

The Lost Public Living Space: A Case Study of High School Student Union*

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This study focuses on the nature of student union of the general high school. It combines John Dewey's Democratic Educational Theory with the public domain theory of Hannah Arendt, thus forming the analysis framework of the thesis. In the school, student union is a space for students to participate in public life, namely, so-called "public life domain" or "public living space". The research takes qualitative research method as the main method. Taking 25 teachers and students in M High School as object of study, the researcher conducted depth interviews to learn about the interviewees' school life and their opinions about the student union. At the same time, a questionnaire was designed to collect the data of high school students' viewpoints on the student union. The study proves that the students union of M High School, which is the public space of student activities, is in a state of loss, and its indications are as follows: The student union members' autonomy is restricted and the students become the right-hand men of teachers, school managers become "silent supervisor" on students, the guidance of moral education department to students converts into "control", the student union neither serves for students nor represents the interests of students, etc. Actually, that is an inevitable result of the discipline education, which not only suppresses the development of individual autonomy, but also obstructs the development of civic education.

Keywords: student union, public living space, discipline education

Introduction

The definition of "student union" in the *Dictionary of Education* is as follows: Student union is a mass organization of students in universities and secondary schools in China (Gu, 1998). During the May 4th Movement in 1919, Student Autonomy Association was established in the colleges and secondary schools, which played a positive role in the anti-imperialist and patriotic student movement. In 1930, the Kuomintang Government published *The Principles of Student Organization* and *The Outline of Student Autonomy Association*, which stipulated that the functions and power of the students' autonomous society "are limited to the administration of the school" and the scope of the activities was limited to a school. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, students' associations have been established in universities and secondary schools. Students of a certain school have the right to vote the associations' leaders. Secondary schools' student unions are divided into two levels, namely, the student union at the school level and the student union in class level (usually called "class committee"). The student unions of colleges and universities have three levels:

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school, department, and class. The basic task of the student union is to unite all the students, learn democratic management, exercise themselves, grow healthily, and try to be a good student in morality, study and physical, with the leadership of the party organization in the school and the guidance of the Communist Youth League.

At present, the definition of student union is not consistent in all conditions, for some definitions also include student associations. According to the data collected, we believe that the student union is a public space composed of students, a public organization for them to provide independent activities, and an important platform for them to participate in the public affairs of the school. The student union of this study is that of the ordinary high school, so it is defined as follows: The ordinary high school students' union is the representative and maintenance of the rights and interests of the students, to provide relevant services for the students' study, life, and development, and to organize student activities in order to promote the development of the public living space for students.

Education is a process of socialization. Schools are composed of students, teachers, and administrators. John Dewey (1990) chose two points in *Democracy and Education* to measure the value of school social life. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a form of social by all members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups.

In good condition, the school should develop the student autonomy ability through the student union and other students organization, cultivate the students' democratic living habits, let the students go out of their own "personal world", pay attention to the common "existence" of the public living space of the students, and make sure every student who participate in it an equal individual. Students need to find their self-identity, because it is related to the "dependence" of social relations or the pursuit of a "shared lifestyle", and the student union will be able to provide this platform and become the space for their public life. But in actual high school education, is it really so? What is the real situation?

Methods

Established in the 1940s, M Middle School is the earliest middle school in C County, and it is also a provincial demonstration high school (provincial key middle school)¹. The campus covers an area of more than 50,000 square meters, among which the building area covers 40,000 square meters. There are 42 senior high school classes, about 3,000 students and 200 teaching staffs.

There is a Comprehensive Administration Office (CAO) in M School, which was later renamed "Moral Education Office". Now, there are 13 staffs in the moral department, including the guard (three officers and four gatekeepers), the dormitory management (three workers), two leaders (the Vice Chancellor and the moral education director that in charge of the school moral education), and one moral officer. The director of moral education in the school told us that his work covered student management, ideological education, safety education, discipline, and hygiene, and so on. He said that "the moral education officer was a newcomer who mainly in charge of discipline".

