



Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States

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As the numbers of mothers in the workforce grows, the role of the extended family diminishes, and parents feel under greater pressure to give their children an educational headstart, industrialized societies are increasingly turning to preschools to nurture, educate, and socialize young children. Drawing on their backgrounds in anthropology, human development, and education, Tobin, Wu, and Davidson present a unique comparison of the practices and philosophies of Japanese, Chinese, and American preschool education and discuss how changes in childcare both reflect and affect larger social change.

The method used is innovative: the authors first videotaped a preschool in each culture, then showed the tapes to preschool staff, parents, and child development experts. Through their vivid descriptions of a day in each country's preschools, photographs made from their videotapes, and Chinese, Japanese, and American evaluations of their own and each other's schools, we are drawn into a multicultural discussion of such issues as freedom, conformity, creativity, and discipline.

In China, for example, preschools are expected to provide an antidote to the spoiling that Chinese fear is inevitable in an era of single-child families. Americans look to preschools not only to teach reading and to encourage children to be creative, expressive, and independent but also to provide a stability and richness otherwise missing from many children's lives. Japanese preschools, surprisingly for many Americans, deemphasize discipline and academics and instead stress the teaching of group interaction to a generation of overly sheltered children. In all three nations, preschools, rather than being radical or transforming, function to conserve values believed to be threatened by social change.

Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States Details

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From Reader Review *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States* for online ebook

Sarah shieh says

I learned this book on the recommendation of my tutor at first, but in China, it's hard to buy it now? because there is no Chinese edition yet.

Alex Cunningham says

"Preschool in Three Cultures" should be a deep and fascinating examination of a fundamental and highly influential part of these societies, and it is. The level of detail and observation is incredible. The analysis - especially of the subtle causal relationships between behaviors - is insightful and well-expressed. It is also overwhelming. Where the writing should be clear in addition to perceptive, it is instead dense and overcomplicated. Where it should let us into foreign environments to explore and learn, it instead overwhelms us. Such an exhaustive study may make for good data for further analysis, but it does not make for good actual reading, and therefore it fails to fully make the many excellent points it contains.

Lisa Wuertz says

Totally fascinating! I was a little apprehensive after reading some of the reviews stating it was hard to read and very much like an academic paper, but I did not find that to be the case. It read easily enough and I found so much to be very interesting. From the way the societal values of each culture play out in the way preschools are run to the history of preschools in each country and the impact this has on them today.

This book/study is written by three people of slightly different backgrounds (education, child development, social work and anthropology) and takes an anthropological approach to looking at preschool in the three countries. They filmed a typical day in typical preschools in all three countries. They then screened the films to parents, teachers and children from the schools as well as other education experts and parents from the countries to elicit their responses and opinions about what goes on in all three preschools.

I found it especially interesting that the Japanese preschools have such large teacher-student ratios, for the most part a hands-off approach to child-child interactions and conflict, and the day mostly consisting of free-play rather than education goals like learning to read and math, yet at the time of the study (in the 1980s, not sure what things are currently) the Japanese were outperforming Americans academically and economically. I also found the section that discusses the impact Christianity and foreign missionaries have had on their education system to be really interesting. This quote from a Japanese Christian/social worker/educator in response to the American preschool film was very interesting, "...what I am trying to explain to you is that while I and others find something very attractive about the American psychological, personalized approach to discipline, I feel something about it isn't quite right or appropriate or feasible for Japanese. For my tastes there is something about the American approach, the approach you've shown us in your film, that is a bit too heavy, too adult like, too severe and controlled for young children. The way Americans deal with children's disagreements by agonizing about motivation and guilt and atonement--it's all very Judeo-Christian in a way which is very foreign to most Japanese. It's based on a very different notion of original sin and conscience

and guilt and individuality and especially of the efficacy of words than we have in Japan." I have to wonder what things might have looked like if Eastern Christianity had been exported worldwide at the levels that Western Christianity has and what that would look like played out here.

As an American, the way the way the authors showed how traditional American values such as individualism, self actualization, self expression, justice and the pursuit of happiness come into play in how the preschools operate was extremely interesting especially in contrast to Japanese and Chinese values of groupism and the collective good and how that played out in those countries' preschools. It is slightly crazy to me that four-year-olds already have a sense of these values and even have them slightly ingrained as the section entitled "Justice" shows, "Justice in American preschools is negotiated daily with children playing the roles of plaintiff, defendant, and attorney, and teachers playing the role of judge. As in the dispute we filmed in the block corner, teachers at St. Timothy's deal with conflict by leading children step by step through the process of litigation and arbitration. As soon as Cheryl arrived in the block corner to break up the fight, the trial began. In this case, each of the parties chose to represent himself. Under Cheryl's direction, Stu and Mike each testified, offered evidence, referred to precedents, and objected to aspects of each other's testimony... Where do children at St. Timothy's and other American preschools learn these techniques of jurisprudence? Many children with siblings have experience pleading similar cases at home, with parents playing the part of judge and siblings the part of co-litigant. For children without siblings and for children growing up in homes that do not encourage this basically middle-class American approach to conflict resolution, the preschool is an important classroom for learning how to defend oneself from accusations and to seek redress when one feels wronged. Key lessons to be learned about justice in American preschools are that words and reason are preferable to fists in conflict resolution; that, with patience, justice can emerge out of adversarial positions; and that one is innocent (and thus unpunishable) until proven guilty."

