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Contemporary Adaptation of Chen Heqin's Art Education Philosophy: Qualitative Evidence from Kindergarten Teachers in Hebei Province, China

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Abstract

Chen Heqin's Life Education theory remains one of China's most influential indigenous frameworks for early childhood education, yet its translation into contemporary kindergarten art practice has not been sufficiently examined. This study investigates how kindergarten art teachers in Hebei Province understand Chen Heqin's art education philosophy, identifies deviations between its child-centered and life-oriented principles and current teaching practices, and develops context-sensitive pathways for contemporary adaptation. An interpretivist qualitative design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes were conducted with 24 kindergarten art teachers from six public and private kindergartens across urban, suburban, and rural contexts. The interview instrument was refined through expert validation and a pre-interview with eight teachers, and the formal data were analyzed through manual, theory-informed thematic analysis. The findings show that teachers were generally aware of Chen Heqin and positively disposed toward child-centeredness, life-oriented learning, creativity, and holistic development, but their theoretical understanding was often fragmented. Classroom practice continued to be shaped by task completion, demonstration and imitation, predetermined themes, model works, product-oriented evaluation, and adult aesthetic standards. These deviations were generated by the interaction of teacher-level limitations, institutional constraints, parental pressure, resource inequality, and examination- and technique-oriented cultural assumptions. Six adaptation pathways emerged directly from the interview data: life-based art activities, creativity-oriented teaching, process-oriented evaluation, integration of Hebei folk-art resources, teacher professional development, and appropriate digital support that does not replace direct experience. The study demonstrates that Chen Heqin's thought can function as a living framework for locally grounded preschool art reform rather than merely as a historical legacy.

Keywords: Chen Heqin, Life Education, Children's Art Education, Kindergarten Teachers, Qualitative Research, Hebei Province

Introduction

Art education during the preschool years is not simply an introduction to drawing and handicraft techniques. For children aged three to six, artistic activity is a mode of perceiving daily life, expressing emotion, exploring materials, developing imagination, and constructing an early relationship with culture. Chen Heqin (1892–1982), widely recognized as a foundational figure in modern Chinese early childhood education, treated these dimensions as part of children's holistic development. His Life Education theory proposed that education should be rooted in children's actual lives, aligned with their physical and psychological development, and organized through observation, action, play, and experience (Chen, 2001). Within art education, this position rejects the reduction of children's creative activity to adult-directed copying or technical accuracy.

Chen Heqin's art education philosophy is especially relevant to contemporary debates because many of the problems he addressed remain visible in current practice. Kindergarten art activities may still be organized around teacher demonstrations, fixed procedures, model pictures, visually uniform products, and adult standards of beauty. Such practices can help teachers maintain order and produce displayable outcomes, but they may also narrow children's opportunities to investigate materials, communicate personal meanings, and create diverse responses. Eisner (2002) similarly emphasized that the arts develop forms of thinking that cannot be reduced to a single correct answer, while the Reggio Emilia tradition regards children's varied symbolic expressions as languages through which they interpret experience (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

The contemporary policy environment in China has also renewed attention to aesthetic education and culturally grounded curriculum development. The School Aesthetic Education Infiltration Action Plan launched in 2024 calls for systematic improvement in the quality of aesthetic education and the development of high-quality, cross-disciplinary resources. This policy direction creates an opportunity to reconsider indigenous educational thought not as a historical subject alone but as a source of practical principles for current curriculum reform. Chen Heqin's emphasis on life, child development, learning by doing, and localized educational resources provides a particularly appropriate lens for this task.

Existing studies have clarified the historical development and major concepts of Chen Heqin's educational thought, and research has documented its significance for preschool education, curriculum, and children's artistic development (Cha Xueqiu, 2018; Guo & Yan, 2023). However, a persistent gap remains between theoretical interpretation and empirical investigation of everyday kindergarten art practice. Many studies explain what Chen Heqin advocated, but fewer ask how present-day teachers understand these ideas, which institutional and social forces shape their classroom decisions, and how the philosophy can be converted into feasible strategies in a specific regional context.

Hebei Province provides a valuable setting for such analysis. Its kindergartens operate across diverse urban, suburban, and rural conditions and include public and private institutions with different resources, curriculum structures, professional-development opportunities, and relationships with parents. The province also possesses rich cultural resources—including Wuqiang New Year paintings, Yu County paper-cutting, Tangshan shadow puppetry, Cizhou kiln culture, folk festivals, natural materials, and community traditions—that can support

localized aesthetic education. The question is therefore not whether Chen Heqin's philosophy remains valuable in the abstract, but how its principles can be interpreted and implemented under these varied conditions.