The school student union is guided by the moral education department, and the instructor is the director of the moral education department and the moral education officer (Teacher ZYF). At present, there are 25 middle school student members in M School Student Union, which includes eight in junior high school (six in junior

¹ In the past two years, the honor of "provincial demonstration high school" has been affected.

one and two in junior two), and 17 in senior high school. The student union currently does not have an independent office area, and the weekly meetings are held in the Moral Education Office or in one of the classrooms without classes at that time. When the student union members hold regular meetings every week, the instructor is sometimes present and sometimes absent. The current chairman of the student union is in Grade 2.

The author carried out a survey in M School in more than two months. When she entered the school, she appeared as a volunteer. The identity of “volunteer” appears publicly, and the identity of “researcher” is hidden. That is to say, from the beginning to the end, the researcher has been hiding under the identity of “volunteer”. This provides a great convenience for the author to conduct “participatory observation” in the whole research process and collect more authentic and reliable information.

In this study, 25 interviewees in M School, including nine teachers and 16 students, were selected to study their school life and their views on student autonomy and student association issues through in-depth interviews. At the same time, a questionnaire was designed to collect the students’ understanding of the problems related to the students’ association in M School (the content of the questionnaire was presented as a background). Then, the author coded the initials of the students and teachers she interviewed to facilitate data process.

Research Process and Results

Through the investigation, the author found that the student union, which should belong to the students and become the autonomous public living space of them, is in a state of “the governance”, which leads to the loss of the space of the students’ public life. The student union becomes an organization that is constrained by others which supervises student and serves the school. The main manifestations are as follows: The autonomy of the student union members are restricted, and become the powerful assistants of the teachers; the school administrator becomes the “silent gazer” of the students; the moral education office becomes “control” not guide the students; and the student union does not serve the students and represent the interests of the students.

Members of Student Union: Right-Hand Men of Teachers

During the author’s contacting with the director of the School Moral Education Department (DBB) and the office of the Moral Education Department (ZYF), the author asked them how to evaluate the student union. They said the same answer without previous consultation. They believed that the student members of student union were competent and could help them to finish their work quickly.

Interviewer: Is the new student union chosen by last student union?

DBB: Yeah. There are teachers and people who have the last session of the student union. The chairman of every student union is very effective, no matter what he does.

Interviewer: How did he/she get the benefit? Could you tell in detail?

DBB: Basically, he/she can do very well what I have done.

...

Interviewer: You have been in touch with the student union for almost one semester. Do you think you can manage quickly?

ZYF: I think it is going well. The assignments I gave them (the student union) have been done fairly well, so they are still very effective.

As the teachers say, the students seem to be very “competent”. They can always complete the tasks assigned by the teachers within the prescribed time. Once, Teacher ZYF asked the student union to design a

questionnaire about how students form a sense of honor for the school, and he said they should finish it within a week. It seemed to me that it was almost impossible, but the students held a meeting immediately. The author was invited by the students to attend the meeting. The chairman of the student union quickly assigned relevant tasks and asked each member to design a questionnaire.

School administrators seem to use the student union as a “right-hand” to carry out the “task”, and serve the school administrators, not for students themselves. Education has become a process of “training obedience” rather than a process of promoting the development of students themselves and student groups. As Wu Kangning (1997) pointed out that “Students are institutionalized in the school organization as the obedient of the teacher’s adult authority, and the state of this low status is constant; if not specially approved, it is impossible for students to ‘break away from’ the school organization.... This situation objectively becomes a favorable condition for school organizations to impose compulsory measures on students”.

“Wooden” Teacher: A Silent Gazer

After being familiar with the students, the author was lucky to be invited to attend the student union meeting. One day, the meeting was held at noon. Mr ZYF was also present. He was sitting in the corner of the classroom facing the door, next to the multimedia equipment. He sat straightly like a statues, with his sharp eyes staring at the students, his mouth unmoving and his face expressionless, which made others feel an unapproachable sense of cold. From the beginning to the end, ZYF kept such a “silent gazer” gesture, without saying a word. By the end of the meeting, he asked the chairman of the student union to go to the outside of classroom. The rest of the students started their own business, watching the metamorphometer (A TV variety show), and the students who did not have lunch went out to buy something to eat. When the author asked something about Mr ZYF, a junior high school kid smiled and said to us, “Wood, he’s like a piece of wood...” Then, he smiled at us innocently, and his companions laughed as well. They seemed to agree with him. The author would like to get a further understanding of his views.

