

Challenging Education

An Alternative Approach to Education



About the Founder

Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen (1929-2003)

Mr. Robert Yet-Sen Chen was born at the beginning of China's new Republic, survived the civil wars and the Sino-Japanese War, lived on four continents, and established a thriving international business enterprise. Through it all he never forgot his roots, his boyhood years in rural China. He dedicated significant time, energy and financial contributions in the later part of his life to helping the less fortunate in his home village in Qidong, Jiangsu Province, China.



Mr. Chen was born in 1929. At the age of 14, he left his hometown to study in Shanghai. In 1948, he left China for Hong Kong and eventually went on to attend university in England. In 1957, Mr. Chen returned to work in the family business in Hong Kong. He established the company's presence in West Africa by setting up factories in Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Like many of his generation, Mr. Chen experienced personal loss, war and hunger in his youth which was to prepare him for the rigors and challenges of doing business in uncharted territories. His positive outlook on life and his uncanny ability to see to the core of issues, coupled with his unfailing diligence, contributed to the ultimate success of his personal and professional endeavors. His diligence and sound financial investment strategies paid dividends for the family business.

The elder, Mr. Chen Zao Men, taught his son about the importance of philanthropy – of giving – from an early age. The Chen Zao Men College in Hong Kong was the first charitable project supported by the Chen Family in 1972, and the genesis of a tradition of community service. Mr. Robert Chen built on this legacy of good work by building and supporting six schools, a community hospital, and undertaking much-needed public works in the family's hometown of Qidong. His lifetime of philanthropic work culminated with the creation of the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation in October 2003, prior to his unexpected and premature passing on November 29, 2003.

Mr. Robert Chen was a successful businessman, a caring family man, a generous benefactor and a respected citizen. Compassionate and generous, he cared deeply about educating the younger generations, in whom he saw unfulfilled potential to excel. His spirit lives on in the Foundation that bears his name.

The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation

About Us

Established in 2003, The Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation is a hybrid charitable institution with a strategic focus on improving early childhood literacy, through the development of libraries and reading programs. The Foundation also supports experiential out-of-classroom programs which aim to improve personal development of children.

Geographical Interest

The Foundation supports organizations for innovative, cost effective and high impact programs in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Ghana.



Mission Statement

To nurture the potential of the next generation by building, supporting & sustaining innovative approaches that enhance learning & personal development.

This includes:

- Supporting relevant local organizations and people to achieve capacity building
- Introducing best practices or new ideas
- Scaling up successful projects
- Encouraging the dissemination of innovative ideas
- Assisting with people resources in libraries
- Promoting quality literature
- Supporting life skills training

Message from the Board

*We are pleased to present this case study,
showcasing a selection of
the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation's work
since we began operations in 2003.*

*For us as a Foundation, these retrospectives are a
perfect opportunity for us to reflect on the
work we have done,
what we have learned, and
where and how we might improve.*

*It is also our hope that through sharing our
experiences, we will amplify the lessons learned
and approaches adopted, supporting others on
their own philanthropic journey.*

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“Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.”

Plutarch

What constitutes a good education? Does learning occur only in the classroom? Does it always involve a teacher? How do children and adults learn best? Can learning be fun? Can it happen without direct instruction? Can it happen during the process of play?

These questions have engaged and inspired the Chen-Yet Sen Family Foundation (CYSFF) from its inception in 2003. CYSFF has long held the belief that learning, from a child development perspective, happens in many settings; in the playground, in the home, in parks, in libraries, and in the books that children read. At the heart of the Foundation’s mission is an educational philosophy that embraces children’s innate potential to learn through play, and to grow through fun and rewarding experiences.

Over more than a decade of work in early childhood education, CYSFF has promoted various forms of experiential learning and provided stimulating environments in which children flourish. The Foundation aims to provide an alternative to the conventional educational models in China and Hong Kong, which tend to emphasize rigidity and conformity. In today’s pressure-cooker education environment, many children have lost the opportunity to play, as more time is spent on academic enrichment and tuition outside of school. How can we restore for children some of their natural ways of learning?

Traditional Chinese education places a strong emphasis on rote memorization. This is partially due to the peculiar demands of the language itself: thousands of characters, each with precise pictographic elements and complex, subtle tonal inflections. Among beginners, the language doesn’t reward experimentation, and demands obedient imitation and intense concentration. For these reasons, and for broader cultural factors, Chinese education has emphasized the importance of repetition and downplayed the role of innovation. Consequently, despite the richness and beauty of the Chinese language, its teaching – and the educational methods employed in the broader curriculum – can seem joyless and even punitive.

