

Case Study on Preschool Chinese Character Multi-Dimensional Education in the Context of Cross-Culture

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Abstract

Action research method is taken in the research. The researchers conduct Chinese character multi-dimensional education from the aspects of experience & expression of Chinese characters forms to cultural infiltration and cooperative learning upon Yiyi who is interested in Chinese culture as well as obstacles in Chinese learning and social adaptability. Yiyi's imagination, observation ability, knowledge, experience and prosocial behavior, etc. were observed and analyzed by qualitative research method through interviews with teachers, parents and young children and analysis on preschool painting and handiwork in Chinese character multi-dimensional education. The result shows that Yiyi's imagination has become more and more and her comprehensive ability has improved; knowledge and experience have gradually enriched and observation ability has become persistent; prosocial behavior has increased and enhanced.

Key words: Preschool education; Chinese character education; Chinese character multi-dimensional education (CCME)

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INTRODUCTION

Yiyi is a mixed blood girl, whose mother is a Chinese from Chongqing City, and her father is an American. Her

parents are teachers in universities of Chongqing City. Yiyi returned to China after living in America for more than three years. She was three and a half years old girl studying in a junior class of a public kindergarten when we first met. Being unfamiliar with China, she was very lonely at that time and did not like to communicate with other children, nor did she answer teachers' questions. She almost did not participate in any group activities. Through short-term contact and conversations with teachers and parents, the researchers found the fact that Yiyi was particularly interested in everything about China, and liked to speak Chinese by imitating teachers, partners and TV personalities. She often asked her mother the meaning of Chinese Characters in picture-books and expected to learn how to write Chinese names.

In addition, Yiyi's mother also expected her daughter to accept Chinese culture instead of forgetting her origin. She asked the researchers about the method that is interesting for her daughter to know about Chinese characters and to understand Chinese culture primarily. Referring to relevant literature according to the above problems, the researchers found that the preschool CCME can integrate characters with Chinese cultural characteristics and educational ideas complying with the characteristics of development of children's psychology. More importantly, it has been proved to be stimulative to the development of young children. Therefore, the researchers decided to try to develop Yiyi's interest in Chinese characters and Chinese culture so as to integrate her into living and studying environment as soon as possible to grow up healthily.

Preschool CCME refers to an activity that takes advantage of multidimensional resources of Chinese characters, including its morphological structure characteristics, evolution rules, and cultural connotation and calligraphic art, to promote development of young children by ways of comparison and analysis on

morphology and structure of ancient Chinese characters and current Chinese characters by pictures (or objects, real sceneries), revelation of essence of Chinese characters, and appreciation of calligraphic art of Chinese characters (Li, 2007)¹. The existing research results show that there are abundant and favorable educational resources in Chinese characters, comparison and analysis on different morphological structures of Chinese characters can promote development of perception and thinking of young children, such as perception, observation ability, classification ability and reasoning ability, etc. Understanding thinking tension of Chinese characters forms and the teaching procedure “ancient Chinese characters—pictures (or objects, real sceneries)—current Chinese Characters—child expression) can promote development of imagination of young children; revelation of essence of Chinese characters is beneficial for enriching the objective knowledge and experience of young children and developing the sociality such as persistence, honesty and cooperation of young children. It is also beneficial for the inheritance of national culture (Li, 2007). These research aims focused on the children whose native language is Chinese, not English. So this research conducted the CCME upon an American child

who is with strong interest in Chinese culture as well as obstacles in Chinese learning and social adaptability. It is hoped to promote the child’s development of imagination, knowledge, experience, observation ability, and prosocial behaviors, etc..

1. RESEARCH METHOD

Action research has been taken. The researchers, as teachers, conducted CCME from aspects of experience & expression of Chinese characters forms of cultural infiltration and cooperative learning upon Yiyi. Concrete operational processes and modes are shown in Table 1. Yiyi’s imagination, observation ability, knowledge, experience and prosocial behavior, etc. were observed and analyzed by qualitative research method through interviews with teachers, parents and young children and analysis on preschool painting and handiwork in CCME. Finally, according to observation record of the typical child behavior, and deep interviews with teachers, parents and partners and analyze on work of the child, the effect of educational activity is evaluated by the way of which formative evaluation is first and summative evaluation is second.

