote good future job prospects, and a need for filial obedience to school teachers, who are senior and also impart knowledge for academic success. For instance, in Shaw's ethnographic studies of two Taiwanese schools (1991; 1994), students, especially marginal ones, faced immense pressure to suppress their own desires and study hard for the greater good of their families and communities. On the contrary, their failure instigated them to seek intense sensations and pleasure through music, drugs, and mischief. Some Wholesome students also reported having experienced corporal punishment and humiliation in state schools due to disobedience or unsatisfactory

academic performance. For example, a student's primary school teacher used to rank-order students according to their overall school grades and ask those with the highest grades to choose their classroom seats first, leaving the poorest students to use leftover seats.

According to Wholesome teachers, filial-piety-based pedagogy falsely portrays adults as inherently authoritative and truthful, thus undermining students' in-born curiosity and capability. Chih-wei described state education at an alternative education conference as follows: 'We cut children's wings and blame them for not knowing how to fly. Kids ask questions when they are young but now, they don't know how and what to ask, just like those in our school admission interviews.' Vice-principal A-hung's theory of 'democratic fatigue' echoed that of Chih-wei: 'When the students encounter things that they don't like, they tend to tolerate and silently hope for a person in power to solve the problems. They would only carry on to be like so after graduation.' In short, pedagogical approaches based on filial piety negate students' agency, turn them hopeless and exhausted, and convince them that they have no power to question authority and change reality.

In contrast, Wholesome founders were fascinated by A.S. Neill's quote: 'I would rather see a school produce a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar' (as cited in Liu 2015: 94). The Wholesome website explained that, 'Human exists not for happiness (kwaile) but meaning (yiyi); meaning exists in the realisation of freedom; happiness is the by-product of freedom.' Referencing Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of liberty (2002), they expanded their guiding principles on the Wholesome website:

Negative freedom is being free from coercion or having the right to be left alone. [...] Positive freedom is a process, driven by internal spontaneous motivation, of making decisions and acting them out with dedication and seriousness, after a full understanding of all possibilities and limitations. It is also a commitment to one's self and the concomitant responsibilities.

## THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

In short, Wholesome teachers conceptualised personhood as being autonomous and free to pursue one's self-determined desires, and at the same time as being responsible for the others' freedom to be themselves.

### **Negative Freedom: Liberation from Coercion**

The path to self-actualisation in Wholesome conceptualisation required negative freedom, meaning the liberation from external judgement and prohibition. One form of negative freedom came from students' ability to engage activities that were prohibited in government schools. For instance, unlike their Taiwanese peers who spent their entire day in class, Wholesome students were given the power to plan their daily schedule at their discretion. Moreover, they could freely select their coursework from a set of courses and decide independently whether to skip classes. One student sufficiently summed up the school structure, 'As long as we don't cause trouble to others, we can do anything.'

However, Wholesome teachers recognised that the exertion of one's will may inevitably violate others' negative freedom. As stated in the website, 'When children encounter conflicts, we willingly let them decide, and respect their democratic decision made through self-government'. The teachers maintained that a mechanism was needed in order for school inhabitants to resolve disputes and for the students to learn to be responsible for the others. This was executed in self-governing meetings (zizihui) and a law court, both of which were organised by democratically elected students. In the meetings, teachers and students could draft, maintain, and abandon school rules by voicing their opinions and voting, with equal weight, for or against the proposals. Anyone could report cases that violated the rules and demand a form of punishment or repayment at the school court. Court cases and hearings were handled by student prosecutors and lawyers, who gathered evidence and gave sentences respectively.