CYSFF seeks to nurture the imagination and cultivate the creativity of young minds, while developing key life skills, including critical thinking, resilience, teamwork and leadership ability. In addition, the Foundation places a strong emphasis on

socialization – education is not merely about personal achievement, but about learning to collaborate with, and live with, others. We support programs that develop empathy and a civic sensibility, so that students can learn how to be active participants, both independent-minded and socially conscious. Our approach is underlined by the belief that critical thinking and creative thinking are not opposites, but born of the same impulse – one harnessed by minds for whom thinking is not work, but a form of play.

Experiential Learning

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” (Aristotle)

Experiential learning is a process through which children develop knowledge, skills and values through direct and first-hand experience. Although this can occur in a classroom, much of it happens outside the traditional academic setting. ‘Learning by doing’ allows children to create meaning for themselves, and associate new information with their existing knowledge. The emotions they experience can facilitate greater retention of information by providing contextual memory prompts.

Yesterday’s traditional classroom setting is ill-equipped to develop the skills children need to be ready for the 21st Century. While classrooms still play a role in academic learning, children require settings in which they can exercise freedom of choice, explore their interests, and interact with peers and adults in a more playful, experimental way.

Role of Play in Children’s Learning

“Curiosity is, in great and generous minds, the first passion and the last.” (Samuel Johnson)

Children learn naturally through play. It is a crucial part of their development process. However, over time, adults put restrictions on children’s informal behavior. Adults misunderstand play, thinking that it is an escape or rest from learning, and that cognition requires discipline. Free play may appear purposeless to adults but it possesses valuable opportunities for learning. Without it, children soon forget to be children.

“There is something in play that gives players permission to take risks considered outlandish or impossible in ‘real life.’ There is something in play that activates the tenacity and persistence required for effective learning.” (Institute of Play)

It is often said that play is a child’s ‘work’, and that in their formative years they wish to play as much as possible. Through play, children develop emotional regulation and social skills, and learn about themselves and their environment, which changes and expands as they grow. Children are born with an innate curiosity to understand their world. They explore this naturally through play, which is a fundamental form of learning, even if it may not look like what happens in a classroom.

Hong Kong Playright Children's Society

Established in 1987, Playright has been focused on developing and delivering education programs integrating play theory and design. Children are given the opportunity to direct their own learning through play. This method taps into their creativity and brings about an enjoyable educational experience. Children choose their preferred activity, with whom to play the game, and for how long. This planning process challenges and develops executive functions in the brain: inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility. It also encourages parents, educators, caregivers and the community to get involved, and often alters their mindset by showing them the positive impacts of play.

CYSFF was looking for a way to introduce the idea of learning through play, particularly in the playground. Since 2004, the Foundation has been a supporter of Playright, an organization that bring play to life in schools and communities in Hong Kong. The spirit of learning within play is at the core of Playright's approach, and their principles align well with CYSFF's philosophy. For example, CYSFF emphasizes 'let children choose' in all its early childhood literacy programs. Like Playright, CYSFF believes in child-centered programs that develop a range of intellectual and emotional skills.

1. Games for children, by children

Traditionally, games are designed with pre-conceived rules and operations, to induce certain behavior or provide a finite set of actions and choices. Playright believes that children should take control of games, including the design, rules and operations. This allows them a new degree of freedom to play, and therefore more opportunities to learn. Often they will take an approach that adults have not considered.

2. Let them choose

Freedom of choice creates ownership, enhancing independence and giving children a sense of control. Children are naturally curious and adept at inventing games, and intuitively gravitate to activities that suit their interests and preferences. The role of the parent/caregiver and educator is to provide children with a range of choices, encouraging experimentation. For example, during a typical day at school, Playright usually designs and makes available a number of games on the playground: some are for groups, some for individuals, some for quiet play, while others require physical exertion. Children can decide what they want to play, even if they choose to play one game the entire time.

3. A holistic approach to child development

When a child is at play, s/he can become fully immersed, teaching them 'flow state'. An optimal experience, or flow, occurs when a person feels well-equipped to cope with a certain situation, confident in their abilities and prospects. In the course of play, children can experience many emotions: happiness, joy, fear, embarrassment, frustration, etc. This experience is beneficial to a child's emotional development as well as their social skills. Experiencing these emotions and learning how to regulate them supports a child's development as a rounded person.



The Playright Method

On the surface, Playright's games seem simple. However, each and every game requires a team of highly trained professionals, collaborating to create a safe and educative experience. The team usually includes expertise in play theory, amusement park design, environment setup, safety, etc. This unique combination in Playright's programs is precisely the advantage that appeals to many different groups in Hong Kong: families, communities, schools, hospitals, recreational facilities.