Accordingly, this study addresses three questions: (1) How do kindergarten art teachers in Hebei Province understand Chen Heqin's core concepts and principles of children's art education? (2) What deviations are present in educational philosophy, curriculum implementation, assessment, and resource allocation, and what mechanisms underlie these deviations? (3) Through which pathways can Chen Heqin's core principles be translated into actionable strategies suited to Hebei's educational and cultural context? By answering these questions with interview evidence from 24 teachers, the study contributes a teacher-centered and context-sensitive account of the contemporary transformation of indigenous Chinese educational thought.

Literature Review

Chen Heqin's philosophy of children's art education emerged from the interaction of China's early twentieth-century educational modernization, Western progressive education, child-development research, Chinese educational traditions, and long-term kindergarten experimentation. His theory of Life Education positioned life itself as the source, content, and purpose of education. In art activities, this means that children should draw, construct, model, and experiment from direct encounters with nature, family, community, play, festivals, and social experience rather than merely reproduce adult-designed images (Chen, 2013).

Child-centeredness is a second core principle. Chen Heqin's observations of children's drawings led him to argue that children's artistic products should be interpreted according to developmental characteristics and expressive intentions rather than adult artistic criteria. Children are active creators with distinct interests, emotions, and ways of representing experience. The teacher's role is therefore to observe, provide materials, ask questions, and offer responsive support. This position is consistent with Dewey's (1916) account of learning through experience, but Chen localized progressive education within Chinese childhood, culture, and social reality.

Learning by doing and game-based teaching further distinguish Chen Heqin's approach from transmission-oriented instruction. Children learn by touching, manipulating, observing, testing, combining, and revising. Artistic knowledge is generated through the process of making. In this framework, demonstration can serve as temporary scaffolding, but it should not become a standard answer that every child must copy. The educational value lies in the child's exploration, decision-making, and meaning construction, not only in the attractiveness of the final product.

A fourth principle concerns evaluation. Product-centered assessment commonly judges whether a picture is neat, complete, recognizable, or similar to a model. Chen Heqin's developmental perspective instead directs attention to participation, effort, observation, imagination, emotional investment, material experimentation, explanation, and change over time. Contemporary scholarship likewise calls for evaluation systems that document process and recognize diverse forms of learning rather than impose a single adult standard (Han, 2023). Portfolios, process photographs, teacher observation notes, and children's own

explanations can make these less visible dimensions of learning available to teachers and parents.

Localization and nationalization are also fundamental. Chen Heqin did not advocate the uncritical transfer of foreign theories; he adapted them to Chinese social conditions and cultural resources. In Hebei, local folk arts and community traditions can become curriculum resources when they are transformed into child-friendly sensory and creative experiences. Mechanical copying of traditional motifs would reproduce the same adult-centered problem in a different form. Local culture becomes educationally meaningful when children encounter materials, stories, colors, forms, places, and community practices through exploration and reinterpretation (Guo & Yan, 2023).

The contemporary digital environment introduces both opportunity and risk. Artificial intelligence, augmented reality, multimedia resources, digital portfolios, and parent-communication platforms can widen access to images, document learning processes, and support teachers' planning (Chen Peiyao, 2024; Heaton, Low, & Chen, 2024). Yet digital tools can also intensify screen-based imitation or replace direct sensory engagement. From a Life Education perspective, technology should extend children's observation and communication while preserving contact with natural materials, bodily action, outdoor experience, and face-to-face interaction.

Research on preschool art education shows continuing tension between developmental ideals and practice. International research has sustained attention to children's art even though the field remains less prominent than other areas of preschool inquiry (Du & Bian, 2023). Within China, the literature reports excessive attention to technique, teacher authority, standardized products, uneven resources, and limited teacher preparation. These problems suggest that the translation of theory depends not only on individual belief but also on institutional assessment, parental expectations, professional learning, and the wider culture of visible educational achievement.

This study therefore uses Chen Heqin's thought as a sensitizing framework rather than a rigid coding scheme. Child-centeredness, life orientation, learning by doing, creativity, process-oriented evaluation, and cultural localization guide attention to the interview data, while the themes remain grounded in teachers' accounts. This approach enables a dialogue between a classical indigenous theory and contemporary practice and helps reveal both alignment and contradiction.

