

Implicit Cultural Beliefs and Practices in Approaches to Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Countries have implicit cultural beliefs and practices about early childhood education which they tend to undervalue and which, as a result, are endangered. The Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited study includes examples of such implicit cultural beliefs and practices in Chinese, Japanese, and US preschools. The paper argues that early childhood practitioners, policy makers, and scholars should give greater value to these cultural beliefs and practices and think of them as national treasures and as endangered educational ecology which it is our responsibility to protect and pass on to the next generation.¹⁾

Keywords: preschool, anthropology, China, Japan

The Role of Culture in Early Childhood Education

This paper is in the form of an argument: Countries have early childhood educational cultural beliefs and practices which they tend to undervalue and which, as a result, are endangered. These cultural beliefs and practices are endangered by various forces, including pressure from policy makers to rationalize and modernize their early childhood education systems; by the increasingly intense global circulation of early

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childhood practices; and by notions of universal standards of quality. In this paper I present examples from Japan, China, and the United States of early childhood education beliefs and practices that I suggest are cultural and valuable and that should be preserved. The examples I come from our 2009 book and DVD *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, which I did with my colleagues Yeh Hsueh and Mayumi Karasawa.

What I mean by cultural beliefs and practices is what Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (2002, p.109) refers to as “professional knowledge rooted in national classroom cultures.” I am particularly concerned in this talk with “implicit cultural practices” of teachers. This concept is akin to Jerome Bruner’s concept of “folk pedagogy”, which he defines as “taken-for-granted practices that emerge from embedded cultural beliefs about how children learn and how teachers should teach” (Bruner, 1996, p.46); to what Kathryn Anderson-Levitt calls teachers’ “knowledge in practice” and “embodied knowledge” (2002, p.8); and to what Bruce Fuller refers to, following Geertz (1983) and D’Andrade and Strauss (1995), as “cultural models”, which he defines as “a parent’s or teacher’s tacit understandings of how things should work” (2007, p.74).

These implicit cultural practices are not taught explicitly in schools of education, or written down in textbooks, or mandated in reform guidelines. Instead, they reflect an implicit cultural logic, and are passed down through on the job learning from older to newer teachers and less directly through the reproduction of the larger cultures in which preschools are located.

My message is in the form not only of an argument, but also in the form of offering unsolicited advice and a plea. My advice and plea to early childhood education practitioners, policy makers, and scholars is this: Value your early childhood educational cultural beliefs and practices. Think of them as national treasures, as your patrimony, as your endangered educational ecology, which it is your responsibility to protect and pass on to the next generation.

Paradoxes and Complexities

Before presenting the findings of this paper, I need to introduce some paradoxes and complexities of my argument:

1. There is a paradox inherent in the notion of “traditional preschool practices” in that preschools are a relatively new invention. It’s only in the last 100 years and in many parts of the world, including China and the US, the last 20 years that a majority of young children started attending preschool. Before that, they were cared for in homes and villages by parents, grandparents, and older siblings.
2. A related paradox is that preschools are new social institutions charged with taking on the old task of producing children who have the character valued by the culture, but who at the same time are prepared for the world to come. For example, contemporary Chinese preschools are asked to prepare Chinese children to succeed not just in the society of today, but in the one that will emerge as they become adults, while at the same time making them recognizably Chinese (which means, for example, respectful of their parents and other adults and willing to take care of them as they grow old; and being socially minded, as well as entrepreneurial and creative).
3. Traditions are always changing. Preserving them doesn’t mean keeping them frozen. Traditions are always in engagement with new ideas and new pressures. There is no going backward. Valuing traditional beliefs and practices doesn’t mean we can roll back the clock and go back to how we used to do things. It’s a question of how to go forward, not back, not to go back to old traditions but to remake them in new forms, to suit new situations. Another way of saying this is that cultural practices are *hybrid*, rather than pure, as each generation creates a new fusion of the old and the new. Preserving cultural practices doesn’t mean necessarily preserving them just as they were, but

rather preserving aspects of them in new forms.

