



The Cross-cultural Analysis of Preschools Morning Opening Scenes in Three Countries: China, Japan and the United States

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Abstract

This paper is using approach—video analysis to analyse Joseph Tobin’s video, *Preschools in Three Cultures Revisited, China, Japan and the United States*. How preschools open seems to be an interesting and also easily forgettable phenomenon to be observed by social and educational researchers. The morning-opening scenes of six preschools in China, Japan and the United States (two in each country) are analysed and compared in this paper. The paper will list the similarities and differences of this cultural phenomenon. Different from the approach that Joseph used in his video—‘multivocal ethnography’, video analysis used in this study directly analysed the moving images recorded in morning-opening scenes, rather than the viewers’ feedback after viewing the video. The researcher is attempting to interpret culture from a non-essentialist point of view. It seems that the children in those preschools with better economic situation (Sinanlu preschool, Madoka preschool and St. Timothy Children Centre) can choose where and what to play with more freely, and also they have more time to play in the morning before the formal school day starts.

Keywords

Qualitative studies, video analysis, preschools

1. Introduction

It has long been recognized that video, as one form of visual media produced by cheap and prevailing technological devices, has provided great opportunities to social research (Heath et al., 2010). Videos enable us to record natural-occurring activities with fine-grained details. The aforementioned features of video are mostly considered as its merits. Increasingly, more social researchers start to use videos as an analytical resource. However, it is still debatable about the ethical aspects of the research using video as research objects (Spencer, 2011). Scholars within different disciplines seem treat videos differently: social anthropologists consider videos as one key element (Hockings, 1995), whereas videos has drawn less interest from sociologists than psychologists (Spencer, 2011).

In this paper, one mini-visual research is conducted to investigate the similarities and differences on how the preschools start among three countries, by analysing the video clip filmed by Tobin and his colleagues in the project of *Preschools in Three Cultures Revisited, China, Japan and the United States (2011)*. This is considered as a cross-cultural analysis, in comparison of the morning-opening video clips filmed in preschools of three countries, including China, Japan and the United States.

The original study attempted to investigate the continuity and change of the preschools in three countries (China, Japan and the United States), from 1985 to 2003. The research method ‘video-cued multivocal ethnography’ was selected

to navigate the original project. To be specific, the research team came to film one day in one classroom of the preschools in three countries. Then, they edited the video and showed it to different groups of people, including the teachers whose classes were filmed, other teachers in the same preschools, other preschool teachers within the country and the preschool teachers in the other two countries (Tobin et al., 2011).

Importantly, the concept of culture needs to be considered carefully, since it is one of the key elements throughout this study. The detailed interpretation will be delivered in section - Ontological, theoretical and epistemological positioning of the research. In this section, one brief understanding of the concept will be given: Tobin and his colleagues used “three cultures” in the title of the project. I, on the other hand, do not think that culture is equivalent to the concept of country, and objectify the concept. Therefore, I will use “preschools in three countries” instead.

2. Research question and brief background

The research focus in this paper is on the similarities and differences in comparison of the morning-opening scenes in six preschools from three countries (two preschools in each country), including China, Japan and the United States. The purpose of this comparison and analysis is to reinterpret and evaluate the concepts of cultural customs and culture in general. The video clips containing those scenes is extracted from the video made by Joseph Tobin and his colleagues for the project of *Preschool In Three Cultures Revisited, China, Japan, and the United States* (Tobin et al., 2011).

This research is designed as a cross-cultural analysis, which analysed how preschools in three countries start, through description and comparison of a series of instances from the video. To be specific, by comparing the two preschools of the same country, the similarities, which are also unique from the preschools in other countries, will be emphasized. Meanwhile, the analysis is also going to be conducted cross-culturally. In terms of the morning-opening scenes, there are two main reasons for choosing this particular instance: first, how preschools start in each country seems to be one of interesting and easily forgettable phenomena to analyse and compare in cultural studies. Second, the morning-opening is one of the few activities shared in all filmed preschools, so that it is easier and more valid to compare among different schools. Therefore, short instances like morning-opening scenes seem to be easier for me to grasp.

3. Analytical process

In this chapter, the comparison between and within three countries will be presented following the description. The bellow analysis is more focused on the similarities and differences of morning-opening scenes in each country. Given the fact that there exists no timeline in the video, no clear boundaries are drawn for the morning-opening scenes.

