

SCHOOLING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD?

THE CHINESE KINDERGARTEN

IN ITS ADOLESCENCE

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The year 2004 is the centenary of the first official kindergarten in China. During this 100 years of development, early childhood education in China has experienced two big developmental spurts, first at the beginning of the twentieth century and then again at the turn of the twenty-first century. The argument presented by this paper is that Chinese early childhood education is currently going through a metaphorical adolescence, in which rapid but imbalanced growth and an increasing awareness of power and possibility are accompanied by the struggle to forge an identity that bridges the colonial and communist pasts with a promising and yet uncertain future.

In this article,¹ we begin with an overview of the birth of the Chinese kindergarten and its first period of rapid growth following the First World War. We then describe the 'Preschool in Three Cultures' study that Joseph Tobin and his colleagues David Wu and Dana Davidson conducted in the mid-1980s, a period in which a second rapid devel-

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opment of early childhood education in China was just starting to gain momentum. As we write this article, we are in the midst of our new study, 'Continuity and Change in Pre-school in Three Cultures', a study in which we attempt to describe and understand the dramatic changes in Chinese early childhood education, alongside China's breathtaking social and economic advances of the past decade. Over the past three years, during which we have been conducting research for this study, Chinese kindergarten reform has been moving so fast that we can barely keep track of the changes we discover during our annual visits to our field sites in Shanghai, the most lively post-industrial and commercial port city, and Kunming, an inland provincial capital. Our research method affords Chinese early childhood educators with the opportunity to offer their perspectives on these rapid social, economic and educational changes. In particular, we have been struck by their discussions of their efforts to reform their early childhood education so as to prepare young children to participate in a new, much more open society, and how these efforts draw on ideas taken from other countries, including Japan and the United States, adapting them to the Chinese social and cultural context. This turning outward for ideas for early childhood educational reform in some ways is reminiscent to the origins of the Chinese kindergarten at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The infancy of the Chinese kindergarten

At the turn of the twentieth century in a few coastal cities, there were a handful of foreign church-run kindergartens based on Froebelian models. But China's first organized childcare and early education programmes did not begin until 1904, when the central government formally recognized a local government-supported kindergarten called *mengyangyuan* in Wuchang, a major port city on the Yangtze River, later known as Wuhan. This first Chinese kindergarten in China was based on a Japanese model inspired by Froebelian principles and practices. The three Japanese women who managed this *mengyangyuan* introduced a Japanese curriculum, teaching materials and cultural practices, including the Japanese language. This early, colonialist version of early childhood education in China was embraced mostly by well-to-do Chinese families and had little or no impact on the overall education system (Chen, 1996).

In the first decade of the twentieth century a dozen governmental and private *mengyangyuan* appeared in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and some other cities (Chen, 1996; Zheng, 1996; Chen & Liu, 1999). But it was not until the 1920s and the 1930s that the first major kindergarten development in China caught on, when a group of Chinese educators began actively promoting progressive educational ideas from the United States. Educators such as Tao Xingzhi, Chen Heqin and Zhang Xuemen were influenced by John Dewey and his colleagues at the Teachers College of Columbia University. After first trying to apply the progressive Western ideas, these Chinese educators shifted their strategy to creating a new kind of progressive kindergarten curriculum that was uniquely Chinese (Guo, 1987; Zhu, 2003b).

Tao Xingzhi (1981a), who studied with John Dewey in New York and then accompanied him on his 1919 tour of China, criticized the colonial kindergartens of the time as suffering from three diseases: a foreign curriculum; a dissipation in care; and

attention to children of rich families. He advanced a kindergarten model for rural and urban working-class families that assimilated the progressive child-centred approach, while transforming Dewey's basic notions into indigenous notions.

For example, the Deweyan notion that 'school is society' meant making 'each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science' (Dewey, 1956). For Dewey, education is life and children learn by doing. But in their efforts to translate these Deweyan ideas into the Chinese culture, these educators arrived at a different, more Chinese understanding where 'society is school,' 'life is education' and 'teaching, learning and doing are in unison' (Tao, 1981b). This was an indigenizing process in which 'kindergarten practices were improved by relating [the ideas] to Chinese conditions and using Chinese toys and Chinese stories, and mothers were given training in child-rearing' (Cleverley, 1991). Although the progressive spirit remained, the Chinese ideology of the larger society as a macrocosm of the family found a home in the new kindergarten movement. The ideas of this generation of Chinese progressive educators not only shaped the first Chinese kindergarten movement, but also formed the impetus for the second, more-extensive spurt of China's kindergarten reform in the 1980s, following three decades of basing its curriculum, pedagogy and care on the Soviet model.