1. Designed from a child's perspective

Playright firmly believes in children directing their own games and in designing games from a child's perspective. Playright's Playscope space embodies this philosophy. The transparent ceiling has a circular walkway that offers a 360-degree panoramic view outside, and allows children to see into the museum from above. It's a simple yet striking design choice, taking into account that children rarely have the chance to see the world from a higher vantage point. The ability to do so fulfills, if only briefly, the longing they have for the world much bigger than what they know and have access to on a regular basis. A careful observer notices that adults need to bring themselves to a child's eye level in order to see the trains running on the tracks hanging from the roof.

2. Using local materials

Commercial toys are usually designed for specific patterns of play. This limits how children naturally interact, restricting their innate creativity. Playright prefers taking materials readily available in the environment – bamboo, tires, cardboard, for example – and transforming them into props for play. With a little guidance, cardboard quickly

becomes a tank, a monster or a dancing snake. Using local materials is environmentally friendly and draws out the child's imagination, helping them re-discover the world around them, and provides teachers with a wealth of affordable teaching materials.

3. Transforming the adult's role

Children are the protagonists of each game. During the process of play, an adult's role becomes peripheral. Adults act as observers and facilitators to support the process, and to ensure safety. If a child demonstrates inappropriate behavior, adults will intervene, taking care not to disrupt the children's play. For example, when conflicts arise – as they typically do when children play in a group – adults need not intervene right away. Rather, they can first observe and give children an opportunity to resolve conflicts on their own. This can provide a wonderful learning opportunity. Of course, if violence is involved, adults promptly intervene.

4. Managing risk and safety



Free play usually involves a degree of danger. Therefore, parents/caregivers and educators are concerned about safety. Before any event, Playright personnel conduct a comprehensive assessment of the environment to the highest safety standards. Playright's approach to safety eliminates hidden dangers while maintaining 'dangers' children can see to preserve a sense of adventure. Risk is part of life, and Playright helps children navigate challenges (an invaluable life skill) in a controlled environment.

CYSFF and Playright Promote Play in Hefei

In 2008, CYSFF invited Madam Xue Mei Chen, the principal of Tun Xi Lu Primary School in Anhui's Hefei city, to visit Playright in Hong Kong. After learning about Playright's educational philosophy, Madam Chen submitted an application to CYSFF. The Foundation and Playright collaborated with four primary schools in Hefei during a two-year project. Upon completion, Playright built a separate game room in each school and trained teachers and facilitators to support on-going development.

Playright and Tun Xi Lu Primary School decided to launch the initiative on June 1st, Children's Day, which is widely observed and celebrated in China. Most schools put on a day's worth of performances and activities to celebrate. But how can children take the leading role in their holiday? Playright and the school decided to replace the traditional performances and activities with 'Play Day', providing opportunities for children to design and create their own games to celebrate their own holiday. This also changed

the parents' roles from the audience to participants, from passive onlookers to actively supporting a culture of play.

One week prior to 'Play Day', Playright staff assisted the school in site planning, game design, and prop construction, with nearly 40 games divided into over 10 categories. At the same time, Playright trained parents and teachers so they can facilitate games and appropriately support the children. Unlike past celebrations, children were free to choose their favorite activities. In a creative play game called 'Happily Go Around Town', a beautifully-crafted large sedan and a bus slowly moved around the school grounds. Children quickly took on the roles of 'bus driver' and 'sedan driver'. They observed various road signs and obeyed traffic rules. Kids watching on the side couldn't wait to get involved and started directing traffic, taking on the role of traffic police. In such a game, children not only play together but also increase their understanding of traffic rules. In another corner, a space was created for girls' pillow fights, while the playground was converted into a 'battlefield' of sorts, allowing boys to play 'strategy and war' games.

Tun Xi Lu Primary School's Play Day has become an annual event. Each year, children report in evaluation forms that 'Play Day' is their favorite school event. In 2012, Tun Xi Lu Primary School became Playright's base in China to promote and train other schools in this methodology. With continued support from CYSFF, today there are ten schools in Hefei that have their own 'Play Day', and in 2013 teachers formed a 'Play Alliance' to share insights and experiences. Tun Xi Lu Primary School's current principal, Mr. Gang Chen, said:

"Playright games brought a new educational mindset to Hefei primary schools. Now the schools all support 'Play Day' activities and children love them. We are very grateful to CYSFF for their help. Even after the program ended in two years, the Foundation continued to support us in various ways so that we can train our staff to carry on 'Play Day' – a new tradition."



