

Stories of Practice from China

Making active connections
with Chinese cultural knowledge
and traditional art form
through visual art
in Chinese kindergartens



"There is a seed of beauty in the heart of each young child. Of particular importance to learning and development in the domain of arts is to providing young children with ample opportunities, nurturing their experience and perception of aesthetics in the nature, social, and cultural life, enriching their imagination and creativity, and guiding them to perceive and discover aesthetics with their souls, and express and create aesthetics in their own ways."

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. 2012. Early learning and development guidelines for children aged 3 to 6 years.

STORY 1

The Practice of Chinese Solar Term Culture in Children's Art

by **TANG Ye**

Head of Art Research and Development
Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten
(was named **Guangzhou Daohe Kindergarten**)



Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten is an international school with a focus on Chinese culture, using the aesthetics of Chinese seasonal life as the basis for pedagogical innovation. Combining local Lingnan culture, the program nurtures future citizens with both cultural and international perspectives through activities such as nature exploration, international language integration, story, poetry, body rhythms, and music and drama.



Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten is also a school that promotes village culture because our grandparents also live in the village and they are more closely related. There are nine families living in this village which means nine classes. In each class there are four teachers and more than ten children. We live in the Liedei community of Tianhe District, Guangzhou, China.

The 24 solar terms are a set of 'natural calendars' that were developed 4,000 years ago in the Yellow River Basin through long-term observations of the sun, the moon, weather and weather patterns.

The 24 solar terms were especially important to the ancient Chinese. If ancient China was compared to a huge farm, the 24 solar terms were the center of all activities on this farm.

Time passes, and although it is difficult for us to see these changes comprehensively in modern society, and every place has a different natural timing, the ancient Chinese people's active perception of nature and their



reverence for it are perpetuated and valued in our education. We are constantly observing the differences in our lives brought about by changes in the natural order of things, and we are refining the 'beauty sensitization' of our educational thinking by the beauty that nature and humanity bring to us.

The seasonal changes, length of growing plants and local living customs of Guangzhou are very different from those of the Yellow River region. In the spring, red paphiopedilums as big as our mother's palms grow, in the summer we play in the creek, in the autumn our teachers make sugar water with bamboo cane and horseshoe, and in the winter we make bacon together to prepare for the New Year. We lived here together following the order and rhythm of nature and recorded what changes were happening in nature with plants, animals and people. We call this seasonal life.



The parents here come from different cities in China, they choose to work and live in Guangzhou, and the teachers here come from different countries around the world, different cities in China, and they bring different life experiences to live each day in Aspirational community Village. We hope that different cultures can meet and interact with each other right here in our village.



Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten is also an art-focused school. We advocate that art is not only about exploring materials and learning material techniques, but also about observing and thinking about things around you and then fully expressing your feelings. Art is a language that expresses the inner world. Art education at Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten is an immersion type of beauty education. We live in this environment of beauty for a long time, and naturally feel beauty, experience

beauty, and express beauty. We believe that children are born artists.

From a philosophical point of view, aesthetic thinking or aesthetic consciousness is not limited to the specific sphere of human mental activity (i.e., aesthetics in the narrow sense); almost everything that belongs to human and cultural constructions is intrinsically involved in the role of the human aesthetic imagination. Thus, the late writings of critical pedagogue Paulo Freire were very keen to emphasize that 'education is essentially an aesthetic practice'.

While focusing on the children's observations and thinking, the teacher would explore with the children what the local nature had created. The art teachers bring food, plants, animals and even humanistic activities that are characteristic of the local seasons to the classrooms and reflect them in the children's art activities, such as kapok in spring, fans in summer, leaves in autumn and Chinese New Year activities in winter. The children elicit keen observation and reflection by opening up the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) before creating their artwork. The teachers came to predetermine the content and materials for creation based on observations of children's interests and creative development, and there was only discussion of observation and reflection, not demonstration of drawing.



We live in the downtown area of Guangzhou, surrounded by concrete forests, so how can we start nature art education? We believe that the buildings, the streets, the environment of the city, the people, things and objects here are all a kind of nature. The teachers combine the seasonal changes of Guangzhou and the traditional culture to design the school environment. Let the children naturally feel the rhythm of the living environment.



Brushes, ink sticks, rice paper, and ink-stones are unique creative materials in traditional Chinese art, and it is often seen and used in Guangzhou Aspirational Kindergarten. We want children to be familiar with unique Chinese painting materials from an early age, and we also encourage them to discover natural materials for their technique exploration. We take the children into parks every week to observe the beauty of nature, hoping to bring the beauty of Chinese culture to more people, and let them understand the uniqueness of this nation and nature grown from in the land of China.

The children's works will be treasured by their teachers and parents and become a record of their growth. We will hold an exhibition for the children once a year, and the children will see their working being taken seriously, adults will come to see the children's works, and the children and teachers will get more sense of accomplishment from them.



