

Bringing Chopsticks to China

Lynn Farrell

When I first contemplated directing and teaching in a kindergarten in China, I thought immediately of my chopsticks. I have a beautiful set of Thai chopsticks that a friend gave me. Because they would serve as a fond reminder of friends and home and also be useful in my new life in China, I decided to bring them along.

After living in China for more than a year, I view my choice of chopsticks as a barometer of my cultural sensitivity. My chopsticks are unique in design and different from other chopsticks I have seen and used in China. They are special because I brought them with me from Sydney. Chopsticks at restaurants and at friends' homes here in China serve the same purpose as my chopsticks; however, they are different. Choosing to use Chinese chopsticks instead of my own is symbolic of putting aside many of my established views and approaching differences with openness and respect.

Everyone has individual and cultural traditions or ways of doing. Understanding your own culture can help you understand other people's cultural perspectives. In this light I share some of the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western child-rearing concepts, as reflected in mealtime practices in my new kindergarten. I also share how the Chinese and Western early childhood educators at the school engaged in perspective taking to begin to resolve a clash of cultures.

Here is some background about China and about the school.

Some Chinese social influences

The Chinese government encourages families to have only one child. Marriage too is guided in part by government incentives, and couples are urged to marry after age 27. Many couples therefore have children later in life than did previous generations. People in China have a strong commitment to family and tradition, and the extended family is the foremost consideration when making life decisions.

In the vast majority of households, both parents work outside the home (often in a province away from where they live) and childrearing is frequently undertaken by one or both grandmothers. (A nanny may also participate in childrearing in families that can afford one.) Many of the grandmothers grew up during the 1940s, when the Chinese civil war and the Japanese occupation took place; living conditions, food sources, and childrearing practices then were very different from those today. These elders also experienced Mao's Great Leap Forward and his Cultural Revolution, times of social upheaval and extreme privation.

China is a relatively new member of the international community and the global market. Information sources are more readily available now than ever before. However, many older people have limited access to new information and maintain traditional practices.

Shenyang Creative Kindergarten

One result of China's prominent role in the world market is the inclusion of English language programs in school and university curriculums. Many kindergartens—early education programs for children two to six—entice families through the employment of a native English speaker, regardless of that person's teacher training.

I am the Western principal of Shenyang Creative Kindergarten, a new dual-language school with an innovative full day program that teaches English through meaning making. Although impressed by China's growth and expansion, I thought the early childhood curriculums and practices were outdated and ineffective in preparing children for the twenty-first century. I arrived in Shenyang (population, 7.2 million), the capital of Liaoning Province, in April 2003 to oversee the school's renovation, develop the kindergarten's curriculum, and employ and train the teaching staff. In September 2003 the school opened its doors to two classes of 25 children, ages three through six. Each classroom has a Chinese and a Western teacher and an assistant.

Traditional mealtime practices

Shenyang Creative Kindergarten provides children with three cooked meals a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Each meal consists of two courses and is accompanied by hot soup. This is typical in China, where meals are huge compared to what we in Australia are familiar with. Grandmothers usually sit with the children for breakfast in kindergarten, and arrive early in the afternoon to sit with the children for dinner.

These family members make sure the children eat all the food placed in front of them. In our kindergarten each grandmother would sit with her grandchild, serve large helpings of each different food, and feed the child. Many of the children, including the older four- and five-year-olds, would not or could not feed themselves and waited to be fed by an adult. It was not uncommon to witness a child protesting, and all too often a child would gag and vomit. The child would be cleaned up and re-served food, and the grandmother would begin the process again.

Mealtime practices were the topic of many discussions during the school's first six months. Western staff at the kindergarten were shocked by the practices, but the Chinese staff saw them as typical, and to some extent they even participated in them. This led to debates between Western and Chinese teachers: How should mealtime be carried out? Does the practice of feeding children constitute force-feeding? How does it differ from encouraging children to eat a complete meal?

Discussions tended to result in the Western teachers making decisions, as the Chinese teachers' way of working within teams is one of compliance and respect toward those perceived as being in authority (discussion of differences does not happen easily). The Chinese teachers were asked to speak with the grandparents, asking them to stop feeding the children, and the teachers themselves were to stop the practice.

In retrospect this was a poor response. Due to their deferential behaviors and their experiences with meetings, the Chinese teachers had little opportunity to share their perspectives, and they continued the practice whenever the Western teachers were out of sight.