I also thought the analysis of lower fertility rates, whether self- or in the case of China government-imposed, the narrowing of the child's world to the nuclear family from the collective village/society or extended family, and increasing mother working rates and how preschool seeks to fill that void was poignant. In all three societies, under funded preschools and underpaid preschool teachers (some of the lowest paid workers of all three societies) are charged with meeting a huge variety of needs including parental counseling, rearing children, socializing them, educating them academically, teaching them early on how to be good citizens, feeding them, teaching hygiene and health and in some cases much more. All these things were once taken care of by parents, extended family members and neighbors. "In all three societies, the rise of preschool is viewed, for better or worse, as a radical departure from traditional modes of caring for young children. And yet our interviews and observations lead us to view preschools more as agents of cultural conservation than change... preschools provide children with a fictive version of the community of concerned others (the kinj?) in which children enjoyed growing up in the past, and they provide isolated suburban mothers with links to others missing from modern commuting communities... Preschools, although a relatively new invention, are more a force of cultural continuity than cultural change. Preschools work more to instill than to subvert the values parents in China, Japan, and the United States wish to pass on to their children. With family size and patterns of women's work dramatically changing in all three cultures in the last twenty years, Chinese, Japanese, and American parents look to preschools to play the essentially compensatory and conservative role of minimizing the undesired effects of these wrenching changes on the lives of young children."

Mauri says

I'm already kind of annoyed at the lofty attitude the researchers and the American teachers are taking over the Japanese high student/teacher ratio. "Small classes are soooooo much better for four-year-olds and what do you mean we have a higher teen suicide rate in the US?"

Read the Japanese part and skipped the rest. In my mind, preschool really doesn't seem to matter as much as these authors think it does.

Also, the authors seemed to neglect the fact that, in Japan, "preschool" is everything up until elementary school, whereas in America, preschool and kindergarten are separate entities. With that sort of set-up, I don't find it surprising that the Japanese have extended "typical" kindergarten activities to younger children (i.e. four-year-olds). They've also extended "typical" preschool activities to the five-year-olds, for example, free play. In the US however, preschool is for play and kindergarten is for pre-learning.

Amanda says

good ethnography - i think it's cool the way they show the video from each country to all the people in the same and other countries....helps to de-privilege one viewpoint. it was cool to see the video in class too. you spend the whole time reading the book about it and then you can watch.

Ben says

As another reviewer said --- this was great ethnography that is excellent for de-privileging your viewpoint. I was able to get a much broader perspective on what people do to (raise) children, along with all sorts of culturally ingrained perspectives on group socialization, play and even philosophy like how to carry out justice.

There was a lot of dialogue at different levels: What actually happened when they observed classes, all the different people in the same culture who they interviewed and got comments about the film from, people from other cultures viewing the film, and then their comments on the comments.

The Japanese section was most interesting, mainly because the American preschool was familiar, and the Chinese method wasn't interesting. Since the films were made in 1985, China was still relatively closed and there was a lot of communist sentiment left over. So the authors had trouble viewing the 'natural' state, as the Chinese kept trying to show extra regimentation (to the horror of the Japanese/Americans). The authors talk about the problem of figuring out what was communist culture, and what was Chinese culture. I expect things to be pretty different now that it's a wealthier country, and not very communist.

Japanese style is 'completely hands off'---they let the children be as wild and crazy as they like, without discipline from a higher authority. At first this idea seemed insane, but it appears to work out---they have their own system of a sort with more power and expectation given to other children in the group. Also, I could about Hiroki all day. What a crazy awesome kid.

W/ the Americans I mainly noted how there are all sorts of weird beliefs about justice and fairness and right

to speak out and such that weren't present elsewhere. For example, psuedo-trial things w/ regards to who is right and wrong and what truly happened in a block dispute. The Japanese/Chinese thought that this was heavy handed, but were also interested in how the Americans talked about feelings and emotions with kids of such a young age. I also thought the other cultures commentary on how their kids do make believe just as well without all the physical toys was interesting.

It turns out there is a sequel that I would like to read.

Jane says

May not be as relevant as before, since the study was done in the eighties (I think), but the main points are still valid, and *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* gives a pretty thorough update. This and *Unequal Childhoods* were probably my two favorite texts from sociology class last semester.