Table1
The Procedure and Mode of CCME Content

Teaching procedure	Direction	Requirement on an child	Teaching mode
Show ancient Chinese character	What is it like?	Observe, imagine	Chidren’s activity
Show relating objects, real scenes or pictures	What are they? Which are same? Which are different?	Observe, compare and analyze the similarities or differences between ancient Chinese characters and modern Chinese characters	Chidren’s activity, teacher’s direction
	Why?	Revelation of configuration of Chinese characters	Chidren’s discussion, teacher’s direction
Show modern Chinese characters	What are they like? Which are same? Which are different?	Observe, compare and analyze farther	Chidren’s activity, teacher’s direction
Show calligraphy of Chinese characters (<i>kaishu</i> or <i>xingshu</i>)	Beautiful? other feelings?	Feel the beauty of vigour of stroke style and form of Chinese characters	Teacher’s direction
Introduce relating myths or culture		Different exprience	Teacher’s direction, Chidren’s activity
Expression of children		Create character, express rich understanding of Chinese characters by using various ways	Chidren’s activity

¹ The forms of Chinese characters evolved about five stages. There were *jiaguwen* (inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty going from 1600 B.C. to 1046 B.C.), *jinwen*(inscriptions on ancient bronzes esp. inscriptions on those of the Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties), *xiaozhuan* (called relatively to *dazhuan*, greater seal character, ancient style of calligraphy current in the Zhou Dynasty, called *dazhuan* subsequent to the creation of the *xiaozhuan* style during the Qin Dynasty), *lishu* (clerical script, evolved and simplified from the seal script. With simpler and more streamlined strokes than the seal script, the *lishu* had come in vogue as the common script during the Han Dynasty), and *kaishu* (regular script, the standard form of writing evolved from the official script). The first three styles (*jiaguwen*, *jinwen*, *xiaozhuan*) are called ancient Chinese characters, the last two styles (*lishu*, *kaishu*) are called modern Chinese characters.

2. PROCESS OF PRESCHOOL CCME

In order to demonstrate the change of children before and after having preschool CCME more clearly, the researchers kept detailed observation and records on Yiyi’s performance in various aspects. Combining interviews with her partners, teachers and parents, the researchers have got a better understanding of Yiyi in different aspects. In addition, as Yiyi was shy with strangers at first, in order to conduct action research more smoothly, the research has tried to get close to her, and has gradually obtained her trust and favor. Meanwhile, the researchers had fully prepared materials and practical experience

for preschool CCME, and had been familiar with whole teaching process. The teaching organizational thought of Chinese character used in the action was basically in accordance with that of preschool CCME. During implementing of specific action, it has been adjusted according to Yiyi's situation and it has been divided into three stages.

2.1 Experience and Expression of Morphological Structure of Chinese Character

Preschool CCME in this stage is aimed to cultivate Yiyi's interest in Chinese Characters, and to improve her initiative for educational activity. Ancient Chinese characters, especially the pictographic Chinese characters are vivid and visualized with complicated forms. Each character is like a vivid picture, which is able to draw cognitive interest of young children. Yiyi thought *jiaguwen* (木)(wood) as "clothes hanger" actually referred to a coatrack-a stand fitted with hoods used for hanging clothes in her home. *jiaguwen* "日" (sun) was like "there is a lamp in the sun". *jiaguwen* "山" (mountain) equals to "a river + a jagged line". Next is the detailed exploration on pattern of the character, "日" (sun).