The pre-school in three cultures method

The *Pre-school in Three Cultures* project (Tobin et al., 1989) began in the mid-1980s, when the thirty-year Soviet dominance of Chinese early childhood education was fading in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, China had just begun to make itself open again to the rest of the world, to implement the single-child policy, and to set in motion a new kindergarten reform movement. The original research in China focused on the pseudonymously named *Dongfeng*, a kindergarten for government employees in a provincial capital in the southwest. Like many kindergartens of the day, *Dongfeng* was housed in an old-fashioned courtyard that had been converted to a boarding kindergarten. There was no running water indoors and the toilets were troughs in an outhouse. A number of scenes depicted in the book and its companion video proved to be surprising and disturbing to Western viewers, including images such as group visits to the bathroom, boarding classes for children below age 5, morning health check-ups, children sitting in rows at desks following precise directions for block play, and parents and educators reflecting on China's single-child policy.

The method used in the original study, as in our current study, is called 'multivocal ethnography' (Tobin, 1989; Tobin & Davidson, 1991). First, we created a video that captured the daily routines of one pre-school in each culture. We then showed videos made in each country to audiences of teachers, administrators, parents and early childhood experts, using questionnaires and focus group interviews to elicit and record participants' descriptions, explanations and interpretations. This method produced a multi-layered, multi-vocal, dialogically structured text. One of the voices in this text was that of the teachers who appeared in our videos explaining the daily routines and practices of

their classroom and providing context and rationale for their actions. Another voice came from teachers, parents and experts in early childhood education within the same culture, who commented on the practices captured in our videos, including their assessment of the typicality of the pre-school. A third voice emerged from the comments of early childhood educators on the videotapes made in the other two cultures. By bringing all these voices together, we created a virtual dialogue across the cultures.

The original *Pre-school in Three Cultures* study was synchronic, as the focus was on cross-cultural comparison. In contrast, the new study is diachronic, with a focus on the question of historical change. Over the past twenty years, rapid economic growth and urbanization has dramatically changed China. In 1978, China was one of the world's poorest countries, with 80% of the population earning less than US\$1 a day and two-thirds of the population illiterate. By 1998, the proportion of the population earning less than US\$1 a day dropped to 12% and illiteracy among 15 to 25 year-olds dropped to 7% (World Bank Group, 2001). In response to the single-child policy that made children all the more precious to their parents, attention to kindergarten education has reached unprecedented importance in China. During the past fifteen years, the Chinese government has issued more than thirty new laws and regulatory documents on kindergarten education, as opposed to the twenty laws and regulations issued in the previous thirty-five years (China Society of Pre-school Education & Research, 1999).

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued *Kindergarten education guidelines* (Wang, 2002), a document that promotes a renewed emphasis on children as lifelong learners. The *Guidelines* require teachers to respect children as individuals, as developing beings and as partners in learning. It mandates that kindergarten education should integrate all possible connections between the curriculum and the surrounding social and cultural environment. As Wang Zhan (Wang, 2002), Vice-Minister at the Ministry of Education, puts it: 'Teachers' daily interactions with children are meant to enhance the shared learning and simultaneous growth of both teachers as professionals and children as society members' (p. 10).

The call for a reorganization of kindergartens has obliged educators to create a new curriculum, as well as a new social and material environment, all designed to reflect changing beliefs, values and customs. The dramatic changes that early childhood educators have achieved since the original study have led to our new central research question: How do Chinese early childhood educators respond to profound social and economic change? How does the kindergarten as a cultural institution simultaneously preserve cultural values while changing in order to shape the next generation of society members?

In the new study, we have videotaped two pre-schools in each part of the country: the pre-school we focused on in the original study plus a new one selected to provide contrast and highlight change. We have returned to *Dongfeng*, which we now call by its real name, *Daguan*. *Daguan* is a child-care facility serving the employees of the provincial government of Yunnan. In addition, we selected a new site, *Sinan Kindergarten*, located in the heart of Shanghai, the most post-industrialized Chinese city. It is a municipally recognized model programme that reflects a city-wide neo-progressivism in the kindergarten curriculum reform movement. It is different from *Daguan* kindergarten in

its focus on individualized learning, teacher/child interaction, and children as an autonomous social group. We used the videos of these two kindergartens as cues for conducting interviews with early childhood educators in five other Chinese cities. These two videos stimulate educators to talk about variations in practices across regions of China. In this article, we focus mainly on Chinese educators' reactions to the video we shot at *Daguan* in the spring of 2002.