4. Although I am suggesting that traditional cultural practices are endangered, and need to be treasured, and I am even using the metaphor of endangered species, I want to suggest at the same time that these cultural practices are resilient. Traditional cultural practices, like nature, if given a chance, are capable of springing back from assaults on them and taking care of themselves. Implicit cultural beliefs and practices are especially resilient because they are implicit, which means they get passed on from one generation to the next without our needing to formally teach them or put them in our educational guidelines.
5. Cultural beliefs and practices that are implicit are less open to scrutiny, criticism, and reform efforts than are beliefs and practices that are mandated in government documents, written down in textbooks, taught in schools of education, given a formal name, and otherwise made explicit. An implication of this is that the best way to preserve implicit cultural beliefs and practices is to keep them implicit, and not attempt to mandate them, or teach them explicitly in schools of education.
6. Calls to preserve and appreciate aspects of culture can sound reactionary, both in the sense of being anti-modern and in the sense of being politically conservative and isolationist. I prefer to think of what I am recommending here not as politically reactionary, but instead as politically progressive in the manner of environmental movements that seek to protect local ecosystems and to oppose monocultures; local food movements, such as the “slow food” movement in Italy that encourages people to eat and appreciate foods that are grown locally and cooked following recipes traditional to the local area and to politically and economic philosophies laid out in books such as E.F. Schumaker’s *Small is Beautiful* (1975) and Francis Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet* which champion the local over the global.

7. I am not against countries learning from each other, and trying out new ideas. I am not encouraging freezing cultures in time. But rather, as we move ahead in our efforts to have high quality early childhood education and care programs, I am cautioning against throwing out the old in the rush to create the new, and I'm arguing against the creation of "one one size fits all" versions of early childhood education which proscribe universal, context-less definitions of quality and best practice. Because I have great confidence in practitioners to create hybrid practices, I don't want to limit their exposure to new ideas, including ideas that circulate globally. But as we encounter these globally circulating ideas, rather than incorporate them *en masse*, we should pick and choose elements and then modify rather than copy them.

Method

The method we used in the new study is an extension of the old one, a method we formally call "video-cued multivocal ethnography" but that others and we most often refer to as "the Preschool in Three Cultures method" (Tobin et al., 1989). In this method we: (1) videotape a day in a preschool in each culture; (2) edit the videotape down to 20 minutes; (3) show this edited tape first to the teacher in whose classroom we filmed; (4) then to other staff at her preschool; (5) then to early childhood educators at other preschools around the country; (6) and finally to early childhood educators in the other two countries. The result is a video-cued multivocal conversation — early childhood educators in three countries discussing the same set of videos.

In traditional ethnographic fieldwork the anthropologist spends the day among cultural insiders participating in and observing daily activities of the culture she is studying and then, in the evening, asking her informants to reflect on and explain those activities. The Preschool in Three Cultures video-cued method collapses and accelerates this process by replacing participant observation with a set of videotapes that provide a focus for the informant interviews.

In this method the videotapes are not the data; rather, they are cues, stimuli, topics for discussion, interviewing tools. In much of social science research the researcher asks informants verbal questions, questions such as, “What is your philosophy of classroom management?” Preschool teachers tend to find this sort of question difficult to answer because it is too abstract and too much like a final exam question. A better, more concrete question would be, “When a child in your class misbehaves, what do you do?” But this question is still ambiguous and abstract: in attempting to answer this question, one teacher may picture children not sitting properly at the lunch table while another teacher may have in mind a sword-fight with umbrellas. In our video-cued method, we show teachers a scene in a video in which, for example, a group of girls struggle over a teddy bear, with two of them ending up rolling around on the floor, grabbing and pulling the bear and each other, and we ask, “What would you do in *this* situation?” Each scene in our 20-minute videos functions as a non-verbal question, a cue to stimulate a response that will provide insight into the beliefs of an informant.

In the original study we videotaped in one preschool in each country. Clearly, one preschool cannot represent the preschools of a nation. We are careful to avoid making such a claim. In our method, because the videos of preschools function as stimuli for focus-group discussions rather than as data, we make no claim about the representativeness or typicality of the preschools we videotaped, other than to say that they are not atypical, in the sense of being perceived in their communities as odd or extreme. We chose preschools that had good reputations, but that were not famous, nor were they lab schools attached to universities, or known for being unusual in their curriculum and pedagogy.