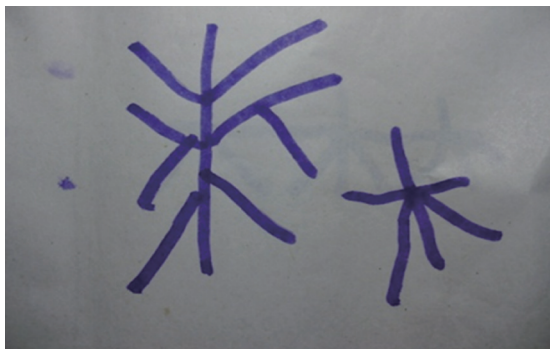


Figure 1
A Tree

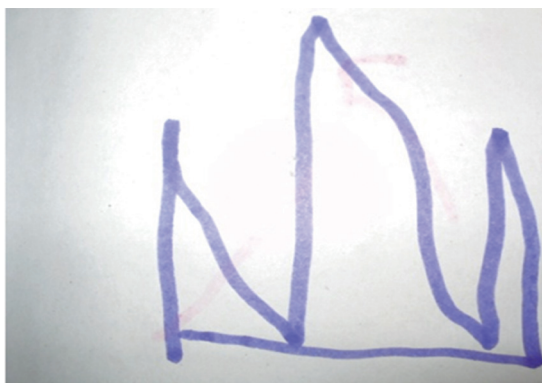


Figure 2
A Mountain

I (the teacher and researcher), "Yiyi, look, what is it like?" I took out the prepared picture of "日" (sun), and asked her.

Yiyi answered loudly at once, "sun".
I asked her, "why is it like the sun?"
Yiyi, "because it is round, like the sun".
I went on, "well, do you know what this central point of '日' (sun) means?"
She replied, "a lamp with light".
I, "Why?"
Yiyi, "It only lights when there is a lamp".

The child's reasoning is very interesting, her creative idea is reasonable. In fact, such idea is similar to the idea of ancients when they created the character. In ancient time, people regarded the sun as holy, and made a central point to indicate the solid and weight of the sun that is filled with light and warmth, which is vital to the growth of all things. As to modern Chinese characters, its form has become rectangle, with the central point turned into a horizontal line. Secondly, Chinese characters are different from linear characters, complex structures such as the independent structure, up-down structure, left-right structure, surrounded structure, and half-surrounded structure, etc.. The structure of English character is scanning unit with one-way linear array that is a single-dimensional structure from left to right. Character structure affects people's cognitive thinking. Two distinctly different character structures have cultivated two different identification ways. As Yiyi grew up in U.S., she has been contacting linear English characters. If we want to cultivate Yiyi's identification thinking upon Chinese characters, we need to begin with patterns and structures of Chinese characters. Therefore, on the basis of Yiyi's certain experience for visual patterns of Chinese character, she should be guided to explore the structure of Chinese character. It is beneficial to her cognition of Chinese characters. During the exploration of structures of Chinese characters, Yiyi regarded *jiaguwen* "日" (daybreak) as "the sun rises from the sea", *jiaguwen* "目" (clear-sighted) as "eyes of a doll".

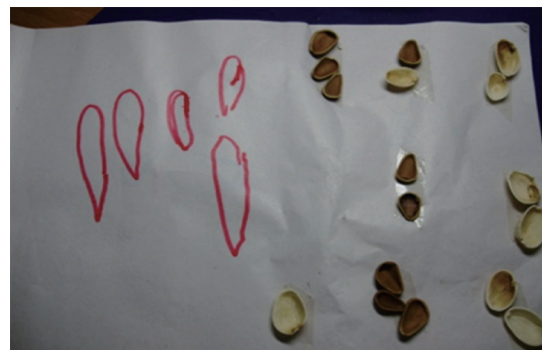


Figure 3
Rain

The diversity of the forms of Chinese character makes the abundance and artisticness of Chinese calligraphy which other types of character do not have. Various materials and conditions were provided to Yiyi, so as to

make her express her feeling for painting, handicraft, and nursery rhymes about Chinese characters that have been learned. The recreation upon Chinese characters is obviously a part with rich content and stimulative to her learning interest. Following is produced drawings and handicrafts by Yiyi during her exploration of structures of Chinese characters.