In addition to the structural design of Wholesome, teachers were also committed to playing the 'serious game' of power and equality. I once overheard two teachers commenting on

students' behaviour, 'I was very happy to see the students disagreeing with us in zizihui. I would have been more worried if they had blindly followed our opinions.' Instead of expecting the students to think like them, Wholesome teachers cared more about students' independent critical thinking. Moreover, teachers would often tease and play with their students, and discuss a wide range of topics, from romantic love and life choices to movie appreciation and mundane quotidian matters. Teachers would also be vigilant about the things they took for granted and tried to appreciate various ways of living; for instance, Chun-hsien once told me: 'The other day I found out that a student who plays a lot of computer games is also watching a lot of YouTube videos, communicating with other players, and participating in online forums, all in English! Good for him!' Finally, teachers preferred being addressed by their first names or nicknames, in contrast to government schools, where surnames are normally used, and downplayed their authority with the students. Upon my request to watch the graduation ceremony videos, Chia-yu admitted to having no power to speak on behalf of the students and instructed me to seek their permission. In short, once negative freedom was established at Wholesome, students were then able to engage positive freedom and explore themselves.

### **Positive Freedom: Self-Actualisation**

Positive freedom is realised through exploring (tansuo) different activities and dedicating time and resources to anything that one may deem worthwhile. The following example provides an excellent illustration of positive freedom: 'If you haven't found a concrete topic to work on, does it mean that even if you have tried a lot of things during your time in Wholesome, you still have not had enough exploration of yourself (niziji)?', Chun-hsien, another vice-principal, rhetorically asked a group of graduating students who were preparing for their self-directed projects. He continued to describe how one alumnus, who did not know what to do after graduation, decided to videotape his journey cycling down from a tall mountain in Taiwan. This led him to discover his interest in photography and videography, and to subsequently apply to an art school.

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

Inspired by the Summerhill School in the UK at the early years of Wholesome, teachers here evolved to have their own educational philosophy of 'the person as the goal' (renweimudi, Liu 2015: 74). On many occasions, the teachers frequently asked the students questions like 'Who are you?', 'What do you want?', 'What do you think?' and 'How do you want to spend your time?'. In this direction, Wholesome had a course where students brainstormed questions and then chose to do short presentations on a few of them. Similarly, every two weeks, students held a committee intended to generate discussion questions based on recent events at school. While the teachers leading the small-group discussions invited students to voice their opinions, they never insisted when a student had nothing to say.

I argue that Wholesome teachers' trust in students' capacity to attain positive freedom was based on a view that is similar to Nikolas Rose's idea of personhood (1996). According to Rose, personhood in modern Western societies is permeated by a political, legal, and moral emphasis on individual rights and choice. Westerners come to understand themselves as 'psychological beings' who can 'interrogate and narrate themselves in terms of a psychological "inner life" that holds the secrets of their identity, which they are to discover and fulfil, which is the standard against which the living of an "authentic" life is to be judged' (23). Subscribing to this humanistic understanding, Wholesome teachers perceived students to have their own life history that shaped their bounded psychology, including their judgements, thoughts, actions, and emotions, and deliberately motivated them to understand themselves.

In short, Wholesome teachers despised the authoritarian culture of filial piety that is premised on the singular ideal of academic and occupational success. Children, who were understood to be inherently inquisitive and motivated, were subverted and 'damaged' within state schools and conventional family settings, and were thus transformed into obedient and pessimistic subjects. To Wholesome teachers, these wounded individuals were in need of 'healing' that would allow them to live meaningful lives, make self-determined decisions, and self-actualise. Wholesome teachers were careful, therefore, to play the 'serious game' and create a tolerating, accepting, and egalitarian environment, where students felt safe and empowered to explore and express themselves.

## Wholesome Students

I don't understand why. Everything [before Wholesome] was pre-arranged. I didn't have time to think about myself, like... what I wanted to do and who I was. During summer holidays, I always shuafei (wasted time). My school was so close to home that I didn't even know how to take the metro. School and home were the only things in my life.

In a badminton session, Hsiao-han, who came to me for a chat out of boredom, said that in primary school, her parents and teachers cancelled her favourite physical education and painting classes and instead forced her to do daily formative tests, take extra tutorial classes, and attend night-time study sessions (wanzixi) every day. She managed to enter a prestigious all-girls secondary school but there she was bullied. Once she was detained for slapping a girl who mocked her parents for having given birth to such a 'creep' (guaitai). From then on, Hsiao-han started to have mental issues and eventually dropped out. After one year, her parents discovered Wholesome; 'They did not know much about Wholesome, but they could enrol me pretty much anywhere different from the schools I had attended before.'