3.1 China

3.1.1 Dagan preschool

Dagan preschool is sited in Kunming City, the capital city of Yunnan province. As one of the most ethnically-diverse provinces, it is located at the southwest of China (Lonely Planet, 2022). According to the background information provided by Tobin in his original study (2011), Dagan was regarded as one of the best preschools in Kunming by the time he conducted his study (Tobin et al., 2011), but it can represent the typicality of Chinese preschools, commented by most Chinese preschool teachers in the original study.

The school begins at 7:30. Before entering the school building, the school nurses checked each child’s health by observing the colour of their tongue and touching their cheeks and foreheads to take the temperature. The breakfast was served by the teacher, Zhang laoshi (Teacher Zhang).

3.1.2 Sinanlu preschool

Sinanlu preschool is at the heart of Shanghai, which is one of the four municipalities directly controlled by the Chinese government. Shanghai is one of the coastal cities being forced to open up to trade from outside world after the First Opium War (“The Opium Wars in China | Asia Pacific Curriculum”, 2022). Since then, the economic development in Shanghai has been in a faster pace than most of other cities in China, even closer to some of the developed countries in the world. Sinanlu preschool is considered by preschool teachers in other parts of China as exemplary, in terms of transforming from teacher-directed to children-initiated pedagogy (Tobin et al., 2011).

At around 8:00, the children were checked by the school nurse. Different from what the school nurses did at Dagan preschool, the school nurses here provided a tiny bottle of medicine to each child. Before being gathered by Cheng laoshi (Teacher Cheng), the children were playing freely in the classroom.

3.1.3 The similarities and differences on morning-opening scenes of both schools

Judging from the above description of both Chinese preschools, the same instances happening are the one, in which

school nurses check children's health at the school gate before they enter the school building.

Since the health check-point at Sinanlu preschool has been partly blocked because of the limited camera angle, the following description and analysis is mainly focused on the check-point at Dagan preschool. The school nurses at Dagan preschool in white gowns picked up one bag of disposable medical equipment – a sterilized wooden stick – from the steel tray on the table, to check the colour of each child's tongue (as shown in the first picture from the left hand side). Then she touched the child's cheek and forehead to check her body temperature. At Sinanlu preschool, the school nurse was also in white gown, but different from what the nurses do at Dagan preschool, the nurse here provided a certain type of medicine to each child. This similar instance in both preschools is carried out according to the Chinese preschools' Regulation on Morning Health-Check, which is issued by Chinese government ("Chinese preschools' Regulation on Morning Health-Check from the Website for Chinese preschool teachers", 2022). The morning health-check procedures are executed in most of Chinese preschools. In terms of the differences, Dagan preschool provided breakfast at around 7:30, while the children at Sinanlu preschool had breakfast at home and then go to the preschool at about 8:00, the teacher accompanied them to play freely as the start of the day.

3.2 Japan

3.2.1 Komatsudani preschool

Komatsudani preschool is sited on the ground of a four-hundred years old Buddhist temple at one hillside in Kyoto, which was Japan's capital from 794 to 1868 ("Kyoto Travel Guide - What to do in Kyoto", 2022). According to the background information provided by Tobin (2011), Komatsudani preschool is a public preschool located at suburban area, based on Buddhist philosophical orientation.

Komatsudani preschool opens at 7:00. The children were wearing their own clothes. They took their shoes off at the entrance way before entering the building. Morita-sensei (teacher), the teacher for the four or five-year-old children, arrived at school at 8:30. The children were playing at the playground freely. A little past nine, the children were directed to do paper, rock and scissors to decide which line leads the way to the classroom.

3.2.2 Madoka preschool

Madoka preschool is a private preschool inside a modest middle-classed neighbourhood on the east side of Tokyo, the current capital city of Japan. The preschool adopts its own curricular approach – *nobi nobi kyoiku*, which refers to 'room at stretch' (Tobin, et al., 2011: 128).

At 8:00, the teachers in their uniforms were gathered in the staff room for the daily meeting. Some of the children arrived at school by school bus, while others were dropped off by their parents. The director and the teacher were greeting the children with 'good morning'. Children in their school uniforms took off their shoes before entering the building. They, then, changed out of their school uniforms into a T-shirt, shorts and a cap. They could choose freely between playing inside or out.

3.2.3 The similarities and differences on morning-opening scenes of both schools

Comparing the description of the morning-opening scenes in both Japanese preschools, the instances, where children remove their shoes before entering the school building, are considered as the similarities.