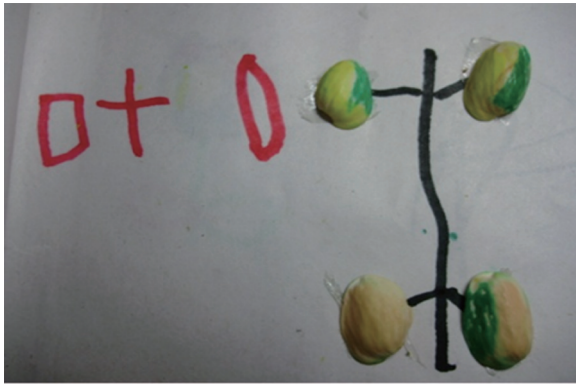


Figure 4
Leaves in the Autumn

2.2 Chinese Character Education of Cultural Infiltration

The Chinese character is a writing symbol system to record Chinese language. One word is a world, and one word a history. It is carrying abundant and profound information by recording the world and the history, which are irreplaceable for Chinese educational context. Chinese characters as a kind of character with a long history and ideographic characteristics and the products of mental and thinking activities of the ancients, have also recorded and carried various cultural information during recording language and conveying concepts. As a kind of character with ideographic characteristics, they often reflect certain cultural information about ancient society during the connection between form & meaning, pronunciation & meaning and meaning variation (Liu, 1995). During the learning of Chinese characters, full exploration of cultural information contained by Chinese characters is significant for acquiring form and meaning of Chinese characters. Therefore, in the second stage, during the free expression of specific Chinese characters, relevant cultural allusion could be narrated to make the primary knowledge of Chinese culture accessible to Yiyi.

When teaching “人” (human) to Yiyi, I told the legend of “God made human beings” in the Bible and “NüWa made human beings” in China which was fresh for her. After hearing the story, the researchers were impressed by some of her words. She said:

“Sir, I can knead the plasticine. I want to make people I kneaded out like me and play with me.”

“But people kneaded out cannot speak. I can speak.”

“I am not kneaded out, mum told me, I was from her belly.”

It can be inferred from these childlike words that Yiyi was comparing herself with characters and people in the myths, and put forward her query when the contradiction between realistic events and events in stories occurred. When teaching the modern character “天”(world), I introduced of the myth the Creation of the World by Pan Gu in China. *Jiaguwen* “天” (world) is like a front human image which means the space above man’s head. *Jinwen* has simplified the head of the character to a horizontal line. After teaching, Yiyi have conducted handmade creation. See Figure 5. At first sight, it looked strange. Why was there a long horizontal line on one’s head? She told me, “it is a long sky, head should support the sky otherwise the sky will fall down.” Suddenly, I understood that Yiyi created clay figurine-Pangu who stands upright on one’s two legs between heaven and earth according to the plot of the Creation of the World by Pan Gu I have just told her. It seemed that the effect of myth has been fully embodied. She made a creative clay figurine according to the plot of story and her own imagination. Following her creation, I seized the opportunity to explain the structure of the character “天” (sky) whose structure is quite similar to the clay figurine that was made for her.



Figure 5
The Sky Above a Head

“The above horizontal line of the character “天” (sky) is just like the sky, under this horizontal line is a man, who supports the sky above his head. This man is Pan Gu, who stands upright on one’s two legs between heaven and earth, so people are not to be pressed by heaven and earth, then survive. The structure of the character “sky” itself has reflected the idea “harmony between the heaven and human” of Chinese traditional culture. Hearing my explanation, Yiyi continued to explain to me, “look, the man I kneaded out is very brave. He is supporting a long sky”.

2.3 Chinese Character Education of Cooperative Learning

Yiyi has become more active during the CCME and her desire to communicate with others is growing. Recently,

she has asked me for several times, “Sir, I want to play with...together.” By observation in early stage, Yiyi was found to be more active during collective learning. In order to meet her demand and to carry out the preschool CCME more effectively, I invited friends with whom Yiyi is willing to play and began to try out the Chinese character education of cooperative Learning. Talking about cooperation, the first ancient character I thought was *jiaguwen* “𠂔” (cooperation). It is like plowing a land for three ploughs, meaning joining forces to plow lands. I asked children that one person plow a land by a plough, or each of three people plow a land by a plough together, which one is faster? They answered me with one voice, “three people”. Meanwhile, I asked them to push a table alone and then push the table with three persons to see which group can move the table more easily. As a result, they proved that three people are more powerful by their own practice. In this stage, the researchers mainly selected some Chinese characters which are suitable for learning and memorizing during cooperation. Except the above character, the researchers have tried other characters in cooperative learning by ways of role-play, cooperative play and theme activities. They are *jiaguwen* “𠂔” (protection) whose character pattern consists of “人”(man) and “子”(kid), indicates a man with a child on his back); *jiaguwen* “𠂔” (friend), a pattern of two paratactic hands which are without weapons towards the same direction, which means cooperative relations between people of sincerity, trust, understanding, and consistency; *jiaguwen* “𠂔” (pregnancy)-a baby inside the mother; *jiaguwen* “𠂔” (filial piety), whose character pattern consists of a senior and a kid, which looks like a kid support a senior with one’s hand or carry a senior on one’s shoulder when walking, which means to be filial to the senior.