Upon arriving at Wholesome, she was still afraid of social interaction and weary of schoolwork, and spent a lot of time shuafei-ing alone, which, she thought, might have caused her to be bullied. In the first semester, her money and clothes were stolen and her bed was urinated on. She turned tired of being mistreated and reported the suspects in the student law court. Those found at fault eventually quit school voluntarily. At that difficult period, Hsiao-han, realizing that it felt empty (kongxu) not to pursue any goals, believed that it was the turning point in her life. 'I wanted to do something,' she said, denoting that she would shuafei less and 'improve herself' (lingzijigenghao). Taking classes and engaging in school activities were the choices she made at first. During her free time, she loved doing sports and reading health magazines. In two years, she said she had learnt to be independent (duli) and self-determining (zizhu): 'now I know how to take the metro on my own.' Meanwhile, after self-reflecting and talking with other school members, she realised

## THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

that she wanted to pick up her long-lost childhood interest, which was to draw and paint. Instead of finishing her final year at Wholesome, she applied for an alternative art school. At the time of writing this article, Hsiao-han had been accepted to the new school.

Just like Hsiao-han, every Wholesome student had a different story to tell, but a common thread could be identified. This section will illustrate their processes of self-discovery, when they were liberated and encouraged to explore and make decisions, their values of self-determination and individuality, and their ways of self-actualisation in face of diversity and obstacles.

### **Self-Discovery**

Self-determination, self-exploration, and self-expression were all made possible in Wholesome, and this prompted students to comprehend that, firstly, they had been stifled by society and, secondly, that there were alternatives to such lifestyle.

Another student, Ssu-ying, told me, 'I knew that I could have my own opinion only after I saw my seniors arguing back at a teacher in class.' Having no pressure to obey anyone, Wholesome students could spend the whole day binge-watching movies, reading comics, or scrolling through their phones. Some students would label these activities as shuafei, which literally translates to 'playing like a deadbeat' and means wasting time. In addition, they ostensibly distinguished these time-wasting activities from the 'useful' ones, which included studying for classes, working out, playing instruments, assembling electronics, researching on Japanese music, mountain biking, writing poems or novels, and engaging in self-explorative activities, such as travelling around Taiwan on foot and surviving in the wilderness with limited supplies. The students said it would have been impossible to live so freely in a state school.



Moreover, this egalitarian atmosphere allowed students to regain their confidence and transform themselves. Tsung-wei, in his distinctive blue-shaded sunglasses, short ponytail, and signature tartan plaid trousers, also recounted his life-story to me. Before Wholesome, he considered himself an impulsive student:

I would, as often as not, flip the table in front of the others, especially when I encountered injustice. The teachers would never listen to me. Even when I was right in a fight, they would punish us both. The very occurrence of conflicts between students was wrong. Their system was too conventional. But now I won't do so since I know people here listen to me. I can use rationality to explain myself.

Tsung-wei felt dignified in Wholesome as it provided him with the space to voice out his opinions and be heard. Through reflecting on their experiences, Wholesome students understood that they were capable of relying on themselves to attain their goals.

Every wholesome student had his or her own unique combination of life experiences and individual agency to interpret them. For example, Chia-jung was inspired by his seniors playing guitar and eventually fell in love with classical guitar music; Che-wei realised that he could be bisexual after interacting with a boy in an improvisation dance class; Ssu-ying discovered that she wanted to be a mountaineering doctor since she believed that she had been a caring rock-climbing and trekking instructor for juniors. The plethora of activities available to the students provided them with ample opportunities to try out different lifestyles and decide what aspirations they preferred. Relishing the liberty to make their own decisions and learn about themselves, Wholesome students see self-determination and individuality as important values to cherish and protect.