Tun Xi Lu Primary School serves as a model school and a 'Play Base' for the district, providing training and advocacy. The 'Play Alliance's goal is to become a model district, incubating and sharing play ideas with other school districts in China. Kathy Wong, Executive Director of Playright, described their relationship with the Foundation:

"CYSFF is a strategic partner and our missions are aligned. They do not think only about service provision; their approach is to ask 'how do we come together to create impact?' The Foundation respects us as a partner and demonstrates this by giving us the space to do our due diligence on target schools to determine suitable fit."

Overview:

1. Children naturally understand how to play

Play is an important part of a child's development. It is also an indispensable educational tool. Through play, children learn to think, feel, and reflect. Educators must recognize the unique role of play in learning and incorporate it to fulfill a child's promise during the growing process.

2. Providing education that's natural to children

What appears to be a simple game for children is actually designed with the highest quality of education pedagogy. A game that induces learning in children requires a team of professionals to carefully design and plan the game. To schools that continually seek to innovate, Playright's playground games provide a unique solution. Instead of traditional games that focus on competition, Playright games invite children to be creative and collaborative. Children are offered abundant materials to invent their own games. Through this process, they learn about teamwork and creativity, without teachers explicitly 'teaching' them. This approach echoes that of CYSFF's own philosophy towards happy reading programs. Giving freedom and choices to children allows them to tap into their innate potential to develop happily and healthily.

3. A paradigm shift is needed

"The truly great advances of this generation will be made by those who can make outrageous connections, and only a mind which knows how to play can do that." (Nagle Jackson)

At present China is experiencing an era of unprecedented technological and social change, at a dizzying speed and scale. The traditional methods of 'passive' classroom learning are inadequate in developing both mental agility (particularly non-linear and associative thinking) and non-cognitive skills, such as resilience and emotional management. Furthermore, schools now face the challenge of equipping students with the skills they need to succeed in jobs that do not yet exist, highlighting the need for an inter-disciplinary approach, in which intellectual breadth and imaginative capability are valued. Paradoxically, perhaps the greatest challenge ahead lies in the teaching of the teachers and parents – for unlike children, their educational mindset and habits are fixed, often molded by inherited ideas of didactic learning.

Epilogue

From Playright to Playwright

CYSFF is dedicated to enriching children's lives by supporting stimulating and fulfilling programs, helping teachers, parents and caregivers recognize and nurture the fruits of play. No other structured activity allows for a greater degree of intellectual, social & emotional freedom than *role play*. Drama has all the qualities that CYSFF is looking to promote: it is creative, expressive, immersive and performative; it requires students to be emotionally empathetic; to appreciate subtlety; to comprehend ambiguity; to receive directions and be open to suggestions; and to navigate interactions with others. It encourages *memorisation without imitation*, while underlining the importance of imaginative interpretation, and helps student learn how to deal with nerves – a crucial skill for exams and job interviews.

The Foundation has worked with Hua Dan (hua-dan.org), an organisation dedicated to cultivating “integrity, courage, and confidence” through theatrical experimentation. Hua Dan is driven by the knowledge that the arts are an invaluable source of social cohesion, as well emotional growth and repair – they can heal and strengthen us, and enlarge our understanding, of ourselves and others.

CYSFF also collaborated with Shakespeare for All (s4a.org.hk), an organisation that offers Chinese students a window into another world. This partnership is especially exciting in light of a series of new translations and adaptations in Mandarin and Cantonese (tinyurl.com/MandCant).

Healthy Body, Healthy Mind

The Foundation acknowledges the limits of conventional classroom teaching, and seeks to equip students with life skills as well as academic ability. This emphasis on holistic learning is vital: education goes beyond school, into an environment of shared public spaces – as a citizen, a worker, a neighbour, a friend. The partnership with Outward Bound (outwardbound.org.hk) reflects this approach, as both organizations aims to nurture the habits of mutual respect, independence, resilience, empathy and co-operation, while building confidence (physical, personal and social) and helping form a deep emotional bond with nature – crucial in a society in which urban sprawl and ecological devastation are rapidly changing the landscape. Environmental consciousness has deep roots in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions in China, as well as in its cultural and literary heritage (Li Bai, Du Fu, Han Shan, etc.). But these are universal impulses, too – in the words of Wordsworth, “Let Nature be your teacher”:

*She has a world of ready wealth,
Our minds and hearts to bless —
Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,
Truth breathed by cheerfulness.*

*One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.*



www.cysff.org