As director of the kindergarten I could not allow the mealtime practice of forcing children to eat to continue. I knew it was important to understand and respect the viewpoints, values, and attitudes of the Chinese families and staff rather than force them to accept the Western perspective. However, I thought the issue involved more than a cultural difference. It was about respecting children and, on a more practical note, about health and hygiene in relation to children vomiting at mealtimes.

Sharing cultural perspectives

A balance needed to be found and a compromise reached whereby all stakeholders would feel honored and any changes in practice would be implemented with cooperation and commitment. I called a meeting for the teaching staff, the Chinese principal, and the kindergarten's doctor (all kindergartens in China are required to have a full-time doctor or nurse) to discuss and resolve this issue in a manner that was respectful to adults and children.

What is the goal at mealtime?

The group's first point of discussion was the goal for children at mealtime and how it influences practice. The kindergarten's doctor is responsible for reporting to the licensing authority the children's intake at meals. She wanted to ensure that children ate enough healthy food to support their play and learning. She felt it was the teachers' responsibility to encourage the children to eat.

All of the Chinese staff believed that the children would not eat a balanced meal unless they were fed. They felt that children do not have the knowledge to make good decisions about what and how much to eat. They did not view mealtimes as learning opportunities, and they believed that the parents' and grandparents' wishes regarding food should be followed.

Western teachers wanted the children to make their own choices about what and how much they ate. To them, independence in life skills was a fundamental aspect of children's learning and development. They expressed indifference about the nutritional aspects of meals and considered many of the children to be overfed. They thought the Chinese adults' practice at kindergarten mealtimes was tantamount to force-feeding, was

disrespectful of children, and was contrary to the kindergarten's philosophy and practices in all other areas of its emergent curriculum.

From this discussion staff learned that the goals for children at mealtime were different for the Chinese teachers and the Western teachers; thus, their practices differed. For Chinese staff, mealtimes were nutritional opportunities, whereas Western staff saw them as learning as well as nutritional opportunities. Both viewpoints express appropriate goals for children.

Is every child the same?

The group next met to discuss whether all children were the same. There was unanimous agreement that every child was different. Staff were asked to consider how any practice—making every child eat everything or facilitating choice for all children—could be uniform if all children were different. Staff were encouraged to think about this and to use their observational records to identify children who might need help eating and those who showed independence and decision making at higher levels.

Are teachers comfortable with mealtime practices?

At our third meeting, I asked staff, "How do you as an individual feel about what is happening at mealtimes?" The Chinese teachers said that they felt uneasy with the practice of making children eat all their food, but that they felt even more anxious not following the requests of the grandparents and the kindergarten's doctor. In addition, Chinese staff were concerned about the health and well-being of children if they did not eat enough food; they feared they would be harming children's health.

The Western staff felt uncomfortable intervening at each meal; they believed it was detrimental to building collaborative teams. However, they did not think they could stand by and watch children being forced to eat; they felt strongly that the practice bordered on abuse.

Resolving the dilemma

From these three discussions the teaching team acquired a wealth of information with which to develop common goals and practices. (For details, see the perspectives of the grandparents, Chinese teachers, and Western teachers listed in boxes throughout.)

Teachers concur about changes

The Chinese and Western teachers were open and receptive to compromise and change; they identified similarities and differences and developed common goals for mealtimes:

- Mealtimes will be a relaxed, happy, and pleasant time for children.
- Children will acquire knowledge and information about eating healthy, balanced meals.

- Relationships between children and teachers will be mutually respectful.

Chinese staff shared their knowledge about Chinese health and food with the Western staff, and both sets of teachers jointly developed a nutrition curriculum for the children. This was displayed so that parents and grandparents could share the children's new learning about health and nutrition.

Teachers showed respect to children in all aspects of the curriculum, not just mealtimes. Rather than doing, teachers would ask—for example, “Would you like some more?” “Do you need some help?” “Would you like some soup?”

Teachers encouraged children to clean up after meals and take appropriate levels of responsibility for their health needs. The older children served their own meals, and the younger children set the tables. Teachers displayed for grandparents and parents daily recordings of what and how much children ate. Many of the older children recorded their own food intake.

Tough decisions about grandmothers

Asking the grandparents to consider compromises or alternative ways of doing was more difficult. The development of trusting relationships with families is often a long process. For Shenyang Creative Kindergarten it was more difficult due to the language barrier between Chinese families and the Western teachers and the fact that the school had been operating for only six months. In the discussions between Chinese and Western staff, it became clear that the mealtime practices of the grandparents were not abusive, as perceived by the Western staff, but were undertaken with good intentions.