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design grounded in a constructivist epistemological position. Educational reality was treated as socially and culturally constructed through teachers' experiences, institutional conditions, parental relationships, and regional contexts. The purpose was not to test the statistical effect of Chen Heqin's philosophy, but to understand how teachers interpret it, how they negotiate constraints, and how they imagine feasible forms of contemporary adaptation.

The research setting comprised six kindergartens in Hebei Province. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who were directly involved in planning,

implementing, and evaluating art activities for children aged three to six. The final sample contained 24 teachers divided equally across six geographical and institutional subgroups: urban public, urban private, suburban public, suburban private, rural public, and rural private kindergartens. Each subgroup contained four participants. This structure enabled comparison across location and institutional type while retaining the depth required for qualitative analysis.

A semi-structured interview protocol served as the main instrument. Its questions were derived from the three research questions, Chen Heqin's educational principles, the conceptual framework, and literature on contemporary children's art education. The protocol covered teachers' backgrounds and knowledge sources; their understandings of child-centeredness, life-oriented learning, and the value of art; their descriptions of objectives, curriculum, materials, creativity, and evaluation; the influence of institutions, parents, and resources; and possible pathways for adaptation.

The instrument underwent expert validation to assess clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the research questions. Before formal data collection, a pre-interview was conducted with eight kindergarten art teachers. The pre-interview showed that some theoretical terms were too abstract and that several questions elicited idealized rather than practice-based responses. Consequently, theoretical expressions were translated into teacher-friendly language, overlapping questions were combined, the sequence was adjusted, and follow-up prompts requesting recent classroom examples and children's responses were added. The eight pre-interview participants were not included in the formal findings.

Formal interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or through telephone or online communication according to practical conditions. Participants received information about the study's purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and right to withdraw. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Identifying details were removed, and each participant received a code combining geographical context (U, S, or R), kindergarten type (Pu or Pr), and subgroup sequence (01–04).

Manual thematic analysis was conducted through repeated reading, initial coding, constant comparison, category development, theme refinement, and interpretation in relation to the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Chen Heqin's principles operated as theoretical sensitizers, but the analysis remained open to unanticipated meanings in teachers' accounts. Reflexive memo-writing was used to record analytical decisions and possible assumptions. Credibility and dependability were supported through expert review, pre-interview refinement, consistent coding procedures, comparison across participant groups, triangulation with relevant literature, and member checking where appropriate.

The final themes were organized into four analytical domains: teachers' understanding of Chen Heqin's philosophy; current practice and deviations; underlying mechanisms; and adaptation pathways. A cross-context analysis then compared urban and rural settings, public and private kindergartens, and experienced and newer teachers. Thematic saturation guided

the judgment that the sample provided sufficient information richness for the purposes of the study.

Results

Participants and Analytical Structure

The formal dataset comprised interviews with 24 teachers from six kindergartens. The balanced subgroup design ensured that urban, suburban, and rural settings and public and private institutions were represented equally. The participant codes used below are reproduced from the thesis and preserve anonymity while making contextual comparisons transparent.

Table 1
Participant Composition and Coding

Participant codes	Geographical context	Kindergarten type	n
U-Pu-01 to U-Pu-04	Urban	Public	4
U-Pr-01 to U-Pr-04	Urban	Private	4
S-Pu-01 to S-Pu-04	Suburban / urban-rural fringe	Public	4
S-Pr-01 to S-Pr-04	Suburban / urban-rural fringe	Private	4
R-Pu-01 to R-Pu-04	Rural	Public	4
R-Pr-01 to R-Pr-04	Rural	Private	4
Total	Three geographical contexts	Public and private	24

Teachers' Understanding of Chen Heqin's Philosophy

Teachers' understanding was generally positive but uneven in depth. Most participants had heard of Chen Heqin, particularly the concepts of Life Education and child-centeredness, through college courses, qualification examinations, professional training, teaching-research activities, colleagues, books, or online materials. However, recognition of Chen Heqin as a major early childhood educator did not necessarily translate into systematic knowledge of his art education thought.