Interviewer: Why do you call him “wood”?

XTT: Is not he? You see he sits there and watches us have a meeting. He looks blank and does not speak. He just looks at us. Is not that like a log? Usually, he is very serious, and seldom speaks, but he is very disciplined and strict.

About ZYF’s situation, the author also interviewed himself and other teachers and students. Most people are quite disgusted with him, showing a “dislike” and “loathing”. And the principal’s view of him is that “he is not the right person, but now the school is very short of staff, and there is no such talent”. The author had interviewed ZYF several times. Generally speaking, his management path seems to be full of “hardships”.

Interviewer: Do you know that students have some bad comments on you?

ZYF: Well, I was scolded a lot on the Internet, and my tyres were damaged by students before. There used to be a lot of cursing things on the Internet about me, but the situation is much better now.

Interviewer: Do you think these have some psychological pressure on you?

ZYF: There must be a lot of psychological pressure. At that time, I did not want to take charge of these students. I resigned to the headmaster four times, not once. I said I did not want to do it several times. Because I have been thinking about this problem, I feel that doing this is very “thankless”. At the beginning of the new term, I get up at six in the morning and sleep at eleven in the evening. I am very tired every day, very tired, very laborious. When dealing with students’ problems, I felt very frustrated, because the students used to in very loose condition, but suddenly the administration became very tight, they do not adapt to that quickly. However, I feel a lot better now. It is such a situation... Without the support of the president, I would not be able to do it. I even would not have done it for a long time.

Through the interviews, we know that Teacher ZYF has a reason for being a silent supervisor. First of all, he knows that students may not like his strategy of “strict control”. Because of the trust of the principal, he was indeed the head of the work, and with the new reform measures of the principal, the strategy of “strict control” was carried out in the school. If the students enter a tight and strict management atmosphere from a relatively loose atmosphere, there must be some in adaptation, so the students’ complaints are unavoidable. Although Mr ZYF has the president’s support, he may be too quick to take advantage of the measures, such as a “blacklist” of discipline and hygiene every day and a “visit” to the students’ dorm at night (once a conflict with the students and scold to the students). He also arranged for the student union members to help him catch the disobedient students, patrol the classroom during the class, and plunge into the classroom directly to confiscate the students’ cell phone or shout him/her to the Moral Education Office, and so on. In the eyes of the students, the “Moral Education Office” has become a place which they both “fear” and “disgust” (even among students there is a saying goes: XXX calls you to the Moral Education Office). Teacher ZYF’s strategy of “strict control” is likely to have the opposite effect. This is also the result of his ignorance of relying on and believing in students. Of course, it would bring students’ questions and complaints, “How can an art teacher become a moral education director?”²

Second, he has a melancholy and lonely mood, acting like an “iron face” role among students. In the course of the implementation of the reform, some new measures have been carried out, which have caused the complaints of the students. On the other hand, some teachers’ interests will be touched and some teachers are dissatisfied; he once admits that the relationship between him and some teachers is not well-handled. These two points undoubtedly add a lot of difficulties to his management, which also makes him very depressed. His silence was on the one hand, because he did not know how to communicate with the students; on the other hand, he had an understood depression, so he had to be a supervisor to master the movements of students. After all, he had to “guide” and “supervise” the students to perform and complete the work.

Moral Education Office: “Guide” or “Control”?