The biggest methodological change we have made in our new study is to videotape in two preschools in each country rather than in just one, as in the original study. The reason we made this modification is not to create a representative sample — two preschools per country in countries as large as Japan, China, and the US are

hardly more representative than one. Rather, we added a second preschool per country as a strategy to foreground the issue of continuity and change. Our criteria for selecting the new preschools was to find preschools that in some way are seen in their communities as representing a new direction in early childhood education. By choosing a program that thinks of itself and is thought of by others as representing a new direction, our intent was to create a new set of videotapes that would work to focus discussions with informants on the question of continuity and change. Making a second stimulus videotape in each country and showing both videotapes to early childhood educators in each country also gives us a more explicit way of getting at the question of typicality and variation in early childhood education practices within each country. While two preschools cannot represent the full range of beliefs and practices of a nation's preschools, by asking informants to watch and comment on videotapes of days in two of their nation's preschools, we can more readily focus the discussions on the question of regional, social class, and ideological variation within the nation.

We shot the videotapes in 2002, edited them, and then in 2003-2007 used them as interviewing cues for interviews with preschool teachers, directors, and early childhood education experts. We conducted focus-group interviews in at least five settings in each country, in groups ranging in size from five to twelve, with a total of approximately six hundred participants.

Findings

In the *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* study we made videos of days in preschool classrooms in China, Japan, and the US, and then used these videos as cues to interview teachers, directors, and early childhood experts in multiple sites in each country. In the sections that follow I will describe some scenes from these videos and present what insiders in each culture had to say about these scenes.

China: The Storytelling King

Our research in preschools across China clearly showed that preschools have been drawing heavily in recent years on ideas from abroad. And yet, the new approaches to early childhood education that are emerging in progressive Chinese preschools retain a characteristically Chinese inflection, as we can see in a scene in our video we call “Story Teller King,” a video we shot at Sinan Road Kindergarten in Shanghai, a kindergarten that is well known as a leader in China’s progressive educational reform.

In the video we see the whole class gathered on the rug and one boy, Ziyu, standing in front of them to tell a story. Ziyu announces that his story is called, “Goodong”, an onomatopoeic sound made by something heavy that drops in the pond. Here’s the gist of Ziyu’s story: In a forest lived many animals. One day an owl heard a strange noise in the pond, ‘Goodong,’ that scared him. He went to tell others. Those who went to check thought that there was a monster in the pond. In the end, a lion went to the pond to check only to find a ripe papaya falling from the tree to make the noise. Everyone was relieved.

Ziyu finished the story, said “thank you”, and took a seat on the floor with his classmates. Ms. Wang, one of the two teachers, asked the children what they had heard in the story. Some children said that there was an owl and the teacher asked what the owl was doing before it heard the noise. This exchange went on for a few turns before Ms. Wang asked the group whether Ziyu could be named Story King. Some said “yes” and some said “no” The children then voted. Ziyu was invited to count the votes. He won the honor by a majority, with 18 of 24 children voting “yes.” He then wrote his name on the red Story King poster.

Then Ms. Wang said, “Some children didn’t raise their hands. Shall we listen to their arguments?” A few children remarked, “He was not loud enough.” “He did not say things clearly sometimes.” And the teacher turned to Ziyu and asked if he agreed. In the end, he was invited to select a story person for the next day. He chose a girl

who commented critically earlier that his story sounded like the one they had heard on a recording.

Ms. Cheng and Ms. Wang, the two teachers in the video, explained how the Story King activity got started. Ms. Cheng recalled: In the beginning, children just wanted to listen to a story that the teacher would tell, Ms. Cheng recalled. “Later, a couple of children who were interested in telling stories asked if they could come to the front to tell a story. We encouraged them to give it a try. Soon, many children began to prepare their own stories and asked for their turns.” Ms. Wang continued, “After the first semester, when so many children wanted to tell a story in front of the group, they got into a discussion among themselves about how to organize the event. They reached agreement that whoever was the story person of the day could choose the story person for the next day.”