In the new video of *Daguan (Dongfeng)*, the morning drop-off and health check-up are followed by breakfast in the 4-year-old room on the fourth floor. Next, the morning teacher takes the children downstairs to a multifunction room for an art class, with children dipping paper in a variety of watercolours to create motley patterns. After one hour of group exercise and free play, the class goes up to the fifth floor gym for sensory integration activities. This is followed by lunch in the classroom and a nap in the nap-room next door. After this, the afternoon teacher leads a music activity in the dance and music hall on the first floor. The day concludes with children playing with big blocks in a common block room. Throughout the day, there are group bathroom times as well as individual bathroom visits. At the beginning and end of most of the activities, there is a bit of time for free play in the classroom.

There were two key questions we asked teachers in China after they viewed the *Daguan* video: 'What are the most striking differences between the pre-school in the video and the pre-school where you work?' 'What do you think has changed most in the early childhood education of your country during the past twenty years?' We asked kindergarten staff in Kunming, Shanghai and Wuhan to offer their comments on the videos. To obtain some different perspectives reflecting the uneven levels of economic and societal advance, we also showed the videos to educators in small cities in the provinces of Hubei and Sichuan.

The metaphor of adolescence

Our video-cued interviews with Chinese early childhood educators over the last two years have provided us with an opportunity to examine various aspects of the reform movement. The metaphor we use to describe the reform is adolescent development. Adolescents' bodies grow in spurts, with some body parts growing and maturing before others, and the overall rate of change producing feelings of both excitement and confusion.

The pace of change is a challenge to veteran teachers and teacher-educators, who are products of the old system but who are nevertheless asked to lead their younger colleagues in the movement toward new ideas and practices.

Physical growth

In 2002, seventeen years after we conducted our original research in Kunming, we returned to *Daguan (Dongfeng)* kindergarten. Passing through the massive gate, we found ourselves on a large playground. One side of the playground was adjacent to the old courtyard we could see in the original video of *Pre-school in Three Cultures*. A temporary

brick wall divided the old and new locations. On the one side were old small classrooms waiting to be demolished; on the other side was the a giant five-storey modern education building overlooking a second classroom building, the administration building, and the teachers' residential apartment complex, all constructed since our last visit. This architectural mutation is characteristic of the transformation that many Chinese kindergartens have undergone in the past fifteen years.

The new kindergarten buildings offer twenty-four self-contained classrooms with adjoining tiled bathrooms and nap-rooms with rows of children's beds, an elevator for food delivery, and three large multifunction rooms, one equipped with a wall of mirrors and a piano, one with a large screen and a computer-controlled projection system, and another with gym apparatus designed to cultivate sensory integration, a therapeutic practice promoted by Dr. Jean Ayres of the University of Southern California in 1969. The contrast in facilities between the old and new structure is striking in that the new education building has almost everything that a kindergarten in Japan or the United States is required to have, and much more. In fact, architecturally and materially, the kindergartens we have visited in cities in China are on average (rural pre-schools would be an exception) much better equipped than most pre-schools in the United States.

After viewing both the old and the new video of her kindergarten, Ms. Shi, the current director of *Daguan*, told us: 'Before 1985, we were like a frog sitting at the bottom of a well who could only dream of a new type of early childhood education based on our wishful thinking. Years of opening up to the world have brought profound change to our country. Now, we find it almost impossible to compare our present facilities and teaching with our situation seventeen years ago.'

We showed a group of kindergarten directors in Kunming our new *Daguan* video and asked them to compare their own kindergartens with *Daguan*. Some directors told us that *Daguan* looked much like their own kindergartens, while others reported that it is much better equipped than their kindergarten. One director told us: 'Differences were not great between *Daguan* and us, except in facilities, the children's family backgrounds and the parents' education.' Another director's admiring words also included a reproach: '*Daguan* has desirable facilities and space; but my kindergarten pays more attention to the children's developmental characteristics and includes more small-group activities.'