## **Self-Determination**

Wholesome students' basic premise of action and non-action seemed to be mostly determined by themselves. One day, Che-wei was standing with his eyes closed under the pelting rain facing the forest. Curious, I asked him how it felt afterwards. He plainly said, 'Nothing much. I just wanted to try. It was just fine.' When I asked the students why they decided to do something, 'It seems interesting', 'It seems fun' and 'I don't know but I quite like it' were some popular responses. Conversely, 'I don't find the reason doing it' and 'I don't like it' were some justifications for skipping activities, such as going to school meetings or finishing an English-to-Chinese translation task for a class.

For Wholesome students, their subjective concern was neither getting good grades nor obeying authority but knowing and dedicating oneself to one's choices. Ssu-ying pitied that very few students in state schools autonomously aspired to be doctors and lawyers, and were rather mostly driven by high pay, social status and/or parents' and teachers' expectations. With a similar idea in mind, Hsin-hung told a visiting journalist that, 'I used to feel good about having good grades at school, but after coming to Wholesome I realised that there are more criteria than sheer academic success to judge a person.' Chun-hung's sharing to the school visitors in an open day could add to such thought: 'To me, what's important in Wholesome is not what exact path you choose after schooling but whether you know who you are and whether you have confidence in what you choose to do. This is the criteria I employ to judge the seniors.'

Furthermore, students disliked seeing the others' freedom undermined. At an alternative education conference, Pai-han found out about the teaching model of a culinary school, when the representative of the school proudly reported that her students learned how to socialise through authentic interactions in the context of restaurant internships. Returning from the event, Pai-han slammed the table and remonstrated with other students, 'Early socialisation? What about the students' own ideas? Are the orders to challenge themselves from that school genuinely what the students want?' Despite not having interacted with the students of that culinary school to find out the truth, Pai-han singlehandedly suggested that

those students were forced by the teachers to administer those tasks and questioned whether 'socialisation' at schooling ages meant being equalised with society and losing one's self.

Being able to decide for themselves was very, if not the most, important to Wholesome students. Once they identify their self-determined goals through self-discovery, they would proceed to actualise their selves.

### **Self-Actualisation**

As seen in Chia-jung, Che-wei, Ssu-ying, and Hsiao-han's examples, when Wholesome students identified a hobby they liked, a lifestyle they preferred, and a future career to pursue, they took courses of action catered to their self-interests, even if this meant disobeying teachers and disagreeing with other students. For instance, while the founding teachers set a rule that no computer games were allowed at school, a few years ago, this rule was vetoed in zizhihui and two new ones were passed: (1) offering no Wi-Fi connection at night and every Saturday and (2) prohibiting any computer games from midnight to noon. Nonetheless, I had bumped into several students who used their own network to stream movies at night or play computer games at their dorms in the morning. 'As long as I don't get caught, it's fine,' one of the students told me. Some further proposed new rules, arguing that this prohibition violated the right of free information access.

In one of these meetings, the headmaster mentioned that the school did not need to provide the rights stated in the Constitution of the Republic of China (Taiwan), as the document only guaranteed the rights of adults but not underage citizens like them. After the meeting, Chun-hung told another student that, 'At the end of the day, Wholesome is a school, an institute. Our freedom here is given by the adults but not inherent in us.' Some students however, supported the existing law, explaining that their experience of not using any electronic devices was enlightening: 'It was interesting to have to look for information without the internet. It really challenges you and makes you think of creative ways to solve

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

problems.’ The internet use dispute represented students’ different perspectives, driven by their independent reasoning. Most of the time, Wholesome students respected each other’s lifestyle choices and accepted differences as instantiations of diversity. When disputes, bullying, or rule violation arose, they resolved the issues in the court or in zizihui.

Diversity, however, was not always wholeheartedly welcomed. During my research out of all students, two wanted to prepare for university entrance examinations against the school norm. After studying at Wholesome for a few years, one of them decided that he wanted to study mechanical engineering or architecture because it would let him ‘do practical things’ (zuoshishi). Yet, he said that ‘the teachers would ask me why I was less active at school’ and felt that the teachers were not supportive enough. Notwithstanding these complaints, he expressed his gratefulness for Wholesome’s freedom, and the fact that he was able to complete all the necessary school courses early on and spend the rest of his time watching cram school videos for public examinations and working on his electronics projects. Another student explained that sometimes she hid to study for exams since a student once told her, ‘Why don’t you return to state schools if you want to take those exams?’ However, getting a university degree was the only way to become a teacher, her dream job, since she felt that she could right the wrong of the maltreatment in her schooling experience and create a happy learning environment for younger children. Despite facing others’ judgement, both students persisted steadfastly.