The Story Telling King activity is a perfect example of the emerging hybridity of Chinese educational practice (Zhu & Zhang 2008, p.176), as it combines progressive beliefs in child-initiated curricula, a Deweyian notion of the democratic classroom, self-expression, and content-area integration with Chinese traditions of verbal performance and mastery and a belief that is both traditional and Chinese socialist in the pedagogical value of constructive criticism.

Straightforward criticism has long been a common feature of Chinese daily life, not only in the first thirty years of the People’s Republic, when the Cultural Revolution and other social movements required people to be self-critical as well as critical of others, but also in the pre-revolutionary periods, when Confucianism encouraged criticism as a means towards cultivating learning and promoting social values. As a familiar component of Chinese everyday life in families, neighborhoods, schools, business dealings and social life, criticizing others does not carry as harsh a feel in China as it does in the US, Japan, and many other cultures. Constructive feedback from both experts and peers can be found in Chinese education not just in the early childhood classroom, but also in the preparation and ongoing professional de-

velopment of teachers, in reciprocal critique and discussion sessions called *qiecuo* (learning from each other by exchanging ideas). In both activities we find a belief not just in the value of constructively giving and humbly accepting critical feedback but also in the value of oral performance, “virtuosity”, and of learning as a process of “self-perfection.” Both the critical feedback and the pursuit of virtuosity seen in this activity are examples of what we are calling culturally implicit practices and of what Jerome Bruner (1996) calls “folk pedagogy”, in that although these practices are not encouraged or even mentioned in the new curriculum guidelines, they are common features of contemporary Chinese early childhood educational practice that survive from one social upheaval and pedagogical paradigm shift to the next and which Chinese teachers feel no need to explain, justify, or reflect on until they are prompted to do by outsiders.

As we did our research in China from 2002-2007, we arrived at a preliminary thesis: China early childhood education was moving inexorably down a path from more didactic, teacher-directed, knowledge transmission pedagogy towards constructivist, child-initiated and child-directed pedagogy. However, a final round of interviews we conducted in 2007 with Chinese early childhood educators led us to change our thesis, and to tell a more complicated story. Our new conclusion was that the aggressive push toward progressivism and child-centeredness that characterized Chinese early childhood education from about 1990 to 2006 has begun to be counter-balanced by an acknowledgment of the value of traditional Chinese pedagogical practices, including the value of direct instruction and the mastery of skills. The period of intense borrowing is being replaced by a period of consolidation and hybridization of foreign and domestic educational ideas.

Japan: Mixed Age Play

Our 1985 Komatsudani video shows four- and five-year-old girls carrying toddlers down a short flight of steps and out to the playground. In 1986, when we told

Assistant Director Higashino that Americans who viewed the videos found this practice alarming, she assured us that the older children are careful with the babies and that staff members are always nearby when older children play with younger ones. She emphasized that this activity is especially valuable for the older children, most of whom do not have younger siblings, because it gives them “a chance they might not otherwise have to develop empathy (*omoiyari*) and to learn how to know and anticipate the needs of another (*ki ga tsuku*).”

In 1985, older children playing with and caring for babies was a practice the administrators and teachers supported, but did not orchestrate. In 2000 the teachers and administrators at Komatsudani decided to institutionalize mixed-age interactions by having the older children take turns as helpers (*tōban*) in the infant and toddler rooms. A system was introduced in which each day four children from the five-year-old class would spend half an hour downstairs, helping out the zero- to two-year-olds during afternoon snack time. In the new Komatsudani video we see older children feeding babies and helping them to walk. The cutest of these scenes shows a five year old boy instructing a two year old boy on how to pee in a urinal.

The introduction at Komatsudani of this system of older children serving as helpers to younger ones is an interesting case of institutional change and what, to borrow a term from Max Weber, we can describe as “routinization”, as a once spontaneous practice recognized as fulfilling an important function became institutionalized.