Teachers at *Sinan* in Shanghai compared what they saw in the *Daguan* video with their own kindergarten and noted that *Daguan* in Kunming had impressive facilities – even better than *Sinan*'s. 'But our children are more polite and well-behaved,' a teacher remarked. 'We focus on tapping children's potentials.' A similar comment was made from a teacher in a small, relatively poor city in Sichuan: '*Daguan*'s facilities and environment are superior to ours, but we rid ourselves of teachers' tight control over children. Our teachers become friends with children in the process of carrying out routines.'

An adolescent's growth rate is uneven, leading to a period of awkwardness. The kindergarten's development in China seems to be following a similar pattern – physical facilities are developing ahead of an understanding of how best to use these new facilities. The new facilities reflect an implicit belief in a child-centred curriculum that in many cases the staff has not quite yet figured out how to implement.

Identity formation

At every kindergarten we have visited in China during the past three years, teachers have told us about an activity that they call 'going out to visit and learn'. Ms. Shi, *Daguan's* director, explained: 'We let our teachers take turns going out to visit and observe kindergartens in other cities that had undertaken interesting educational experiments. We visit kindergartens in other places to refresh our minds and to learn about different environments so that we may have newer or better ideas about what we can do in our own kindergarten.' Director Shi explained that, in addition to these trips, there are frequent visits by kindergarten teachers and directors in Kunming, some of which are co-ordinated by the Municipal or District Bureau of Pre-school Education. 'Every week, study groups of teachers visit each others' classrooms to discuss how to improve their teaching.'

This process of professional development through 'going out to see and learn' and comparing themselves to other programmes can be seen as analogous to adolescents who join formal and informal groups as a process of identity formation. The responses of teachers in different parts of China to watching our *Daguan* and *Sinan* videos highlight this process of professional identity formation and value clarification through observing and evaluating other programmes.

As mentioned earlier, several directors in Kunming pointed out similarities between their kindergartens and *Daguan*. This type of comment prompted us to ask the group of twenty directors from Kunming whether they would call *Daguan* a typical Kunming kindergarten. Most of the directors shook their heads. 'We are all very different,' one director said, 'and each tries to create its own characteristics in the field of early childhood education in the city.' Different in what ways? 'In my kindergarten,' another director replied, 'we promote activities that children themselves organize. We design a variety of learning centres and encourage small-group activities.'

Along the Yangtze River, 2000 km away, we interviewed five teachers from a kindergarten affiliated with a technical university in Wuhan who reacted to *Daguan* video in one voice, 'It is just like our kindergarten!' However, when we walked 2 km down the street to find a local equivalent of *Daguan*, a kindergarten that serves employees of the provincial government, we received a different response: 'Our teachers differ from *Daguan* teachers in that we guide, encourage and collaborate with children in their activities.'

A teacher in Deyang, a small city of Sichuan, about 1200 km west of Wuhan, observed that *Daguan's* teachers 'have little co-ordination with each other and do not offer children enough opportunities to do hands-on activities.' But she was equally critical of *Sinan*: 'There are too few group activities and the teacher does not correct the children's wrong behaviour in a timely manner!' This strategy of taking the middle ground was often used by Chinese teachers faced with the task of comparing their own kindergarten with the two in our videos. Elsewhere we have described this strategy as 'the Goldilocks effect', a phenomenon we encountered in our original study, where American teachers would tell us that they found Japanese pre-schools too chaotic, Chinese pre-schools too controlled, and American pre-schools just right (Tobin, 1999).

Other directors, rather than situating their programmes between those of *Daguan* and *Sinan*, identified themselves with *Daguan's* challenge of catching up with *Sinan* kindergarten's level of progress. For example, after viewing the *Sinan* video, a kindergarten director in Kunming told us: '*Sinan* teachers respect children, empathize with them, and provide guidance for children's initiatives, unlike our force-feed teaching and the way we herd children's activities according to our own thinking.' In Jingzhou, a mid-sized city on the Yangtze River, we heard a similar comment: 'The greatest difference between *Sinan* and ours lies in the teaching/learning system. *Sinan* closely follows the notions promoted by the national *Guidelines* (China. Ministry of Education, 2002). They attend to young children's personality development and encourage extensively children's initiatives. However, limited by our local conditions, we are faced with large classes, we are used to the traditional force-feed approach to teaching, and we're not sure how to help children develop all round.' This comment shows awareness of the need for change and of the direction recommended by the national *Guidelines*, and also of the regional and economic differences that present obstacles to this change.