Nonetheless, a number of students said they felt overwhelmed imagining having to enter ‘the outside world without such freedom in Wholesome’ (waimiandeshijie meiyouzhelideziyou). Chun-hsien, the vice-principal, commented that some alumni would return to the school frequently in the first two years after graduation as if they had not ‘weaned’ (duannai). Wholesome students were aware of the different sets of game rules played in and out of Wholesome. While still at Wholesome, they were able to learn to discover themselves, determine for themselves, pursue the lifestyles and aspirations they preferred, take responsibility of their own decisions, and appreciate social diversity.

## Conclusions

This article described how, in Taiwan, a democratic country influenced by the progressive education movement, a group of educators established a school that departed from the conventional educational model upholding the single ideal of obedience and academic success, and rather adopted a liberal democratic model promoting freedom, equality, and responsibility. In the Wholesome subculture, students played by different social game rules. The school structure allowed students to determine their own ways of life and educational goals, on the basis that their behaviour would not overly intrude the others' freedom. With such liberty, students could reflect on their selves and learn to cherish their individuality and self-determination. From this forty-six-day ethnographic research, it is evident that while social structures have a significant power in structuring habitus and limiting choices, social actors are aware of the rules of the structures they are embedded in and the serious stakes involved in playing the games, and are capable of creatively accepting, rejecting, and modifying such rules by means of their agency and reflexivity.

It is noteworthy that the seemingly utopic freedom enjoyed by Wholesome students was not absolute but intentionally offered by adults for an educational purpose. Firstly, as implied by the school's educational principles, although students have their own ideas, they might not be clear about what they want or be strong enough to resist societal control. Students may also forget to respect diversity and create judgemental pressure that might obstruct the others' self-actualisation. Wholesome thus aimed to operate as a safe haven from familial and communal pressure, to offer a supportive nurturing ground that would teach students to be independent and respectful of others and eventually, to reinforce students to stand up for their individuality. However, if a student seriously threatened the school's democratic operation, the teachers had the power to suspend or even expel them. Secondly, students' freedom was heavily dependent on their parents' decisions and financial situations. Being responsible for financing students' studies, parents could also withdraw their children from the school if they changed their views on Wholesome educational principles or grew dissatisfied with their children's learning progress. In other

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

words, Wholesome students' liberty and independence were contingent on their teachers' acceptance and their parents' subscription to the school's values.

On the other hand, poorer Taiwanese families, who are not affluent enough to enrol their children in alternative schools, would rather choose state education, which is understood as a securer choice for upper social mobility (Lan 2018). Their children would also think that gap years 'discovering oneself' would be too luxurious and seek to start a stable job as soon as possible out of filial respect and existential necessity. Although at the time of the research, Wholesome was seeking government funding to subsidise students' tuition fees, it would still be uncertain whether lower-class families would take the risk of enrolling their children into a school that would provide a relatively more unwarranted future. On the contrary, Wholesome families, just like other Taiwanese middle-class families, have the opportunity to enrol their kids to overseas educational institutions, if they failed to continue into local tertiary education. These parents also have the financial resources to support the families' survival without their children's extra income. Allowing their children to 'find' themselves and their happiness through exploration is financially feasible and preferred. Hence, this education alternative remained to be more available to the affluent than to the poor.

