

Madness and Education: A Theoretical Analysis of Children's Aberrant Behaviours in China Using Foucauldian Viewpoint

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Abstract: This study is mainly a theoretical approach aiming to study children's unruly or deviant behaviours and demonstrate the unreasonableness of Chinese education system, with many vivid realistic examples provided. The study mainly benefits from Foucault's point of view upon "madness" and his genealogical and literary approach, follows it and extends it, giving a new and wider definition of "madness" which includes all aberrant behaviours like madness or unruliness, constructing the macroscopic socialization process of children, which is irrationality partly conquered and stymied and partly excavated and refined by rationality. The author's suggestion about this situation is also given at the end, which is profoundly influenced by Foucault and calls for education with more irrationality.

Keywords: Madness, Education, Foucault, Aberrant

1. Introduction

Chinese children have undergone draconian regulations during their childhoods. Those who seem unruly and disobedient tend to be labeled "bad children" and receive punishment. The violent scene is quite common when a child disobeys the teacher and revolts vehemently, skirmishing with other kids, shouting, fighting, as if they had gone crazy! However, it is worth considering whether unruly children are "mad" and whether the pedagogic principles drive children mad in China.

Foucault's viewpoint seems intriguing in understanding the "mad" behaviors of those naughty children, the functioning of the Chinese children's education system, and finding a solution to ameliorate it. In his book *Madness and Civilisation*, his opinion about mad people appears especially fit for analyzing the so-called bad children's behaviors [1]. This study utilized a Foucault's viewpoint, mainly his focus on madness and his historical analysis of its development throughout civilization, to delve into the aberrant behaviors of Chinese children.

Many former works have proven the possibility of researching children's education using Foucault's viewpoint. One of them has provided a panoramic review in using Foucault's opinion to analyze American education, mainly focusing on his concept of power and regulation [2]. There is a more specific example of analyzing problems in children's education, stressing its hierarchical structure, revealing the inequality between educators and educatees, and pointing out that if a child questions the assumption that he or she should be educated, he or she will be regarded as demented and trouble-maker [3]. This is very similar to the approach in this study, which uses Foucault's concept of madness to analyze unruly children. However, what distinguishes the study from others is

that those extant researches are mainly based on Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* and his concept of power and social structure, while the innovation in this study is mainly drawing on *Madness and Civilisation* and focuses on his concept of madness and extend it to a broader sense to account for children's "bad" or aberrant behaviors.

Since the approach in the study depends mainly on the concept of madness, it will be worthwhile to consider some literature concerning that concept. The book *What is Madness?* is a panoramic review of the concept of madness, which is an excellent introduction to my understanding of madness [4]. "I do not hold a relativist view – that madness is just what does not fit social norms" [4], said Darian Leader in that book, which is quite different from the point of view in this study. However, Darian Leader also refutes the dichotomy of mental illness and health. In addition, the focus of that book is mainly physiological rather than sociological. Foucault's book "*Madness and Civilisation*" does provide a coherent argument about the sociological meanings of madness, which will be sufficiently utilized in this study [1]. The monography "*Madness in literature*" by Lillian Feder focuses on the concept of "madness" reflected in western literature, disclosing the analogy between madmen and wild animals, stressing the importance of literary analysis of madness since literature can reflect its concept in a variety of social aspects [5]. The definition of madness given by Lillian Feder is "a state in which unconscious processes predominate over conscious ones", and madness, according to the author, includes some reason and some manifestation of some essential aspects. The literary approach initiated by Feder is quite inspirational, and the study will try to go along this path.

2. A Reconsideration and Extension of Concept of Madness

First, it is worth considering what madness is. Upon Foucault's theory, the author argues that madness is just a kind of aberrant behavior that conflicts with social norms and is restricted by social control—like a lunatic, shouting and roaring like a wild animal, flourishing his limbs, flouncing, writhing around, obstreperous, recalcitrant. People think a person is mad simply because he probably seems detrimental to everyday society. However, what if what he intends to do is merely some damage to himself without hurting anybody else? Like he wants to cut off one of his fingers? Or refuse to eat? This is still a kind of deviant behavior and, in a sense, is detrimental to the survival of the whole human race. If all human beings attempted to hurt themselves, the human race would have no chance to survive. Consequently, this kind of abnormal self-destroying lunatics will still be confined and controlled by regularity. All in all, people define something as madness simply because it is regarded as somehow detrimental to social norms, but that does not necessarily mean madness is a bad thing per se. There is nothing as absolute madness primitively; all is contingent on what the society and social norms are like and how people define it.