Through interviews with school administrators, we learned that when it comes to the relationship between administrators and student unions, several of the teachers interviewed answered very similar questions. They believe that the student union is actually a relatively autonomous student group and is self-motivated. As ZYF said, “Their student union is a completely independent group, very independent; they do a very good job”. When asked about the help and support he and Director DDB gave to the students, he said, “Oh, we will provide some help, like a place to do the activity. Of course, sometimes if they need us to attend the meeting, we will be there”. When talking to Teacher CPY³, he said, “I am personally interested in Student Union and Student Associations, and our teachers should also fully believe in the potential of the students and let the students free to manage themselves. They will learn to be self-restraint in this process”. Learn to restrain each other, and then all aspects of school discipline will follow. At the same time, he believes that the student union should be a “model” for other students, mainly playing the role of “supervision, and intermediators between administrators and other students”. When it comes to the question of “democracy”, he glanced at me (as if I asked a very naive question) that he was less willing to talk about it. He thought “democracy can only be used

² In fact, he is not the director of moral education, is the director of the moral education department, because individual students do not know that he is the director of moral education.

³ Teacher CPY is the vice chancellor of moral education in charge of the school.

as a reference, because now students are more one-sided about a lot of problems, and some teachers do not have this ability, so it is hard to say....” Later, in the course of interview with the principal, the principal also mentioned that he wanted to develop the student union and the activities of the school. He thought that these were the platform of the students’ activities, and it was a place which was basically full of students to play a role.

From these interviews, we can see that school administrators tell us that they respect students’ autonomy and encourage students to “self-management”. From the actual situation that the author understands, it can be seen that the student union does not seem to be so ideal in the development of autonomy. Student organizations, especially student unions, do not even have independent space and time to do what they want to do. This is a very disjointed one.

During the interview, there was a detail that attracted my attention. On the day of the student union meeting, the students came to the classroom without lunch. In an interview with ZYF, he said members of the student union “should design questionnaires and check ‘two songs a day’ activity and then hold a meeting at noon. They all went to lunch after the meeting”. The author put forward why not meet after lunch. Teacher ZYF said, “The rule is not made by me. I do not know whether it is the DBB director or the students themselves make it. Later, I did not care about them, because the group was supposed to let them manage themselves”.

Generally speaking, the relationship between the Moral Education Department and the Student Union is “guidance”, that is, the student union is under the guidance of teachers. It is a public living space for students to independently perform student activities. School administrators are clear about this. So, when they talk about it, they “pay extra attention”, like looking at the interviewer, or being careful of their words. However, in the actual process of work, due to the authority of the instructor and the “tacit consent” of the student union, the function of moral education department in M school changed from “guidance” to “control”.

All the business of the student union, the space, and time for the activities, and the behavioral norms of the members are under the control of the Moral Education Department. This kind of control seems to take for granted and the student union members seem to be “volunteers” of these works, because they are in the “guidance” of the moral education department.

Student Union: For Whom?

The author talked with the students from time to time about the related situations of the student union. There is a clear feeling that many students do not seem to care about the student union, and some students do not even know anything about it, including its activities and the composition. Another girl who once wanted to join the student union told the author her opinion about the student union.

Interviewer: Who do you think the student union is serving now?

YMF: For teachers.

Interviewer: Why do you say so?

YMF: I think they just do what the teacher says, that is all. They are very conscientious and responsible, and the teachers (those teachers in school management) will give them what they should do.

Interviewer: Has the student union ever organized activities like giving advice to schools?

YMF: No, our class has not heard of it. There are also several student union members in our class. They just go to a meeting and come back to convey to us.

We can see that in her eyes, the student union has become the “spokesperson” of school administrators and teachers, they represent neither the interests of students nor serve students, and they are the “microphone” of the teacher and the “right-hand” of the teachers to supervise students. Also, the members of the student union can use their own “privilege” to seek some small conveniences for themselves. For example, if you do not want to come back to the classroom at noon, you can say that the student union has a meeting. If you are late, you can also tell a classmate who are in charge of the deduction to ask him not to deduct our class marks, and so on.

In addition to interview students, this study also collects students’ opinions on the school student union through questionnaires to supplement the information we obtained during the interview.

Table 1

Who do You Think the Student Association Belongs to?