Preschool Chinese character education in cooperative learning often leads to positive results. Especially in the verbal communication, both of people talked with each other unlike exchanging apples of two people, each one will have two thoughts at the same time. Sometimes young children will naturally have various ideas during the communication. When describing the ancient character “𠂔” (pregnancy), Yiyi said, “like a little kid in a circle.” Another child said, “a little baby is dancing.” She went on immediately, “someone is dancing with the little baby in the arms.” No matter the answer is right or not, her response has enriched another child’s reply. In addition, the successful cooperation has also made young children feel happy during the process and enhance their friendship. The researchers have paid attention to Yiyi’s social circle and found that she often chose to play with kids from partners in the Chinese characters education with her. Moreover, such way has also subtly cultivated

cooperation awareness of young children and made them learn humility, sharing and consultation during the cooperation.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Imagination Has Become More and More and Understanding Ability Has Improved

The teaching procedure “ancient Chinese characters—pictures (or objects, real sceneries)—current Chinese Characters—child expression)” of preschool Chinese character education has not only laid the foundation of “known information” of creative imagination for young children, but also has provided imagination space for them. In the first three procedures, young children can perceive and the understand general rules of formation and evolution of Chinese characters and relationship between form and meaning of Chinese characters. The procedure of “child expression” has provided space for young children to create characters by using their imagination. After the preschool Chinese character education, Yiyi’s imagination has become more and more. The modern Characters of “孕” (pregnancy) and “友” (friend) are taken as examples.



Figure 6
Mum Is Having a Baby

During the teaching of character “孕” (pregnancy), after feeling the form of ancient Chinese character “𠂔” (pregnancy), Yiyi created a second picture. See Figure 6 “mum is having a baby”. The scene of a baby inside the mother showed in the figure is quite familiar with “𠂔”. She took advantage of basic information of known picture and created the image of a pregnant mother. Besides, painting techniques of this picture has resonated with configuration of “see through” when ancients creating characters, so we can directly see the baby inside the mother’s belly. During the teaching of character-“友” (friend), after perceiving the form of this character, Yiyi draw a picture of friends. See Figure 7 “good friends”. Four girls in the picture are good friends. The meaning

of good friend has been presented by their hand in hand. After then, she created another picture which has been called “bad friends”. I asked her why two children in this picture (Figure 8) did not hold hands. She told me definitely, “This (on the left) is Jiang Jiaqi and this (on the right) is me. He often robs from me. I do not like to play with him. He is not my friend.” From explanation of Yiyi, I understood that Yiyi thought friends can hold hands while bad friends can not. From this point, Yiyi’s depiction of characters and scenes in the picture has clearly expressed her basic understanding of character “friend”. Meanwhile, she described the facial expression of the character vividly with imagination to express the happiness of being friends while unhappy and angry expression stood for the absence of friendship.



Figure 7
Good Friends



Figure 8
Bad Friends

3.2 Knowledge and Experience Keep Enriching


One character is a world. Every character is like a picture to show thinking mode and national spirit of ancestors. They not only have a general communicational function, but also carry different cultural connotations. They are good materials to learn Chinese history and culture. Undoubtedly, it is a good way and abundant resource for young children to enrich their knowledge and experience. In the stage of Chinese character education of cultural infiltration, relevant festival activities of Chinese characters have made Yiyi understand some primary


knowledge about Chinese festival culture. On the Dragon Boat Festival, “rowing a dragon boat to save people fell into the water.” on the Mid-autumn Festival, “the moon will become very round”, “we can see the fairy of Chang’e in the moon...”, “I want to go to the moon to see the little rabbit and invite her to come down to be with me.” “There are moon-cakes to eat.” These childlike and cute words are the hints of her memory of Chinese characters which have just learned from her and reflect her understanding of interesting Chinese festival culture. Compared to her situation before the action research, her knowledge has expanded.