An urban public teacher explained, "I first heard about Chen Heqin when I was studying preschool education. At that time, we learned that he was an important educator and that he proposed Life Education. But honestly, it was more like theoretical knowledge for exams. I did not think much about how to use it in children's art activities" (U-Pu-02). Another teacher stated, "I know Chen Heqin as the father of Chinese early childhood education. I remember concepts such as child-centeredness and life-based education, but if you ask me to explain his art education thought systematically, I may not be able to do that very clearly" (U-Pu-04).

Table 2
Themes in Teachers' Understanding

Analytical dimension	Themes derived from coding	Meaning in practice
Awareness and sources	General but superficial awareness; uneven access to theoretical learning; weak translation from theory to art teaching	Teachers recognized major concepts but often lacked a systematic art-pedagogy framework.
Child-centered education	Respect for interests and differences; participation and choice; tension with teacher-led implementation	Child-centered values were endorsed, but children's autonomy was often bounded by planned outcomes.
Life-oriented education	Daily life as subject matter; direct experience and observation; uneven contextual implementation	Some teachers used life only as a theme, whereas others began from children's actual encounters.
Value of art education	Skill acquisition; emotional expression and creativity; tension between product and process	Teachers ranged from skill-oriented to development-oriented and balanced positions.

Differences in access were contextual. Urban public teachers more often encountered Chen Heqin through formal courses, municipal training, and teaching-research groups. Private and rural teachers relied more heavily on curriculum packages, colleagues, online materials, or memories from qualification preparation. Nevertheless, teachers who could not name the theory precisely sometimes described practices consistent with it, such as using leaves and community scenes, listening to children's explanations, and accepting different colors or forms.

Teachers also differed in how they defined the value of art education. Skill-oriented teachers emphasized tool use, line and color control, neatness, completion, and visible progress. Development-oriented teachers emphasized confidence, emotion, imagination, aesthetic perception, and communication. A balanced position was captured by S-Pu-01: "I think skills and expression are both important, but skills should serve expression. We can teach children how to use tools or materials, but we should not make every child's work look the same."

Current Practices and Deviations

The second analytical domain revealed a clear gap between teachers' stated developmental beliefs and routine practice. Teachers frequently affirmed that art should encourage imagination and self-expression, yet classroom activities were commonly organized around visible task completion. Objectives focused on finishing a picture or handicraft within the allocated period; demonstrations and model works established an expected appearance; themes were selected in advance by teachers or curriculum packages; and evaluation emphasized neatness, completeness, beauty, and similarity to the model.

Table 3
Major Deviations in Current Kindergarten Art Practice

Domain	Observed practice	Deviation from Chen Heqin's principles
Teaching objectives	Objectives narrowed to task completion and visible products	Holistic development and lived experience became secondary.
Teaching methods	Demonstration, fixed steps, imitation, and model works	Learning by doing was replaced by following the teacher.
Creativity	Children's ideas were adjusted toward expected outcomes	Creative autonomy and personal meaning were restricted.
Curriculum	Predetermined themes and teacher-selected materials	Children's interests and direct experiences had limited influence.
Evaluation	Neatness, completion, beauty, and similarity	The creative process and developmental change were undervalued.
Resources	Uneven materials, space, curriculum support, and training	Life-oriented and exploratory activities were implemented unevenly.

Teachers explained why controlled practices remained attractive. A newer rural private teacher stated, "I know children should have their own ideas, but if the activity is too open, I am not sure how to guide them. So I still depend on samples and steps" (R-Pr-02). Model works reduced uncertainty, supported classroom management, and made the final products predictable. They also enabled teachers to show parents and administrators a visible result. These advantages, however, could turn a scaffold into a standard answer.

The product-process tension was especially strong in activities intended for display. U-Pr-04 noted, "As teachers, we know the process is important, but parents usually see only the final work. If the work is not beautiful, they may not understand what the child learned in the process." R-Pr-03 similarly explained, "If the children's works are displayed on the wall, the kindergarten hopes they look orderly. So sometimes we choose activities that are easier to control, because the final effect will be better." The data therefore show that product orientation was not merely a personal preference but a response to a wider accountability environment.

At the same time, the interviews contained examples of more developmental practice. U-Pu-01 stated, "I think the most important value of children's art education is not whether the child draws accurately, but whether the child dares to express. Some children are not very good at speaking, but they can show their feelings through colors and pictures." S-Pu-03 described children's art as a language and warned that correcting shape and color could erase what a child wanted to communicate. These counterexamples demonstrate that alternatives already exist within the same regional system.