Then, the question will be turned to what is "bad" or unruly child is. The author believes that the concept of an unruly child is highly similar to the concept of madness. Likewise, "bad" children are not intrinsically bad. It is just the nature of a kid to play around and disobey the rules of their parents or teachers. Because people want to civilize those children and get them fitted to the social norms, people tell them something is wrong and deserves punishment. It is observed that unruly behaviors of kids are also aberrant behavior that conflicts with the social norm, like mad behaviors. It is pretty typical in primary school that some naughty children are regarded as going mad when they show extreme disobedience and defiance to teachers. Foucault also mentioned in his book about the madness that in those medical institutions in the 19th century, madmen were treated similarly to juveniles, in which way they lacked fundamental personal rights and were subordinate to their guards who were like their "parents". This analogy between madness and children's unruliness is very thought-provoking.

It is probably easy to get perplexed by Foucault's endeavor to dig into madness—Since madmen are only a minority group of people, why is research about it so important to understand the

functioning of society? The author believes that what matters is not madness itself but a broader concept of aberrant and unseemly behaviors, which according to Foucault, is regarded as irrationality, being dominated and suppressed by rationality, which is a quite important process throughout human civilization.

The crucial thing is that Foucauldian train of thought can be followed and the study will go further into the concept of madness. As a representative of postmodernism, Foucault pleads for irrationality and negatives everything in rationality. The well-established, full-fledged social order represents rationality, and it has gained its ascendancy over a diversity of aberrant behaviors, which are thus denominated by irrationality. This vast field of irrationality includes madness and also unruly childish behaviors. In Foucault's theory, a critical aspect of madness is that it includes some aberrant behaviors which breach social norms. Nonetheless, there is potentially no definite and objective demarcation of reason and folly, rationality and madness, etc. What matters is the criteria set by society. Therefore, it is available to extend the concept of "madness", and define it as all aberrant social behaviors. Unruly children can thus be regarded as "mad" children in this way. Everything becomes "madness" in this broader sense simply because it is deviant from ordinary social norms and deserves social control to put it into the right place.

A broader concept of "madness" is a unique innovation in the study, but what calls for special attention is that this new concept of "madness" is different from the meaning of the usual idiomatic usage of this word, so it entails some clarifications here to avoid confusion. The usual usage of the word madness generally refers to psychological and physiological meanings, while the definition of "madness" attaches more sociological meanings. It considers the similarity between commonly referred madness and a large group of other behaviors with similar social meanings (aberrant behaviors) to madness and are also included in this broader concept of "madness".

For example, a madman will probably cut off one of his fingers or do other self-damages. Then inversely, if somebody wants to cut off part of his or her body, It is not appropriate to conclude that he or she is mad. There are a lot of other possibilities. Maybe there is someone who has determined to cut off one of his fingers with a clear mind and preconceived plan rather than with a paroxysm of madness. Cutting part of the body appears quite commonly as the initiation ceremony of some terrorist groups or pseudoreligions, and people are with reason and not mad but still intend to do self-damages. Or, take the LGBT group, a transgender woman would intend to cut off her reproductive organ, but can we say that she is mad because of this?

Madness, pseudoreligion, and LGBT are entirely different issues, but they can all probably result in self-damages. However, the self-damages in later ones are still disparate from that in madness. A madman would probably cut off his finger in complete loss of mind and reason, he cannot control his behaviors; but in the case of pseudoreligion or LGBT, there is no psychological madness, and people are mentally sound but still intentionally wants to do that. However, they still share something in common, both damaging themselves, which is an incomprehensible behavior by ordinary people, and both doing something aberrant that conflicts with some social norms. In conclusion, pseudoreligion or LGBT communities are not equal to madness but can all be classified as "madness" according to the broader definition in the study. Then children's unruliness, as discussed before, also falls into this category of "madness" without any misunderstandings.

3. The Historical and Literary Review of Madness by Foucault

To further analyze this "madness", the study will first examine Foucault's historical analysis in *Madness and Civilization*. In this book, his genealogy approach has disclosed the essence of the concept of madness. Foucault gave a panoramic view of the experience of insanity in the age of reason, from the Renaissance to today.