After my fieldwork experience at Wholesome, I realised that it was naïve to imagine a different childhood. I, and those Hong Kong university students I envied, had experienced the same education system and submitted to the single ideal of academic success and obedience. And yet, we exhibited diverse characteristics and personalities. Similarly, both Wholesome students and I albeit educated in vastly different structures, would commonly feel confused about how to live our lives and what to aspire to. This unique interplay between the structures we live in, the individual biographies we have, and the agency we employ gives rise to the beauty of diversity, but also the commonality among us. In this sense, social structures are not stagnant but malleable upon actors' actions. Humans can pro-actively reclaim the power to define the re-constructible social structures. Being aware of the game rules, one can attempt to bend them according to one's will and the ideals one possesses.

### **About the Author**

Wai Lok Ng earned his Master's Degree in Anthropology of Childhood, Youth, and Education at Brunel University London and his Bachelor's Degree in Psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His research interests include education innovation, social reproduction, pedagogy, parenting, and student empowerment. He can be reached through [happyng321@hotmail.com](mailto:happyng321@hotmail.com).

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to Phaedra Douzina-Bakalaki and Ana Chiritoiu, the editors of Anthropology Matters, the blind peer reviewers, all Wholesome participants, Starfish, and Dr. Peggy Froerer.

### **References**

Archard, David. 2004. *Children: Rights and Childhood*. Second Edition. Oxon: Routledge.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. (trans. Richard Nice). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1987. (trans. Richard Nice). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chang, Kyung-Sup. 2010. 'The Second Modern Condition? Compressed Modernity as Internalized Reflexive Cosmopolitization', *British Journal of Sociology*, 61(3), 444-64.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01321.x>

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

Chou, Chuing Prudence & Ching, Gregory. 2012. *Taiwan Education at the Crossroad: When Globalization Meets Localization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cuban L. 1972. *The Managerial Imperative and the Practice of Leadership in Schools*. Albany, NY: SUNY.

Duncombe, Stephen. 2002. *Cultural Resistance Reader*. London: Verso Books.

———. 2007. 'Cultural Resistance', in George Ritzer (ed.). *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, pp. 911-13. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Freire, Paulo. 2005. (trans. Myra Bergman Ramos). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Graubard, Allen. 1972. 'The Free School Movement', *Harvard Educational Review*, 42(3), 351-373. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.42.3.n577v0m481wv1r2>

Hsu, Hui-Chuan. 2007. 'Exploring Elderly People's Perspectives on Successful Ageing in Taiwan', *Ageing & Society*, 27(1), 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X06005137>

Ikels, Charlotte. 2004. *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jordan, David K. 1998. 'Filial Piety in Taiwanese Popular Thought', in Walter Slote and George De Vos (eds.). *Confucianism and the Family*, pp. 267-284. New York: State University of New York Press.

Katz, Michael B. 1971. *Class, Bureaucracy, and Schools: The Illusion of Educational Change in America*. New York: Praeger Publishers.



Kim, Kwang Chung, Kim, Shin, & Hurh, Won Moo. 1991. 'Filial Piety and Intergenerational Relationship in Korean Immigrant Families', *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 33(3), 233-245. <https://doi.org/10.2190/Y91P-UNGR-X5E1-175K>

Kwok, Ka-ho. 2017. *When Education Meets Politics in Taiwan: A Game Theory Perspective (1994–2016)*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Lan, Pei-Chia. 2018. *Raising Global Families: Parenting, Immigration and Class in Taiwan and the US*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

LeCompte, Margaret. 1978. 'Learning to Work: The Hidden Curriculum of the Classroom', *Anthropology and Educational Quarterly*, 9(1), 22-37.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1978.9.1.05x1748z>

Leland, Christine H. & Kasten, Wendy C. 2002. 'Literacy Education for the 21st Century: It's Time to Close the Factory', *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 18(1), 5-15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/105735602753386315>

Levinson, Bradley. 2001. *We are All Equal: Student Culture and Identity at a Mexican Secondary School, 1988–1998*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lin, Sunny S.J. & Tsai, Chin-Chung. 2002. 'Sensation Seeking and Internet Dependence of Taiwanese High School Adolescents', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18(4), 411-426.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0747-5632\(01\)00056-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0747-5632(01)00056-5)

Liu, Ruo-fan. 2015. *Let the Timber Cook: An Alternative School's Utopia for Coming Generations* [成為他自己：全人，給未來世代的教育烏托邦]. Taipei: Acropolis Publishing [衛城出版].