Underlying Causes of Deviations

Five interacting causes explained why development-oriented beliefs were difficult to enact. The causes formed an educational ecology rather than a linear chain. Teachers were

positioned at the center of demands to respect creativity, follow curriculum plans, manage classrooms, satisfy parents, use unequal resources, and produce visible evidence of learning.

Table 4
Underlying Causes of Deviations

Underlying cause	Main manifestations	Resulting deviation
Teacher-level factors	Limited familiarity with Chen Heqin's theory; insufficient open-ended teaching strategies; weak process-evaluation ability	Reliance on demonstration, imitation, fixed procedures, and product-based judgment
Institutional constraints	Fixed curriculum plans; teaching records; assessment requirements; open classes; wall displays	Task-oriented and standardized teaching focused on visible outcomes
Parental pressure	Preference for beautiful works; comparison; competition; demand for visible progress	Children's expression adjusted to adult-recognized expectations
Resource inequality	Urban-rural gaps in materials, training, space, curriculum support, and professional development	Exploratory and diversified activities implemented unevenly
Cultural factors	Examination-oriented thinking; technical orientation; adult aesthetic standards; emphasis on "drawing well"	Art reduced to skill training and product quality rather than holistic development

Teacher-level limitations were most evident among newer teachers and those with fewer training opportunities. When teachers lacked practical strategies for scaffolding diverse responses or evaluating processes, they returned to methods that were safer and easier to control. Institutional systems amplified this tendency through weekly plans, activity records, open lessons, inspections, festivals, and wall displays. Because final artworks were easier to record and compare than internal experience or imaginative growth, visible products became proxies for teaching quality.

Parental pressure was stronger and more direct in private kindergartens, where satisfaction and institutional reputation were closely connected. Parents frequently interpreted neat and recognizable products as evidence that teaching had been effective. Broader cultural assumptions reinforced this expectation by equating art learning with drawing accurately and progressing toward adult standards. The result was a systemic push toward correction, comparison, and standardization, even when teachers personally valued creativity.

Resource inequality produced a more complex pattern than a simple urban advantage. Urban kindergartens generally had diverse formal materials, picture books, curriculum packages, multimedia tools, and training opportunities, but their curricula were more structured. Rural kindergartens had fewer formal resources and less professional support but richer access to leaves, stones, soil, crops, animals, village scenes, and seasonal changes. Rural environments therefore held strong potential for Life Education, but teachers needed support to transform local resources into systematic curricula.

Adaptation Pathways

Six interconnected pathways were developed directly from teachers' reflections. They respond to the deviations and causes identified above and translate Chen Heqin's concepts into strategies that can be used in daily teaching. The pathways do not require every kindergarten to adopt an identical program; they provide a shared direction that can be adapted to institutional and regional conditions.

Table 5
Adaptation Pathways for Contemporary Practice

Pathway	Core strategy	Practical function
Life-based art activities	Use natural observation, daily experience, family life, community scenes, and familiar materials	Transforms "life is education" into classroom activity design
Promoting creativity	Reduce model works, avoid mechanical imitation, provide open materials, and accept diverse outcomes	Supports self-expression and creative autonomy
Process-oriented evaluation	Use children's explanations, observation records, photos, portfolios, and developmental feedback	Shifts attention from final products to learning processes
Hebei culture integration	Use Wuqiang New Year paintings, Yu County paper-cutting, Tangshan shadow puppetry, Cizhou kiln culture, festivals, and local materials	Transforms localized aesthetic education into regional curriculum resources
Teacher professional development	Strengthen theory, child psychology, open-ended pedagogy, process evaluation, and rural support	Builds capacity to translate theory into practice
Appropriate digital integration	Use AI, AR, multimedia, digital portfolios, and parent communication as support, not replacement	Modernizes teaching while preserving direct experience and hands-on creation

Life-based activities should begin from what children have seen, done, touched, and felt. Observation of weather, plants, insects, food, playgrounds, family events, and community scenes can precede artistic expression. Everyday and recycled materials can reduce dependence on commercial supplies and broaden sensory experience. A rural teacher summarized this potential: "We do not have many special art materials, but children can easily find leaves, stones, branches, and things from the fields. These are close to their life and can become art materials" (R-Pu-01).

Creativity-oriented teaching does not mean abandoning all instruction. Demonstration can introduce the safe use of a tool or suggest a technique, but it should not predetermine every child's product. Teachers can offer choices of material, invite multiple solutions, ask children to explain their plans, and accept unconventional colors or forms. Process-oriented evaluation supports this shift by documenting participation, curiosity, experimentation, dialogue, persistence, and developmental change through portfolios and observation records.