Do the national *Guidelines* and *Sinan Kindergarten* represent the future of Chinese early childhood education? Chinese early childhood educators' responses to our videos show a range of answers to this question. We asked the twenty kindergarten directors in Kunming whether they see *Sinan* as their future. We did not anticipate their negative replies to this question. One director argued: 'Our city has its own unique history and its industrial and economic strengths and resources, all of which set us apart from Shanghai. To become like *Sinan*, to a certain extent, means that we would have to give up who we are here and how we should seek improvement in kindergartens.' This comment, which was met with nods of affirmation from the other directors, suggests a proud refusal to copy *Sinan* in Shanghai or to treat the *Guidelines* as an instruction manual.

However, this comment also reveals uncertainty among these practitioners who seem caught between two incompatible professional identities. On the one hand, they identify with the national *Guidelines* as an ideal for which they need to strive. On the other hand, they claim a strong local identity that works against their becoming too like *Sinan*, which they see as reflecting the special character and conditions of Shanghai. No one in this group of twenty directors, for example, believed that class sizes would become as small as those in Shanghai any time soon. The national *Guidelines* offer clear presentations of the new ideas and standards, but how to translate these advanced notions about teaching, learning and running kindergartens into practice and how to adapt them to local conditions are far less clear.

The past, the present and the future

In response to our questions about what has changed most significantly in early childhood education in China since we conducted our original study almost twenty years ago, Chinese kindergarten teachers and administrators conveyed the clear sense that change in their professional life is most palpable and inevitable. But the rate of change is not even

across China. It has been much more profound in bigger rather than in smaller cities, in coastal rather than in inland locations, and in areas that have ready access to ideas from Japan and the United States rather than in more culturally and geographically isolated locales. In an earlier publication we noted that a year before the national *Guidelines* made their appearance in 2001, Beijing kindergarten teachers had already promoted their own guidelines in which they articulated a belief in respecting children, treating them as equals and giving them more freedom (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003). In our 2003 fieldwork, we heard teachers in different parts of the country expressing similar ideas.

In Kunming, over 3000 km southwest of Beijing, a kindergarten director observed: 'We now respect children and recognize them as active learners. We now emphasize the need to tap their intellectual potential and encourage their hands-on work, social development and creativity.' In Jingzhou City in central China, a teacher stated: 'These days, we strive to enrich hands-on materials for children to use and let children explore in their learning. We respect them, and cultivate their individual development, and stimulate their creative ideas.' These responses reflect the power of the *Guidelines* to provide teachers nation-wide with a uniform language and shared concepts and goals. And yet the direction called for by the *Guidelines* presents difficulties to many teachers.

In Wuhan, a teacher in a university-affiliated kindergarten complained to us: 'Change in ideas for early childhood education has taken place in our country, but the actual implementation is like adding fresh water to old medicine.' Her colleague concurred: 'We can see great change in teachers' increasing sensitivity to children's feelings and developmental experiences. Children have more freedom. However, as in the past, requirements for us to implement the ideas are uniform and inflexible.' Many of our informants suggested that teachers' educational ideas have changed, but a large gap remains between these ideas and their practice.

But other teachers and directors are more optimistic. 'The most striking change is that we have come to value humanity as the essence of early childhood education,' noted an administrator of *Sinan* Kindergarten. One director in Kunming explained that: 'In the past, we covered our curriculum and prioritized knowledge. But now, we highlight the importance of humanistic education, prioritizing children as actively developing beings. Children have control of their learning; teachers are participants, collaborators, guides and supporters. The designs of all our educational settings are based on children's needs.' The themes of respect, equality and freedom we discovered in our interviews with teachers and administrators in Beijing in 2000 (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003) seem to have expanded to a widely shared commitment to humanistic education. We find in our recent interviews evidence that this approach has caught on in China, with educators repeatedly employing active verbs such as participate, collaborate, guide and support.

This change is the result of the so-called second phase of curriculum reform that first emerged in Shanghai, then in other cities, before spreading across the country. The first phase started in the 1980s with a new emphasis at the time on children's needs, a progressive notion from the 1920s that, ironically, was implemented through reworking of various single-subject curricula, reflecting a combination of traditional Chinese schooling and Soviet pedagogical theory. The second phase of curriculum reform is aimed at addressing this problem by experimenting with an 'integrated theme-based

curriculum' that seeks to place children in the centre of learning and living in kindergartens (Zhu, 2003a; b).