Komatsudani’s contemporary approach to mixed-aged interactions is not found in most other Japanese preschools. However, the logic behind the practice was widely endorsed by Japanese early childhood education experts and by the teachers and directors of other Japanese preschools who have watched our new video. The technical term for mixed-aged interaction in Japanese preschools is *tate-wari kyōiku* (vertical, or mixed-age, education) (cf. Ben-Ari 1996, p.61). Because *yōchien* have no children under the age of three, they cannot provide the opportunities *hoikuen* can for older children to interact with infants and toddlers. But many *yōchien* staff members who

have watched our Komatsudani video told us that they encourage spontaneous interactions between older and younger children and that they have instituted systematic interactions between older and younger classes (as for example, having them collaborate on projects or assigning older children as “older siblings” to younger ones).

One of the key findings of the original study was that preschools are inherently conservative in that they are relatively new social institutions charged with making sure young children are taught traditional cultural values. Preschools are asked to compensate for experiences of social and emotional complexity children in earlier eras enjoyed in their families and communities but which are disappearing under contemporary social conditions. One of the traditional values that is perceived to be at risk among contemporary Japanese young people is *omoiyari*, the ability and willingness to understand and respond to the feelings and needs of others.

Komatsudani’s innovative practice of having the older children take turns serving as child minders can be seen as bringing the history of childcare full circle. In *Children of Different Worlds* (1988) Bea Whiting and Carolyn Edwards explain that until the last one hundred years or so, while their parents worked, most children in most of the world’s cultures were cared for most of the day by other (older) children. This is still the case in subsistence agricultural societies in many parts of the world. In industrialized societies older children minding younger ones is becoming a lost art, a vanishing experience, and a forgotten form of knowledge. The innovative child-minding program at Komatsudani can be thought of as a rediscovery of an important form of cultural logic lost in most modern societies.

We see the wisdom of this old logic clearly in the pee lesson. There are some tasks of childcare and socialization that five- and six-year-old children can handle not just competently, but better than can adults. Teaching a toddler to pee is one of these tasks. The understanding and empathy displayed by the older boy in the pee lesson are extraordinary. When Kenichi asks Taro, “Did it all come out?”, he is perfectly cued in to the younger boy’s mind set. When Kenichi pantomimes excitement at the

sound of the flush, he is empathizing with the toddler's interest, fear, and excitement at this new experience. The sound of the flush can no longer be exciting, surprising, or scary to five-year-old Kenichi, who we must therefore assume is performing rather than feeling interest, surprise, or fear at the sound of the flush in order to help Taro, for whom flushing is still relatively new, become comfortable with the experience. The slight smile on Kenichi's face communicates his pleasure in the shared experience—after all, one of the great pleasures of teaching, like parenting, is the opportunity to re-experience moments of learning and mastery from our own childhood. The pleasure in the sound of the flush (and more generally in mastering of urination) is one lost to most adults, but still present to this five-year-old boy, which makes him the ideal pee instructor.

In societies such as China and Japan, where the majority of younger children have no older siblings, and such as the United States, where the age segregation of children keeps younger and older children apart for most of the day, opportunities for older and younger children to interact are rare. In the absence of opportunities for younger children to be taught to urinate by older children, the task falls on adult women to teach boys to use a urinal, a task they generally take on more awkwardly and with less relish than does Kenichi—you have to have a keen knowledge of and interest in a subject to teach it well.

We can see in the evolution of Komatsudani's custom of having older children take turns being caretakers for the little ones a cycling back to a kind of childhood and a mode of child socialization that was characteristic of most human communities until very recently.

US: Choice

Choice is a key feature of the curriculum and pedagogy of American preschools. At most American preschools, when children arrive at most American preschools they are asked by the teachers, "What would you like to do?" The choices are not

unconstrained. “What would you like to do?” is followed up by a menu of alternatives: “Would you like to help Alex with his puzzle? Read a book? Draw? Help feed the turtle?” We can see how choices are presented in a scene from St. Timothy’s Child Center in Hawaii. American preschool teachers not only encourage children to choose, but to develop a meta-awareness and a meta-discourse of the techniques and language of choosing. There are multiple times of the day at St. Timothy’s and Alhambra, the two American preschools in *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, when the teachers announce that it is time to make choices and draw attention to the task: “You’re song helper today. Do you know what song you want to choose? Do you need to think about it for a minute? Do you want some suggestions from your friends?” “What center do you want to go to? Don’t just point. Say it with words. Blocks? Good choice.”