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Effective (%)	Cumulative (%)
Effective	Defect	4	1.1	1.1	1.1
	Student	140	40.1	40.1	41.3
	School Moral Education Department	77	22.1	22.1	63.3
	School League Committee	84	24.1	24.1	87.4
	Teacher who manages student union	44	12.6	12.6	100.0
	Total	349	100.0	100.0	

In Table 1, 40.1% of the students chose “belong to students”, and 58.8% of the students chose “belong to the moral education department, the school league committee, and the administrator”. As we know, in addition to the student union, these subjects are the school management level of the main body, that is, they are representatives of the school. More than half of the students believe that the student union belongs to the school level.

This study holds that the student union is the platform and space for students’ autonomy, and the carrier for students to participate in and organize school public activities, so the student union is a public living space of students. But the results of the questionnaires are different from what we imagine. Many students do not realize that the student union is the students’ public living space. One reason is that students have limited knowledge of student unions, and the other is that student union’s long-standing “behavior” and performance in school have made students misunderstand.

Table 2

Student Union Serves Students

		Frequency	Percentage (%)	Effective (%)	Cumulative (%)
Effective	Defect	2	0.6	0.6	0.6
	Very disagree	29	8.3	8.3	8.9
	Not quite agree	47	13.5	13.5	22.3
	Unclear	95	27.2	27.2	49.6
	More agree	95	27.2	27.2	76.8
	Strongly agree	81	23.2	23.2	100.0
	Total	349	100.0	100.0	

Student union is the public living space of students. For students, this is the “public sphere” of their activities. It should represent the interests and aspirations of all students. However, from the data shown in Table 2, we can see that only 50.4% of the respondents agree with the view that student unions serve students;

27.2% of the students have a vague and unclear attitude towards this view, which shows that schools are guiding students to agree with this part of the society. The content is missing. As shown in Table 1, students misunderstand the nature and role of student unions.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the autonomy of the members of the student union in M School is limited and they become “the right-hand men of teachers”; the officers of the moral education department become “silent supervisor” of the student union; the “guidance” of the moral education department becomes “control”; and the student union does not serve the students and represents the interests of the students. The student union in this school is basically in a neglected state and survives in cracks. In a word, the public life space of student union is lost. As for the reasons, we believe that disciplined education is the main reason. Disciplined education in schools is mainly manifested in strict discipline control and supervision of students from time to time.

“The discipline of modernity education may be achieved in the paternalistic centralization of power, it is a gentle, meticulous and flexible control, from the body to the mind, from emotion to instinct, a comprehensive training of people, its mandatory embodied in an invisible” (Jin, 2003). Under this kind of disciplined education, the students’ personal living space is compressed to a very small level, and the public living space is also in a state of lacking correspondingly, thus restricting students to participate in school public life; on the other hand, it will also make students develop a “non-participation” and “indifference” mentality for a long time. A respondent once told me that she “only cares about what is meaningful to him/her”. In addition, the results of the questionnaire also show that only 4.9% of the students often participate in the activities of the school league committee and student union, while 51.3% of the people “never participate” or think “it does not matter” and 43.6% of the students only “occasionally participate”. We have to say, because the public space of the school is in a “lost” state, the enthusiasm of students to participate in public life is not high. Coupled with the lack of guidance and practical activities, students’ ability to participate in the school public life will also decline.

This disciplined education and lack of public space leads to the lack of enthusiasm and initiative of students to participate in public life. On the one hand, disciplined education forms the control over people and cultivates the personality of “slavery”; on the other hand, disciplined education cultivates “exquisite egoist”. As Max Weber (1998) once said, “The ultimate and most expensive values have disappeared from public life, either in the mysterious transcendental realm or in direct personal relationships between individuals”.

Ahrendt (2009) pointed out in the *Human Condition*, the only criterion used to measure the truth of the world is that it is common to all of us, and that common sense holds a high place in political quality.... In any given community, a marked decline in common sense and a marked rise in superstition and ignorance is almost a distinct sign of retreating from the world. As we have pointed out above, disciplined education leads to the erosion of public space, and students’ public spirit and ability to participate in public life will be greatly limited. What is worse, students’ public living space—student union, in a state of survival in the cracks, cannot play the role of student autonomy platform. Put it another way, its function will be gradually simplified and formalized, and students will gradually become a school “discipline” tool.

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Appendix



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