Hebei's local culture offers distinctive resources, but localization must avoid replacing one form of copying with another. Wuqiang New Year paintings or Yu County paper-cutting should be approached through stories, sensory exploration, color, shape, material, play, and children's reinterpretation. Teacher development is essential because such transformation requires knowledge of both cultural content and child development. Experienced teachers can mentor newer colleagues, while rural educators need targeted curriculum support for converting abundant natural and community resources into planned but open-ended activity sequences.

Digital resources should remain auxiliary. AI-generated images, AR experiences, videos, and multimedia can introduce unfamiliar places or cultural processes, while process photographs and digital portfolios can communicate learning to parents. However, technology should not replace outdoor observation, material manipulation, bodily action, or interpersonal dialogue. In the terms of Life Education, digital tools should serve life rather than substitute for it.

Cross-Context Patterns

Table 6

Integrated Contextual Pattern

Context	Main strength	Main constraint	Key adaptation need
Urban public	Strong formal resources and professional awareness	Fixed curriculum and institutional documentation	More flexible, life-based, and child-led curriculum
Urban private	Material support and parent communication channels	Strong parent pressure and product orientation	Parent education and process-based evaluation
Rural public	Natural and local life resources	Limited formal materials and training	Local-resource curriculum development
Rural private	Familiarity with children's local life	Resource limitations and visible-outcome pressure	Low-cost open-ended activities and teacher support
Experienced teachers	Interpretive and flexible teaching ability	Need for deeper theoretical integration	Advanced curriculum innovation and mentoring roles
Newer teachers	Willingness to learn and follow structure	Limited confidence in open-ended teaching	Practical training in scaffolding, observation, and evaluation

Cross-context analysis demonstrates that implementation should be differentiated rather than uniform. Urban settings need to reduce excessive structuring and create more opportunities for direct experience. Rural settings need professional support to convert natural and local resources into sustained curricular sequences. Public kindergartens need to prevent documentation and formal evaluation from overwhelming developmental goals. Private kindergartens need strong parent communication that makes children's learning processes visible. Experienced teachers can serve as mentors, while newer teachers require

practical strategies for managing open-ended activities without returning automatically to model-based instruction.

Discussion

The findings confirm that Chen Heqin's philosophy remains recognizable among contemporary kindergarten teachers, but recognition is not equivalent to pedagogical internalization. Most teachers endorsed child-centeredness, life-oriented learning, creativity, and holistic development, yet their accounts often remained implicit, fragmented, or disconnected from systematic planning and assessment. This extends Cha Xueqiu's (2018) observation that educators' exposure to Chen Heqin's art education thought is limited and insufficiently translated into teaching. The principal issue is therefore a theory-practice gap rather than direct rejection of the philosophy.

The tension between stated values and enacted practice is particularly important. Teachers could describe art as a language of emotion and imagination while continuing to use demonstrations, fixed steps, and uniform products. This contradiction should not be treated simply as inconsistency or inadequate commitment. The interviews show that model-based teaching performs several institutional functions: it reduces classroom uncertainty, secures task completion, produces evidence for records and displays, and reassures parents that instruction has occurred. The persistence of imitation is consequently maintained by an ecology of accountability rather than by teacher belief alone.

This systemic interpretation contributes to child-centered art education theory. Children's subjectivity depends on more than a teacher's willingness to allow choice. It is shaped by the curriculum schedule, available materials, assessment language, parent expectations, institutional display culture, teacher confidence, and broader definitions of educational success. When these surrounding conditions privilege visible products, the teacher's room to enact child-centered principles contracts. Reform must therefore operate simultaneously at classroom, institutional, family, and cultural levels.

The findings also clarify the meaning of life-oriented education. Several teachers initially understood it as selecting familiar themes such as weather, family, or festivals. The stronger form identified in the data begins before the art product: children observe, touch, collect, discuss, play, remember, and emotionally engage with a phenomenon before expressing it. This distinction prevents Life Education from becoming a superficial label attached to an otherwise teacher-directed lesson. It also resonates with Dewey's (1916) account of experience as an active relationship between learner and environment.