This change is reflected in comments such as those of teachers at *Sinan* after watching our video of *Daguan*. One teacher commented that *Daguan's* children seemed more self-reliant and independent, which she attributed to *Daguan's* large class size (thirty-six children in classrooms at *Daguan* compared to twenty-four at *Sinan*). Another *Sinan* teacher was critical: '*Daguan* has not been keeping up with the second phase of curriculum reform; they're lagging behind in their educational ideas. The difference between their practice and ours is that, in the second phase, we focus on individual interactions between the teacher and the child.' A fellow teacher in *Sinan* added: 'We have turned from a teacher-centred to a child-centred approach; we put emphasis on respecting children's individuality, teaching from children's own interests, and paying attention to ecological effects on children.' Professor Zhu Jiaxiong (Zhu, 2003a), Vice-President of the Chinese Society for Pre-school Education and Research, noted that the second phase of curriculum reform began in three major cities: Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing. The experiments on an integrated theme-based curriculum in these cities preceded the appearance of the 2001 national *Guidelines* for kindergartens.

A teacher in Jingzhou City of Hubei commented that: 'Change is obvious, but it seems to be happening more in large and middle-sized urban settings, where kindergarten reform has moved much further in the direction of the 2001 *Guidelines* than in small cities. We have just begun to reform our kindergartens, but the pressure from parents for academic skill learning is huge. Parents' wishful and wilful demands are pushing our kindergartens in the direction of an elementary school model.' But despite such counter-productive pressures from parents, the change towards a more humanistic approach is inevitable and taking place on a large scale. A director in Kunming told us: 'In the last ten years, the most evident change is the internationalization and indigenization of our curriculum. We are trying to create our indigenous kindergartens in order to become part of the world.'

This becoming part of the world requires an artful blending of the local, the national and the global. It requires not just responding to local pressures and drawing on local traditions, but also engaging with the national *Guidelines* and assimilating ideas and practices from other countries, notably Japan and the United States. As an experienced teacher in Wuhan told us: 'Over the past twenty-year period, the theory of lifelong learning has gained wide acceptance among kindergarten teachers. Approaches such as Montessori, parent/child activity and sensory integration experiments are highly visible.' 'Parent/child activity', in which parents are encouraged to get involved with their child's experiences in the kindergarten, seems to be a concept and a term imported from Japan. The Montessori approach and the sensory integration exercises came to China mostly via the United States. Professor Zhu (2001) suggests that both the project approach from the United States (Katz & Chard, 2000) and the Reggio Emilia approach from Italy (Edwards et al., 1993), again via the United States, become interesting to Chinese early childhood educators mainly because these non-Chinese approaches support 'the notions and beliefs we have been promoting nowadays' (Zhu, 2001).

Conclusion

Compared to Japan and the United States, China was not only late in creating an early childhood education system, but also experienced some developmental delays. As a result, to continue the central metaphor of this article, early childhood education in China is still in its adolescence, growing rapidly but unevenly, full of new-found strengths and promise, but also at times confused about what will happen next. The unevenness of this remarkable progress is most striking between kindergartens in the largest cities and those in smaller urban and rural areas. Shanghai is the city that is most open to such Western ideas as the project approach of the United States, the Reggio Emilia model from Italy and the family-kindergarten communication model from Japan. Kindergarten reform in inland cities lags in learning about foreign ideas and integrating them into existing practice. Across China we heard universal acknowledgment from early childhood educators about the significance of the national *Guidelines* issued in 2001 for leading the modernization of Chinese kindergartens. But educators in more rural and remote locales are more aware of the need to adapt these *Guidelines* to their local conditions and of the hurdles they will have to overcome before the core values and practices of the *Guidelines* can be fully implemented.

In the words of teachers, this is not just a gap between urban and rural areas, but also between the ideas they have recently been exposed to and the practices they do not yet have. There is a belief among many Chinese educators that, as long as one has a clear idea, the corresponding practices will follow. Our study suggests that, while the national *Guidelines* have been widely spread and have taken hold, most kindergartens have a long way to go to turn these ideas into effective practice – a colossal challenge to Chinese kindergarten teacher education and development.

In spite of the frequent comments we heard about the unevenness of the reform and the difficulty of matching practice to new ideas, the overall sense we take away from our interviews in China during 2003 is one of optimism and confidence. As the director of a kindergarten in Kunming told us: 'During the past twenty years, I have been a participant in and a witness to dramatic change in kindergarten reform. Early childhood education in China has gradually rid itself of the old model of transmitting knowledge to the young. We have entered an era in which early education is centred on a humanistic belief, and on a view of human development as a life-long process. I feel proud of this progress.'

Note

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