MacLeod, J. 2009. *Ain't no Makin'it: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Third Edition. New York: Routledge.

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

Ministry of Finance, Taiwan. 2017. An Inquiry to the Recent Situation of Salary in Taiwan with Financial and Tax Statistics [由財稅大數據探討臺灣近年薪資樣貌] Available at: [https://www.mof.gov.tw/File/Attach/75403/File\\_10649.pdf](https://www.mof.gov.tw/File/Attach/75403/File_10649.pdf) (Accessed: 21 July 2019).

Ortner, Sherry. 1997. *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Patthey-Chavez, G. Genevieve. 1993. 'High School as an Arena for Cultural Conflict and Acculturation for Latino Angelinos', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 33-60. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.1993.24.1.05x1737u>

Phua, Voon Chin & Loh, Jason. 2008. 'Filial Piety and Intergenerational Co-Residence: The Case of Chinese Singaporeans', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 36(304), 659–679. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853108X327155>

Reay, Diane. 1995. 'They Employ Cleaners to do that': Habitus in the Primary Classroom', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16(3), 353-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569950160305>

Reese, William J. 2001. 'The Origins of Progressive Education', *History of education quarterly*, 41(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2001.tb00072.x>

Remmert, Désirée. 2020. *Young Adults in Urban China and Taiwan: Aspirations, Expectations, and Life Choices*. New York: Routledge.

Rose, Nikolas. 1996. *Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shaw, Thomas. 1994. "'We Like to have Fun" Leisure and the Discovery of the Self in Taiwan's "New" Middle Class', *Modern China*, 20(4), 416-445.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049402000402>

———. 1996. 'Taiwanese Schools against Themselves: School Culture Versus the Subjectivity of Youth', in Bradley Levinson, Dorothy Holland, and Douglas Foley (eds.). *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice*, pp. 187-207. New York: State University of New York Press.

Stronach, Ian. & Piper, Heather. 2008. 'Can Liberal Education Make a Comeback? The Case of "Relational Touch" at Summerhill School', *American Educational Research Journal*, 45(1), 6-37. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207311585>

Sun, Yuezhu. 2017. 'Among a Hundred Good Virtues, Filial Piety is the First: Contemporary Moral Discourses on Filial Piety in Urban China', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 90(3), 771-799. doi:10.1353/anq.2017.0043.

Taipei City Government. 2016. *The Tables of the Standard School and Miscellaneous Fees for Various Public and Private Schools in Taipei City in the Second Semester of the 2016 Academic Year* [臺北市公私立各級學校 105 學年度第 2 學期學雜費及各項代收代辦費收費標準表] Available at: [https://www-  
ws.gov.taipei/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvcHVibGJlL0F0dGFjaG1lbnQvNzEx  
MTEwNDU0NDcxLnBkZg%3d%3d&n=NzExMTEwNDU0NDcxLnBkZg%3d%3d&icon=..pd  
f](https://www-<br/>ws.gov.taipei/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9VcGxvYWQvcHVibGJlL0F0dGFjaG1lbnQvNzEx<br/>MTEwNDU0NDcxLnBkZg%3d%3d&n=NzExMTEwNDU0NDcxLnBkZg%3d%3d&icon=..pdf) (Accessed: 21 July 2019)

Thayer-Bacon, Barbara. 2012. 'Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William H. Kilpatrick', *Education and Culture*, 28(1), 3-20.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5703/educationculture.28.1.3>

THIS IS MY LIFE AFTER ALL

Uhrmacher, P. Bruce. 1995. 'Uncommon Schooling: A Historical Look at Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy, and Waldorf Education', *Curriculum Inquiry*, 25(4), 381-406.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.1995.11076190>

Wang, Heng-fen. 2018. 'The Challenges and Counter-measures of Experimental Education [實驗教育的挑戰與因應策略].' *Association for Taiwan Educational Review [臺灣教育評論月刊]*, 7(1), 68-71.

Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.