Welcome to China. Welcome to Guangzhou.

Welcome to Aspirational Origin Community, Aspirational kindergarten.



STORY 2

An Engraving Art Project in Kindergarten

by **SHEN Min** (Art Teacher) & **BAI Xiaoxi** (PD Facilitator)

Shenzhen Experimental Kindergarten

Shenzhen Experimental Kindergarten was founded in 1988, located in Futian district of Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. It has 2 main campuses with 26 classes serving approximately 1000 children and their families.

We believe every child is a seed of happiness, and every seed is a colorful world. We have been firmly committed to our motto "to sow the seed of a lifetime happiness", following the "Sān Rén Xíng" curriculum which means



深圳实验幼儿园
Shenzhen Experimental
Kindergarten

three people - the child, the teacher and the parent - walking together, inspired by the Confucian philosophy. Our programme emphasizes on immersing the children, parents and teachers in happiness and providing them an environment for self-fulfillment and for strong connection with our cultural roots.



Engraving art is an art form born following with Printing - one of the Four Great Inventions of ancient China. In this presentation, we will share a story about how children at our kindergarten learn engraving through an art project, and how teachers support children's learning through visual art, how we explore engraving art by connecting with the traditional cultural knowledge and the local resources in the city of Shenzhen.

There was a group of 5-year-old children participated in this engraving art project. It started from one picture book called Jin Cheng, which meant going to the city center. This was a story about Chinese people's life many decades ago, when we didn't have modern transportations, and when donkey cart was a good choice for outing. This book was brought to the kindergarten from home by a boy Mao. The pictures in this book were painted black and white, which was totally different from other colorful picture books that the children were familiar with.



The children were attracted by this new picture book, and they expressed their feelings and questions about it.

Tian noticed that the pictures were not painted with colors.

Jin said that it was quite different from the paintings, it only had two colors.

This book was created by engraving, which was a new art form for the children in our kindergarten. "Can we learn how to engrave?" Mao asked.

Of course! But as engraving was an art form had never been introduced in our kindergarten, we - children and teachers - needed to learn it together. We found a video introducing engraving art. So we watched it together. From the video we learned that the engraving works had three key steps. The first step was to draw the pattern on a board, the second step was to engrave the pattern and the third step was printing.

The children had done a lot of paper cutting by scissors before, and this would be their first time using the nicking tools. The teachers prepared gloves for safety, and the teachers believed that children were capable to learn how to protect themselves and how to use the nicking tools properly.



Actually, engraving on paper was popular in Han and Tang dynasty. Thousands years ago people used red paper to engrave the samples that they believed would bring them happiness and fortune. So today our teachers introduced this tradition to the children.

At the beginning we used the red soft paper, but children found it was difficult because the paper was too soft, so we changed the soft paper to harder ones. The engraving area became the most popular place at that time. Seemingly, engraving on red paper was just a process of using certain skills. Actually not just that, the children and the teachers also wondered and talked about why

Chinese people preferred red color during festival. Thus, engraving on red paper contained the learning about Chinese culture, tools and in the process of exploration children also brought the teachers a lot of surprises! The children and the teachers exhibited the process, steps and their works outside their classroom. We could see the children tried to make connection with our own culture, as their engraving works contained many Chinese traditional elements such as the Zodiac.



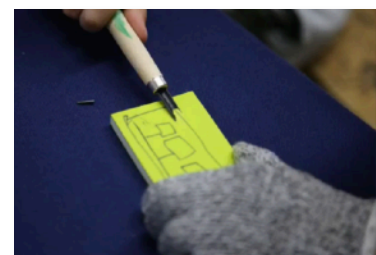
After exploring the first step, teachers thought that engraving art was born following with the Printing which was one of the Four Great Inventions of ancient China. How could our children understand the history and the value of this art form? We shared a video describing history of engraving art with the children. After watching the video, the children thought that our ancestors invented print long long ago, so they were very clever. The children also showed great interested in how to engrave on the wood board so they could print again and again to make many copies. They couldn't wait!

We provided the wooden board for the children, but it was too hard. So we changed to thick plastic board. Although it was easier for the children to engrave, the work of printing was not clear. The material was not suitable, and this made us quite distressed, but we still kept on trying. Then, we found out that there was a folk village in Shenzhen which was famous of the engraving art - Guanlan Print Village, and we should pay a visit and learn more about engraving there.



Guanlan Print Village is a beautiful village with quiet tree-lined streets, beautiful Hakka architecture and row upon row of gallery spaces. The village serves as a base for the creative printing industry and is home to a number of important annual print events. However, long before Guanlan became an official artist village the area was already famous for being the home of CHEN Yanqiao (1911-1970), a pioneer in contemporary Chinese printmaking and famous art theorist and educator.