The urban-rural comparison offers a further theoretical contribution. Formal resource abundance did not automatically produce more life-oriented practice. Urban kindergartens had materials, technology, and professional language but were frequently constrained by structured curricula and display requirements. Rural kindergartens had fewer commercial resources but richer access to natural, seasonal, and community life. This pattern challenges deficit-based interpretations of rural education. The central problem is not only the quantity of resources but whether teachers have the professional support to recognize and transform available resources into developmentally appropriate experiences.

Process-oriented evaluation emerged as a pivotal mechanism because it can alter the incentives that sustain standardized teaching. If only the finished picture is shown to parents, neatness and visual appeal will continue to dominate. When portfolios include children's words, process photographs, material experiments, observation notes, and evidence of change, the invisible educational value of art becomes more legible. This can align teacher practice, institutional documentation, and parent communication around participation and development rather than appearance alone (Han, 2023).

The integration of Hebei folk arts further demonstrates how Chen Heqin's nationalized and localized educational orientation can be renewed. Local culture is not a fixed motif bank for children to copy. It is a living environment of stories, materials, community practices, colors, forms, and social memory. Child-friendly reinterpretation allows cultural inheritance and creative autonomy to reinforce rather than contradict one another. Guo and Yan (2023) similarly emphasize the generative and life-based character of Chen Heqin's kindergarten curriculum thought.

Digital integration requires the same critical distinction between resource and replacement. Contemporary technologies can widen access to cultural content, assist documentation, and strengthen home-kindergarten communication. Research on AI in art education notes both pedagogical possibilities and the need for reflective judgment (Heaton et al., 2024). The present findings suggest a clear boundary condition: technology is compatible with Life Education when it stimulates observation, dialogue, making, and reflection, but becomes inconsistent with it when children are reduced to viewers or imitators of digital outputs.

Practically, the study indicates that professional development should combine theory with rehearsable classroom strategies. Lectures on Chen Heqin alone will not resolve teachers' uncertainty about open-ended activities. Training should include analysis of children's drawings, material workshops, questioning and scaffolding techniques, portfolio assessment, local-resource curriculum design, classroom cases, parent communication, and mentoring. Hayes, Maguire, and O'Sullivan (2021) likewise show the value of exchange-oriented professional development in early childhood arts education.

The study is limited by its focus on 24 teachers from six kindergartens in one province and by its reliance on interview accounts rather than direct classroom observation. The findings are analytically transferable but not statistically generalizable. Teachers' stated practices may differ from enacted interactions, and children's and parents' voices were not directly collected. Future research should combine interviews with observation, drawing-based conversations, portfolio analysis, parent inquiry, and action research that tests the six adaptation pathways over time.

Conclusion

This study examined the contemporary relevance of Chen Heqin's art education philosophy through qualitative evidence from 24 kindergarten art teachers across six kindergartens in Hebei Province. Teachers generally accepted the values of child-centeredness, Life Education, creativity, emotional expression, and holistic development, but their theoretical understanding was often fragmented. The principal challenge was not a lack of sympathy for

Chen Heqin's ideas; it was the difficulty of translating them into curriculum, teaching, and evaluation under contemporary institutional and social conditions.

The interview data revealed persistent deviations: objectives narrowed to task completion, demonstrations and model works dominated instruction, children's ideas were adjusted toward expected products, themes were predetermined, and evaluation privileged neatness, beauty, completion, and similarity. These practices were produced by the interaction of teacher-level limitations, institutional documentation and display requirements, parental expectations, resource inequality, and adult-centered cultural assumptions about what it means to draw well.

Six practical pathways were identified: grounding art activities in children's direct life experiences; reducing mechanical imitation and accepting diverse outcomes; reforming evaluation through observation, explanation, photographs, and portfolios; integrating Hebei folk arts as exploratory cultural resources; strengthening teacher professional development; and using digital technology as support without displacing direct experience. Their implementation must be context-sensitive. Urban, rural, public, private, experienced, and newer-teacher settings possess different strengths and constraints and therefore require differentiated support.

The study concludes that Chen Heqin's art education philosophy should be treated as a living framework for reform rather than as a historical doctrine. Its contemporary significance lies in redirecting attention from standardized products to children's lives, perceptions, emotions, actions, and cultural environments. Through coordinated change in teacher learning, curriculum design, evaluation, parent communication, institutional support, and local resource use, Chen Heqin's indigenous educational wisdom can contribute to a more creative, developmentally appropriate, and culturally meaningful form of preschool art education in Hebei Province.

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