Why the emphasis on choice in US early childhood education? There is no single answer. Choice is wrapped up with the American cultural belief that young children (along with the rest of Americans) have an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness and fun, and activities that are individually chosen are assumed to be inherently more pleasurable than those that are collectively chosen or assigned. The belief that preschool should be fun and full of choice is in tension these days with growing pressure on young children to learn to read. But even the most zealous advocates of pushing an academic curriculum down into the preschool years take care to present this curriculum as fun and to offer children choices within structured and even scripted lessons.

Choice is also valued because it is believed to foster intrinsic motivation and thereby to facilitate learning. In comments of American early childhood educators on the St. Timothy’s and Alhambra videos, we can deduce an underlying cultural or folk theory of learning that links choice to intrinsic motivation and to constructivist pedagogy: learning centers are important for children of this age because children can choose activities within their zone of proximal development; children learn best when

they choose the activity; if you choose for them, they resist, they are less engaged, and they learn less.

Choice is also tied up with notions of democracy. Letting children choose between building with Legos and playing at the water table is seen as providing practice in exercising the rights of democratic citizenship and more generally, of “independent decision making” (Lee & Walsh 2005, p.63). While most American educators who watched and commented on the Alhambra video were critical of the Pledge of Allegiance as an age-inappropriate display of patriotism that teaches young children no valuable lessons about democracy or citizenship, there was widespread support for the notion that choice and child-initiated activities support democratic values. As a preschool director in Phoenix told us after watching the St. Timothy’s video:

I like the way this teacher lays out the options for learning centers and then patiently gives each child the chance to choose a preferred activity. I am really into Alfie Kohn (1996). He says that you can’t teach democratic values by lecturing about them. You have to organize your classroom as a democracy and let children experience what it feels like to be in a democratic environment where their individual voices and choices matter (Tobin et al., 1989, p.196).

Conclusion

Critics as well as proponents of globalization suggest that as goods, ideas, and people are exchanged among nations at an ever-increasing pace, nations are becoming more similar and cultural differences less salient. The world systems theory version of globalization suggests that as the world increasingly becomes one system, ideas (including ideas about education) from the most powerful, culture-exporting countries come to dominate those of other countries. This is also the prediction of the modernization/rationalization version of globalization, which would suggest, follow-

ing the logic of social Darwinism, that over time the most rational, effective educational approaches spread, replacing tradition-bound local approaches that are believed in for reasons other than their rationality and functionality. The result is an ever-growing global convergence of education practices and ideas.

Is this the case for approaches to early childhood education over the past generation in the three countries in our study? Since the mid-1980s have Chinese, Japanese, and US preschools become significantly more alike? My answer, in a word, is “No.” My conclusion is that despite modernization and globalization, Chinese, Japanese, and American approaches to early childhood education are no more alike in their core practices and beliefs than they were a generation ago. Or rather we should say that over time they have become more alike in some ways and more different in others. Our study has shown that some cultural practices have been replaced by practices borrowed from abroad, but other cultural practices have emerged unscathed from their encounter with globally circulating ideas, still others have evolved into hybrid forms, and along the way some new cultural practices have been invented.

Our last round of interviews in 2006 and 2007 with Chinese early childhood educators suggests that the aggressive push toward progressivism and child-centeredness that characterized Chinese early childhood education from about 1990 to 2005 has begun to be counterbalanced by an acknowledgment of the value of traditional Chinese pedagogical practices and theories. This leads to the prediction that the period of intense borrowing will soon be replaced by a period of consolidation, localization, and hybridization of foreign and domestic educational ideas. A hybrid form of progressivism will emerge that combines Dewey, Vygotsky, the Project Approach, and Reggio with Confucianism, Chinese socialist principles, and Chinese educational traditions that give importance to memory, performance, mastery, content knowledge, and critique.