In the village, we visited the engraving art gallery. We saw lots of great artwork. The artists in the gallery introduced the history and tools of engraving art that helped us to make active connections with the ancient wisdom, nowadays and the future. During this visit, we also discovered the perfect material for children to engrave on - the rubber board. When we provided the suitable materials, we could feel children's enthusiasm rising again.





One day, Jiayin, a girl who was a graduate of our kindergarten came to visit our class after school. She was a member of engraving art club in primary school. Jiayin brought us one of her work. The children found that her work was different. Because we could only see the lines on our printing work, most part of the engraving painting is like a background. But on Jiayin's work, we could not only see the lines but also the other part of the pattern.

We learned that if you wanted to print the whole pattern, not only the lines, you needed to sunken other area, and make the main part came out of the board. In this way, the children got to understand the concepts of Yin and Yang, which was an important part of Chinese traditional culture.



Another day, a girl Han asked "Can we engrave our name? It likes a stamp."

Yes! Chinese characters deserve to be explored. So we started to engrave our names on the rubber. But after printing out the first lot of the names, the children found that the characters should be turned over, like images in the mirror. Then the teachers provided the copying paper to support children when writing down the characters, then printing/carving on the rubber and engrave after. The children made their own stamps successfully by following this process, and we invited more teachers and children to join us. We shared what we had learned during this project.



In the end, we reflected on the process of this project. For the teachers, we learned how to scaffold young children's learning through visual art. We learned we needed to look for suitable materials and give the children time to support their exploration. We firmly believe that children are confident and competent learners with full potential.

In particular, we learned to connect visual art with Chinese history, cultural knowledge, and local resources consciously. Visiting the engraving art village was not just to gain more knowledge and skills, we also experienced the elements of the Chinese traditional culture. The children was learning through play and doing. What we teachers needed to do was to provide the time and space for children to explore and also to expand our own cultural awareness, knowledge and understanding.



STORY 3

A Learning Journey that Teachers and Children Learn Chinese Brush Painting Together

by **CHENG Yong** (Principal) & **YANG Ke** (Artist)

Beijing Enji Kindergarten

(also known as **Tong Xin Jia Yuan**)



Beijing Enji Kindergarten was established in December 2012, with two campuses. It is located at the foot of the beautiful mountain Fenghuang Ling (Phoenix Ridge). Beijing Enji Kindergarten is also known as Tong Xin Jia Yuan since 2016, which means 'Children's Home at the bottom of Mountain Fenghuang Ling'.

The teachers and staff of Tong Xin Jia Yuan share one educational dream, and we all strive to realize it in everyday life. The dream is that we would build a happy home together, so that every child, parent and teacher who lives, studies and works here can feel happy and meaningful. We all learn to appreciate growth and to harvest the precious 'gifts' that the course of life gifted to us with a good and brave heart.

Voices from the Children: *Chinese Brush Painting is amazing.*

Life at Tong Xin Jia Yuan is particularly interesting. We play a lot everyday, and we feel free and happy here. There are lots of children's works displayed in the classrooms and hallways at Tong Xin Jia Yuan, including the pictures that are painted by the Chinese brushes. They are Chinese brush painting. Our teachers told us that all of us are little painters and artists.



Chinese brush painting is amazing, although the main color is black, you can still create special artwork as long as you use the strong ink and soft ink properly by controlling how much water to be added to the ink.

Voice from the Principal: *Teachers are seen as 'art learners' as well as 'art educators'.*

At Tong Xin Jia Yuan, it is not only the children who are learning art, but also the teachers. We have been exploring some new ideas and practices in order to support teachers and children to learn art together (e.g. Chinese brush painting) for the last three years.

'Experiencing as art learner' and 'artist-in-residence' are two key aspects of this learning journey.

We see the teachers at Tong Xin Jia Yuan as 'art learners'. Usually teachers are ought to play the role of 'art educators'. However, we encourage the teachers to reflect and realize their



own relationship with art as “art learners”. We provide various opportunities for the teachers to get in touch with art, enjoy art and communicate with art as learners, so they can gain first hand experiences — the difficulties, challenges, happiness and satisfaction — in the process of art learning as ‘art learners’.



When the teachers get back to the ‘art educators’ role in the classroom, we find that the teachers’ own art learning experiences have definitely helped them to understand the children’s feels, needs and their ways of art expression better.

The ‘artist-in-residence’ aspect means that we invite the local artist YANG Ke who is a great artist and also an experienced art-educator to work closely with the teachers and the children. Our long term goal is to improve the quality of our art education. She has led and accompanied the teachers and the children to participate in many kinds of art experiences. We want to have an art learning journey that is co-constructed, shared and experienced by the children, the teachers and the artists.