Listening and perspective taking helped staff critically reflect rather than be judgmental. However, stressful mealtimes and the practice of filling children's mouths until they gagged were causing the children to develop unhealthy eating habits and were contrary to the school's educational philosophy. Development of a social environment in which children and adults jointly planned and made decisions was integral to the curriculum. Furthermore, while it was understandable that past experiences influenced the grandparents' practice, childhood experiences in China today are different. Food is plentiful and the children who attend the kindergarten generally come from the more affluent section of the city.

The decision I made to address the issue of grandmothers at mealtimes was not optimal, nor is it one I would advocate for other children's services. But given the circumstances, it was the best option at the time. I asked the Chinese principal to speak with the grandmothers, asking them not to participate in mealtimes at the kindergarten. I wanted the staff to work through the issues without additional anxiety and to remain open to reflection and evaluation of the practices they had agreed to implement.

I hoped that the grandparents would see some significant changes in their grandchildren's eating habits and their developing knowledge about healthy foods. Staff made videos of mealtimes for the families to view, showing that teachers were carefully monitoring meals and feeding or facilitating children's eating individually when necessary. Teachers recorded anecdotes accompanied by digital photographs showing the children's developing skills. The Chinese principal and I spoke to the parents about forming a nutrition committee to share our goals, rationale, and practice with families and gather feedback about the new practices. I hoped that the grandparents would feel welcome to join the children at mealtimes at a later date, when the new practices were firmly established.

Most families accepted the new practices, which have been in operation for three months. Three families withdrew their children—when grandmothers are unhappy, parents do all they can to keep the peace. I learned the importance of communicating with parents and grandparents before they enroll their child.

Conclusion

The teaching staff have a strong sense of ownership of and commitment to the new practices and can see the benefits for children in relation to their growing skills and social development. The mealtime practices have flowed to other areas of the daily routine, and children are frequently heard saying "I don't like it" and making decisions and choices in their play and learning. The Chinese teachers see that children are capable and can contribute to their own learning. The Western teachers see that past experiences have a strong influence on practices.

The disposition to question, reflect, evaluate, and listen to others has been a positive outcome for all the teaching staff and one I hope the team continues to develop. I am still working through the issue of grandmothers in the classroom and trying to understand the role of a doctor in a kindergarten.

Staff and families at the Shenyang Creative Kindergarten have experienced many differences in practice, values, and attitudes in the past year, and although most seem insignificant or minor, I have come to believe that all differences need to be discussed. When minor differences add up, major issues surface and people become resentful and distrustful; team collaboration disintegrates. We can work respectfully and cooperatively only when we acknowledge and share our differences while listening to and respecting others. Our individuality and uniqueness come from our personal experiences and cultural influences. In our differences lie a wealth of challenges, opportunities, and learning, provided we are receptive, sensitive, and open.

Although I still value my Thai chopsticks, I have become very comfortable using traditional Chinese chopsticks instead.

Chinese Teachers' Perspectives	Western Teachers' Perspectives
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling one's elders what to do and how to behave is disrespectful. • Likewise, to show respect, teachers have to do as the grandparents ask. • The Chinese teachers' immediate supervisor advocates the mealtime practice of feeding children. • It is important to consider the medicinal benefits of eating, where culturally relevant; for example, children and Chinese staff drink only warm water, as they believe cold water upsets the stomach. • Chinese teachers are familiar with tales of famine and high child mortality rates in China. • Chinese teachers' past experiences and routines influence their practices. • Children's development of self-help skills does not have a high priority in learning. • The concept of the child as capable and resourceful is new to Chinese teachers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence is valued. • Western staff have no negative past experiences with the availability of food. • Western teachers have little understanding of or belief in traditional Chinese medicine and its relation to food. • Current mealtime practices undermine the kindergarten's philosophy and curriculum. • The Chinese teachers' authority is being used inappropriately. • Western staff draw on their own individual and cultural experiences as well as their professional knowledge and understanding of appropriate practice. • Western teachers are strongly committed to the rights of the child. • Western staff view the Chinese children from a Western perspective.
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Lynn Farrell, BEd, is the Western principal of Shenyang Huanggu District Creative Kindergarten in northeast China. To establish this new school, she oversaw its renovation, implementation of operational and accounting systems, alignment with bureaucratic requirements, hiring, teacher training, and curriculum development. Lynn formerly directed Lady Gowrie Child Centre in Sydney, Australia.