In contemporary Chinese education there is a growing “nativization” (*bentuhua*) movement that overlaps with new Confucian movements. Critical of what they see as

overzealous attempts to import foreign ideas without sufficiently localizing them and of failing to appreciate the unique virtues of Chinese thought, these movements are explicit about their goal of restoring to the curriculum traditional Chinese values and pedagogical approaches. These self-conscious, explicit efforts to preserve and reintroduce clearly marked Chinese cultural practices are a growing force in Chinese education. But I am suggesting that most of the characteristically Chinese beliefs and practices that we have identified in our study of contemporary Chinese preschools have been preserved and passed down less through self-conscious effort or political struggle than through the workings of informal, unmarked mechanisms of transmission. Practices that follow an implicit cultural logic in Chinese early childhood education include the emphasis on mastery and performance, as seen, for example, in the Story Telling King activity; on shared daily bodily routines, as seen in the daily physical exercise activities conducted across Chinese preschools and other domains of Chinese society; and the emphasis on critique as a strategy for self-improvement, as seen both in the Story Telling King activity and in the practices of professional development for teachers based on critiques by experts and by peers. Even as Chinese early childhood education goes through dramatic and sometimes wrenching processes of reform, traditions of performance and mastery, a belief in the power of exemplars and the utility of critique, and a commitment to shared social activity are beliefs and practices that should be preserved.

The Japanese situation is different. Japan modernized earlier, and then post-modernized, leading to a concern of loss of culture. Preschools are asked to be a key site for teaching young children to be Japanese, to have the cultural traits, behaviors, beliefs that are seen as traditionally Japanese and as in danger of disappearing in post-modern Japan. The core features of the Japanese preschool are implicit, reflecting a deep cultural logic. Values such as social-mindedness, liveliness, creativity, appreciation for nature, perseverance, and empathy are emphasized in government statements of goals for *yōchien* and *hoikuen*, but without clear directions on

how to achieve them and without the kind of codification found in DAP in the US or in China's early childhood education curriculum revision. The characteristic qualities and strengths of the Japanese preschool system include the alternating periods of chaos and order in the classroom; the reluctance to intervene too quickly in children's disputes; the high student/teacher ratios that encourage peer interaction; and the emphasis on emotion and especially on the development of empathy; these are not spelled out in curriculum guides, found in training manuals or program descriptions, taught in schools of education, or much discussed by Japanese scholars in academic publications. They are passed on from one generation to the next via an apprenticeship model, in which new teachers learn what to do from more experienced teachers. The cultural beliefs and practices of Japanese early childhood education make it unique among world systems and well attuned to the desire of contemporary Japanese parents and policy makers for institutions that can preserve Japanese cultural values in an era of rapid social transformation. Because so many other traditional Japanese institutions have been so thoroughly modernized and postmodernized, preschools are looked to as islands of cultural continuity in a sea of social change.

In the US, while debate is centered on questions of provision (for example, in bills calling for universal, publicly supported, pre-kindergarten programs) and on paradigm wars between proponents and opponents of developmentally appropriate practice and of direct instruction in literacy and mathematics, other practices can be found in US preschools that are unmarked and that reflect a core cultural logic that is largely shared across the philosophical/ideological spectrum. These practices include an emphasis on choice, self-expression, and the quality of the dyadic relationship between the teacher and each child in her class.

I'd like to conclude this talk with something Professor Zhu Jiaxiong told us when we interviewed him in 2007:

When we are exposed to a new way of thinking we should not swallow it all

at once without tasting it first. Chinese culture has a long history and many merits worth preserving. Our educational reform has undergone a long journey. We have learned a lot from the West. But we have many good things in our own culture, too, and our preschool education should reflect those merits. Educational approaches have a cultural character: American education has its American cultural values; Japanese has its Japanese values; we have our values. Because we have different values and different cultural backgrounds, we have different types of early childhood education. We need to learn from and complement each other.

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