When conducting the preschool Chinese character education upon Yiyi, she has obtained lots of knowledge and experience of practice by various experience and practice. Eg in the stage of preschool Chinese character education of cooperative learning, Yiyi has concluded her own experiential knowledge by learning the primary meaning of visual morphology of Chinese character “cooperation” and by her own experience of pushing table “more forces, more powerful.” At the same time, during the following specific competitions, she has learned the truth “more people, quicker work” after defeating the teacher by cooperating with other kids.

3.3 Observation Ability Lasts Longer

A Chinese character, as an independent block, has the characteristics of visuality, abstraction, generality, and comprehensiveness. Cognition of Chinese characters needs cognitive processes such as extended observation, careful identification, wild imagination and association, continuous abstract thinking. During the preschool Chinese character education, Yiyi’s observation time has grown from less than 2 seconds to a longer time and her description of Chinese characters has become more detailed and more comprehensive during the observation.

After the ancient character “” had been showed, Yiyi gave a description of “like a crown” at once. But before I went on, she changed her mind and told me the bottom horizontal line is like “river”, and on the line is like “jagged line”. “Also like a knife, a window...” She kept observing and having new ideas. Yiyi has enriched her imagination during the long observation.

Learning ancient Chinese characters in preschool Chinese character education improve the observation persistence of Yiyi and the ability of generalization. Eg the teaching of the character “” (clear-sighted), Yiyi took the picture and observed for a long time. She suddenly turned the picture on a whim and got the answer to “eyes of a doll” which is hard to understand without her explanation, but her idea was quite inspirational for the researchers. She regarded the “月” (moon) on the right as the eyebrow of the doll and “日” (sun) on the left as eyeball of the doll and then connected these two separated things and finally got the answer of “eyes of a

doll”. From the case of “mountain (山) which consists of a river plus jagged line” to the case of “the sun rises from the sea” and then “eyes of a doll”, Yiyi’s observation on Chinese character has become more detailed and completed. She could connect the different things and gave corresponding description of her own thinking. To this point, her observation has gradually improved during continuous exploration and leaning of Chinese characters.

3.4 Prosocial Behavior Has Increased and Enhanced

Yiyi in this case, grew up in America and returned to China until she was more than three years old. Environment, culture and thinking of foreign country made her unadaptable to the kindergarten at the beginning. Some of her special behaviors have reflected differences between Chinese and western culture to a certain extent. When other young children wanted to play with her, she would refuse them with an expressions imulating a horrible tiger. At first, Yiyi was always alone and kept herself apart from other children, not to mention sharing or cooperate with other children. In the process of Chinese character education, her performance of social communication has gradually improved. Yiyi started with no friend to one friend and then added to several friends. She started to play with girls and boys. She cooperated with others in game instead of playing alone and offered help initially instead of refusing them. She sought happiness and shared success with others in the cooperative games, which indicate Yiyi has made the progress in multi-dimensional education of Chinese characters.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

When conducting multi-dimensional education of Chinese character for Yiyi, the researchers mainly paid attention

to the influence of Chinese character education on Yiyi’s imagination, knowledge and experience, observation ability and prosocial behavior, further discussed the tracing observation and the analysis of painting and handicrafts with the combination of the deep interviews with teachers, parents and young children. The result shows that Yiyi’s imagination has become more and more and her comprehensive ability has improved; knowledge and experience have gradually enriched and observation ability has become persistent; prosocial behavior has increased and enhanced.

This research takes the researchers themselves as the research tool who played a dual role in the process of preschool CCME: both the researchers and executor of the action. During the process of teaching, the researchers have obtained the professional growth. But the research needs to be reflected and improved in some places. As the executor and researchers, the collection and analysis of materials may be subjective to some extent, which is hard to reconcile with the objectivity of the research and subjectivity of the researchers. The whole Chinese character education lasts less than a year, which is too short compared to the whole growth period of young children. Therefore, the effect of multidimensional education of Chinese character on development and growth of young children should not be exaggerated.

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