In the Renaissance, what was incredible is that insanity was sometimes even respected and regarded as instructive. This can be reflected in the literature emerging at that time. Like in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the mad people, Hamlet and Ophelia, are the key people and the only ones, to tell the truth, unveiling the heinous crime of the king. Like in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, the protagonist is mad and quixotic but also ambitious and romantic, expressing the tension between dream and reality through his fantasy, which is precisely the tenor of the book that Cervantes wanted to show us. At that time, madness was not so abhorred and excluded from society, but rather just regarded as the shortcoming of humans, a normal phenomenon, sometimes even the instinct or intuition of humans for bad omens.

Unfortunately, things change dramatically later on. According to Foucault, in the classical age, roughly the 17th and 18th centuries, madness was confined and excluded from normal society; the milestone was the establishment of the general hospital in Paris in 1656. Madmen were confined in nuthouses and treated cruelly because madness was an outbreak of animal nature. In the modern era, which began in the 19th century, according to Foucault, an assortment of medical treatments appeared, specializing in dealing with madness. Then there were psychology or psychiatry to tackle madness, like Freud's psychoanalysis. People's brutality towards madmen seemed alleviated, but they also made the management of nuthouse more institutionalized.

It is observed from the historical process that it is a gradual conquest of irrationality by rationality. Irrationality was firstly feared and respected, then assailed and excluded, and finally analyzed and governed by rationality. Madness was not initially something deleterious, not naturally the antithesis of rationality, but it is the specialty of modern society that makes madness so hated and avoided and excluded from us.

4. Detailed Analysis of Children's Aberrant Behaviours and the Process of their Socialization

Now comes the right opportunity to explain the formation of children's aberrant behaviors and their socialization process. Likewise, regarding children's aberrant behaviors, which also belong to the broader sense of "madness", the case is quite similar to what Foucault told us. These are not intrinsically wrong, but rather children's nature or instincts. Because the adult society nowadays is highly institutionalized and disciplined, these lively children are regarded as aberrant and irrational in society, and people need to lead them into their "correct" paths. Uneducated kids are like uncivilized savages, or in the broader sense, like madmen; they are unfit for social norms, thus showing aberrant behaviors. Adults are also using social norms to conquer children's new world and their irrationality. They have to be incorporated into society, so they must be socialized and control their irrationality,

However, Foucault's refutations against rationality remind us of the precious value of irrationality and those unruly children. Like madness, those unruly children are treated severely, criticized and punished, and excluded from the average class, but maybe their aberrant behaviors are laudable, and people can potentially harvest much merit in them. people are using rationality and social control to stifle those unruly children's vitality in their cradles.

This is the very point where the contradiction is most severe. Understanding this tension between children's irrationality and adults' rationality would help disclose the process of children's socialization. Irrationality is not destructive, but society needs some order; how to reconcile this antithesis? Moderate and well-organized irrationality would end up being good, but untrammelled irrationality would lead to true madness and undergo a crackdown by social power. Like in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, the protagonist is an ambitious and rebellious girl who was also considered a "bad child", "like a mad cat", during childhood but ended up being well. What calls for special attention is that another madwoman Bertha in the novel, Mr. Rochester's former wife, is violent and

incarcerated in the attic. Jane and Bertha are both rebellious feminine figures but end up with disparate outcomes, which is quite instructive. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's psychoanalytic analysis *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they have proposed that the madwomen Bertha can be deemed as Jane's *alter ego* or a presage of Jane's nature of madness [6]. Jane and Bertha both have the impetus to go mad, but by self-restraint, Jane does not end up like Bertha and gets accepted into social norms.

That is precisely the process of children's socialization, in which children's irrationality gets restrained and more congruous with social norms, gets utilized, and turns into their strong motivation to struggle and explore. The intention of socialization and education is not to suppress irrationality but rather conduct it so that people will become Jane Eyre instead of Bertha; people will be accepted instead of being mad. Despite the broader concept of "madness", the absolute madness depicted by Foucault is still not the same as simply behaving aberrantly but rather more vehement, chaotic, and uncontrollable. This line is quite ambiguous, quite tricky.

5. Theory and Reality Combined: More Examples

Literature works enrich thoughts and offer an abundance of inspiration, as stated by the book *Madness in Literature* [5]. However, to be realistic, more evidence is needed in the real world. Here is an example.