Voice from the Artist-in-Residence: *Combining the teachers’ art learning experiences with their teaching practices is important.*

Three years ago, I was invited by the principal of Tong Xin Jia Yuan -- CHENG Yong to explore whether there would be a possibility to find a way to support our teachers and improve the quality of the kindergarten’s art education. During the last three years, we have taken full advantage of rich cultural background in Beijing and various art exhibitions, showing teachers around museums and gallery which could nourish the teachers from the outstanding artistic works in the wider community. The teachers also visited artist’s studios and talked to artists so they could learn the ideas and the processes behind the artwork. The teachers would then bring their own art learning experiences back to the classroom to share with the children.





Obviously, only watching other people's art works is not enough. I believe that with sufficient art knowledge and professional art skills, teachers may avoid to give simple oral comments of children's artwork when working with young children. However, I do not mere teach the art knowledge and art skills to the teachers. I provide the teachers with many opportunities to try multiple ways of painting and other art forms, for example Chinese brush painting. Learning Chinese brush painting not only gives the teachers a deep understanding of the necessity of inheriting traditional Chinese culture, but also encourage the teachers to express freely by connecting with their present feeling and thoughts. Through discussion, I also want to help the teachers to realize their educational responsibilities, and importance of combining their own art learning experiences with their teaching practices, and how to look for new possibilities and opportunities in order to extend children's learning.

I try my best to improve the teachers' aesthetic awareness and enrich their art understanding during the process of supporting teachers' own art learning experiences. I hope that the teachers can bring what they have gained from their own learning back to classroom, as their first-hand art learning experiences may influence and transform their teaching practices.

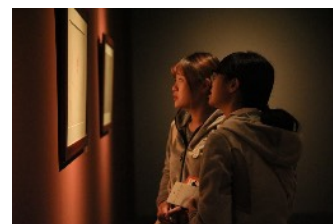
In the Chinese traditional culture there is a saying — 'a teacher, one who could propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts'. Indeed, as a teacher, the part of propagate the doctrine (spreading the law and the idea) is the most important part.



Voices from the Teachers

MA Xiaoxu: *Not only impressed by the artwork but also the artists' life and their influences.*

In the past, I only knew some famous artists and the names of their famous artwork. I had very limited knowledge about their art career and their influences on the history of Chinese art. After visiting art galleries and getting in touch with those amazing works, I was deeply impressed by their artwork and life. I learned more about the styles and characteristics of their artwork, and also their contributions to the art history. At the same time our art teacher YANG Ke told us about each painter's pursuit, works and stories of their life. I am now more willing to show kids around galleries in the future, letting them to feel, to experience and to get in touch with different artists, different artistic styles and different forms of artistic expression.



XU Meng: *Art is designed for releasing the children's feelings and natural instincts.*

When our art teacher YANG Ke led the children to paint the story 'Journey to the West' with ink and Chinese brush, she asked the children to share their favorite characters of this classic novel first, and this could give them inspirations to catch the unique features of the character from their own angles. She would not pay too much attention to the technical issues. She



would encourage children to use their own imagination and creativity. During this activity, I found that the children's aesthetic feelings were simulated, they enjoyed the painting process very much. Seeing how YANG Ke works with the children has reminded me that art is designed for releasing the children's feeling and natural instincts, not for conformity and being governed by a set of rules.



DONG Qingzhu: *Do not give children judgmental comments.*

In the past, I was always worried about others' judgments of my art work and did not like to paint. But during the process of learning painting with the help of teacher YANG, I realized that painting is neither for comparison or training of techniques. It is the expression of your real emotion that really matters. I bring this idea back to the class and try not to give children judgmental comments such as good or not good, look alike or not. Instead I prefer to communicate with the children about their feelings and ideas around the artwork and their painting process. In this way, they can feel that they are encouraged to create their art work freely and to enjoy the process.



ZHANG Qian: *Not confused anymore.*



If I saw this kind of children's artwork in the past, I would feel confused, and did not know what he was painting. However, during these years of learning with children and teacher YANG, now when I see this picture, I do not feel confused anymore. I just want to feel the flow of Chinese brush on the paper that the child has made. I can see the child has been experiencing the difference between strong ink and soft ink in the process of creating this work. I feel the child has been enjoying expressing himself when painting this picture, which is meaningful and very important. Now I am willing to understand and

know the children and their painting process in this way, rather than judging the 'quality' of their artwork. This is the biggest change happened to me.

We must let children learn how to appreciate and create beauty in order to foster a whole child. In the process of art education, we teachers have the responsibility. At the same time, we ought to cherish all of these because we are there with the most beautiful things – the art and the children. The beauty and the sincerity worth the efforts we made.

— YANG Ke





言为心声

yán wéi xīn shēng

画为心象

huà wéi xīn xiàng

Words are the voices of your heart
Paintings are the images of your mind



Special thanks to our paper cutting artist LI Yuxin