According to the information that I gathered from an online forum ("Where removing shoes custom comes from? - japan-guide.com forum", 2022) and the talk with a Japanese friend of mine, the main reason why Japanese children remove their shoes at the entrance of the building is that Tatami (one wooden surface covering the floors), which most Japanese buildings equip with, is too expensive to be ruined by people walking by with their shoes on. Another possible reason lying underneath this instance is that children are taught that everybody is equal regardless of their family status ("The Japanese Custom of Removing Shoes - Vision Times", 2022). In terms of the origin of this custom, one Japanese friend of mine told me that people attended the religious meetings in shrines at old times, where, out of respect, they were asked to remove their shoes before entering the shrine. The habit was kept from then on.

From the observation of the morning-opening scenes in both Japanese preschools, it is noticeable that children in both schools have free time to play inside or outside the school building in the morning. In accordance with the background information provided by Tobin in his book (2011), the curricular philosophy of both Japanese preschools is play-oriented.

What is interesting is that the children at Komatsudani preschool, like shown in the picture, wear their own clothes to school, whereas those at Madoka preschool wear their school uniforms, and change out of their uniform at the entrance of the school building into a T-shirt, shorts and a cap. Japanese uniform seems to be pervaded worldwide as a token for Japanese culture (Kinsella, 2002). Madoka preschool, as a middle-class private school located at the capital, perfectly conforms to this stereotyped Japanese culture. However, as a public preschool located at the suburban area of Kyoto,

children seem have freedom to wear their own clothes to school.

3.3 The United States

3.3.1 St. Timothy's Children's Centre

St. Timothy's Children's Centre is on the ground of an Episcopal church, in a suburb of Honolulu, Hawaii. It is on the hillside overlooking the Pearl Harbor shipyard. The head teacher, Jannie Umeda, who serves 4-year-old children, arrived at 7:00. The teachers were playing with the early-arrived children. While almost all children arrived at school, Jannie gathered the children to begin the class with 'good morning' songs.

3.3.2 Alhambra preschool

Alhambra preschool is a public preschool, run by a school district, Phoenix, Arizona. It is sited at a working-class neighbourhood, in a cluster of classrooms on a middle school campus. The school runs two programs, including one half-day preschool (morning and afternoon sessions), and a wraparound day-care program from 7:00 to 18:00.

Each morning at 8:00, one group of children lines up, walking from their day-care room to the middle school cafeteria for breakfast. At the meantime, Fran Smith, the head teacher of the preschool session, met the school buses that were arriving, bringing children to the preschool. After all arrived at the classroom, Eva began to serve morning snacks. Meanwhile, Fran was taking the attendance by calling out every child's name.

3.3.3 The similarities and differences on morning-opening scenes of both schools

Different from Chinese preschools and Japanese preschools discussed above, there seems no much resemblance on morning-opening scenes between St. Timothy's Children's Centre in Hawaii and Alhambra preschool in Phoenix. As a public preschool with two thirds of the children from Spanish-speaking working-class families (some of them have special educational needs), the morning-opening scenes seem to be quite chaotic. There exist two groups of children, including one from day-care program having breakfast in a middle-school cafeteria before the preschool session, and the other directly joining the session from home by school bus. They are directed by different teachers, taking quite a lot of time in commuting from rooms to rooms. Possible reasons could be the limited funding that the school has, and its location – a working-class neighbourhood. However, the morning-opening scenes at St. Timothy Children's Centre followed a quite clear structure: the teachers played with the early-arriving children, waiting for other children to come. After all children came, the two teachers started the class with the greeting song.

4. Findings

To summarize, through the angle of Tobin's camera, the morning-opening scenes of both preschools in China (Daguan preschool and Sinanlu preschool) have one similar instance – morning health-check at the school gate; the morning-opening scenes of both preschool in Japan (Komatsudani preschool and Madoka preschool) have one similar instance – children removing their shoes before entering the building. There seem not many similarities on morning-opening scenes of both preschools in the United States (St. Timothy's Children Centre and Alhambra preschool).

In terms of the differences, which are found in comparison of both preschools in the same country, there are quite a lot of possible reasons, including the communities that the preschools are serving, the geographic locations, the funding that the preschools are receiving and the local political climate. Those differences are more likely to be considered as part of the individual preschool culture.

From a panoramic view – comparing the preschools in those three countries, it seems that the children in those preschools with better economic situation (Sinanlu preschool, Madoka preschool and St. Timothy Children Centre) possess more free will to choose where and what to play with, and also they have more time to play freely in the morning before the formal school day starts.

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