There is a boy called Suoyuan Xiao in Wuhan, China, who was the only one in his secondary school to get admitted into Xi'an Jiaotong University Youth Honored Program. The program is a particular school in China designed for gifted young children, and school children can begin their university at an early age when their peers are still in their high schools and struggling to get admitted into universities. "Suoyuan Xiao is admitted into Xi'an Jiaotong University Youth Honored Program and gets the qualification of his postgraduate recommendation directly." [7].

However, Xiao's success was not plain sailing. He was quite a naughty boy in his childhood and got piles of criticism frequently. He was not fit for the pedagogic system in China nowadays, especially discontented with the robotic and plodding study methods taught in school adapted for matriculation examinations. In China, it is called *Shuati*, meaning "brushing the exam questions" in Chinese, which refers to the process of mechanically repeating the same exercise style to get proficient in exams. Xiao hates *Shuati* very much. "Now, the difficulty of many questions lies in the fact that there are a lot of 'pitfalls', in order to avoid 'pitfalls', you have to *Shuati* to familiarize yourself with the tricks of the questioner; I feel that this is nonsense waste of time.", said Xiao to the reporter [8].

As a result, Xiao could not get good grades in the current education system in China. However, he was pretty innovative and interested in scientific experiments and explorations at an early age and did a lot of physics or chemistry experiments with the support of his father, a patient physics professor at HUST. It was for these specialties that Xiao proved outstanding in the entrance exam of the Youth Honored Program. "I encourage kids like Xiao to take extraordinary paths", said Li Yang, Xiao's head teacher and physics teacher [8].

The author knows Suoyuan Xiao personally, since Xiao was the author's classmate in primary school. According to the author, his success later was unimaginable at the sight of his performance in his primary school. He was pretty unruly and consistently broke the rules. Children jokingly said he was a madman because when he got into conflicts with his classmates and teachers, he would react vehemently and behave just like going mad. This striking contrast is quite thought-provoking.

The story of Xiao can be a good exemplification of the theory of children's aberrant behaviors and socialization process. People said he was "mad" because he was showing aberrant behaviors, which is precise "madness" in the broader sense. These behaviors include some merit that should be excavated, such as children's curiosity to discover science. However, some of their abnormal behaviors can not be accepted by the social norms and would lead to disaster or "madness" if not

correctly conducted. What makes Xiao successful is that part of his irrationality is reasonably utilized and converted to his advantage, by his father's cultivation, by choice of entering the Youth Honored Program, which can help him eschew "*Shuati*", etc. The other detrimental part of irrationality was timely suppressed or became his subconsciousness and not expressed, which, if unleashed, would make him a veritable madman. Through the socialization process of Xiao, it is concluded that his uncultivated irrationality became fortunately conducted properly rather than suppressed and annihilated brutally, thanks to the proper education he received.

6. Thoughts and Suggestions Concerning problems of Chinese Children Education

By virtue of Foucault's historical analysis of madness, the study has discussed children's aberrant behaviours and studied their process of being socialized and absorbed into society, proclaiming that it's just a process of irrationality becoming reasonably bridled and making concession to rationality. Foucault's advocacy of irrationality is especially edifying, stressing the importance of respecting irrationality in kids' education.

Then, here is some reflection upon education. Education does need to introduce rationality to manage children's irrationality, which would otherwise grow wild, but maybe education is too rational, especially here in China. People do need to accept more irrationality and diversity.

There are vast problems in Chinese education, all brought about by the over-exaggeration of rationality. People attach too much importance to science subjects, like math, physics, or computer, but often ignore liberal art and humanity, like literature, history, or philosophy. People attach too much importance to discipline but ignore the cultivation of children's characteristics. People always tell kids they need to reason like an adult and think about their future and career, but people are unaware that rationality is susceptible to all kinds of criticisms. People are using too much rationality to suppress kids' creativity and development, letting them do the same thing and think in the same way, prohibiting all aberrant behaviors or "madness", resulting in hideous homogeneity among children.

The Chinese tradition of patriarchal society has especially aggravated this situation because people stress the importance of conformity and obedience and put the experience of older adults in the first place, reinforcing the top dominating position of rationality and extinguishing any challenges against it.

This tartarean homogeneous education system nearly ruined intelligent kids like Suoyuan Xiao. Many kids like him, if without his good opportunity and forced into the strict exam system, would really be driven mad. Their vigorous irrationality cannot find its proper place to burst, and then it would explode elsewhere. They would become bad children, indulging in dissipation, even becoming ruffians or gangsters, and excluded from normal society for their whole life. That is the fiasco of rationality, the massacre of education!

The malady of suppressing diversity and stressing uniformity is absolutely not restricted to the field of academic education in schools. Instead, it saturates the whole course of Chinese children's development, at home and at school, imposed by parents, teachers, and peers, afflicting their study, daily life behaviors, entertainment, and almost everything.

For example, retake the LGBT issue, which has been invoked previously in this article to articulate the definition of "madness". LGBT is also an excellent example of "madness," which is aberrant from the social norms of sex and gender in a traditionally patriarchal society. Interestingly, LGBT was once really regarded as a mental illness that requires treatment, but no longer now in most parts of the world. "In May 2019, the World Health Organization removed transgenerness from the Mental Illness Regulations, meaning that gender recognition is no longer regarded as an illness in the world." [9]

Even though, in China, there are still piles of people who are constrained by traditional moralities and stereotypes and regard transgender people as anomalous and treat them with discrimination. Thus in terms of family education, kids with problems of LGBT are especially discriminated against, which is another good exemplification of homogeneity and over-rationality in Chinese education. There is a transgender girl Hetao in Chongqing, who is rejected and humiliated by her parents because of her transgenerness [9]. Hetao's parents banished her from her home and cut off her economic income to compel her to change her idea of hoping to become a girl. Two other transgender girls, Vivian and Xiao Yu are treated even with violence and abuse by parents or doctors [9]. Another example, MengMeng, committed suicide because of unacceptance from her father [10].

“Nearly 90% of native families cannot fully accept transgender children, and nearly 60% of parents will not understand and support their children.” as shown by *Survey Report on the Survival Status of Transgender Groups in China, 2017* [9]. This research, conducted by the Beijing LGBT Center and Department of Sociology, Peking University in 2017, has shown that after telling their parents they are transgender, 38.9% of Chinese children will not be accepted at all, and 59.7% of them would receive no understanding or support by their parents [10].

The rejection of LGBT by parents in China is a good reflection, and proof of the homogeneous education children receive in China. Everything like LGBT tends to be opposed and oppressed in China simply because it is inconsistent with Chinese traditional values, and people become xenophobic and try to repulse these “intruder” opinions and re-establish uniformity. If a kid in China is LGBT, he or she would likely be badly treated, especially by his parents. Education here does not accept diversity and expects everyone to behave like somebody else—males behave like males, females behave like females—and reject anything that exceeds binary gender division, without understanding that gender minority is congenital and deserves respect, rather than illness or madness or bad habit that should be cured. This also proves that Chinese education and way of thinking are too rational or too materialistic. Chinese deny that some people are not heterosexual and are inbornly LGBT. Society only agrees with physiological gender and supposes that “normal” people would always behave according to the designated gender at birth because of biological bases. People are bound to a traditional biological understanding of gender but neglect psychological factors. The denial of issues like LGBT, which are psychological-based and without provable material evidence, demonstrates the plethora of rationality in China. The strict social norms of rationality in China are stifling everything “madness” as LGBT that commits a transgression.

Numerous phenomenal prodigies like Suoyuan Xiao are smothered, sexual minorities like MengMeng killed, children's original thoughts, creativities strangled, unique behaviors, personal hobbies, outlandish dressing styles, or LGBT disrespected and assailed. It is not exaggerated to argue that multitudinous Chinese children are being devastated, tortured, and excruciated by excessive rationality imposed on them. The author sincerely appeals for irrationality in Chinese children's education here: all rationality would only result in homogeneity, but irrationality would encourage true vitality.

7. Conclusion

In the light of Foucault's genealogical analysis of madness, the study has reconsidered the concept of “madness” and got it expanded to a wider sense, applying it to the analysis of children's aberrant behaviours, constructing the socialization process of children, unmasking the insidious effects of Chinese homogeneous children education system. Variegated evidence is offered to account for the argument, including literary analysis, examples in reality, various aspects of Chinese society, successful “naughty” children, LGBT groups, etc. Furthermore, suggestions are proffered at the end

to ameliorate this egregious situation, which appeals for more irrationality and diversity to be introduced.

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