Dear Professor,

Hello!

I’m Sun Yunxiao, a researcher for the China Youth Research Center. Many years ago, I was very shocked when I read the book Multiple Intelligences. Recently, I re-read Frames of Mind, Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons, Truth, Beauty, and Goodness and other books. I believe deeply that MI theory is extremely important, especially for the freedom and development of young people. It’s the most important theory and guide.

I often conduct lectures for parents and teachers in China, and MI theory is the most recommended and discussed. It is also the most received during interviews.

Therefore, I want to thank you for your outstanding contribution to creativity and wisdom. And thank you for agreeing to participate in this conversation.

Sincerely thank you for your generous help!

Sun Yun Xiao
Summer 2013 in Beijing
Part 1

About your personal experience

1. Please briefly describe your childhood. You’re a child from an immigrant family and you graduated from Harvard. How would you rate your academic performance?

GARDNER: I am very fortunate. My parents were loving persons and gave me and my sister a good home. I was a very good student and was never really challenged intellectually until I entered Harvard College in 1961.

2. As an outstanding professor, what is the root of your achievement? Or, in other words, how did you get your professional life started?

GARDNER: At first I thought I would become a lawyer. But I fell in love with scholarship and particularly with the social sciences. I decided to become a psychologist but might as well have become a sociologist or a historian. In retrospect, I could have become a journalist but I am glad that I decided instead to become a psychologist.

3. Home life is very important for a child’s growth. Which relatives impacted you the most?

GARDNER: My parents impacted me in different ways. I developed work habits from my father, and an interest in other persons from my mother. Both of them had extremely high ethical standards and I hope that I live up to their examples. In different ways they were both very courageous. I always felt loved.

4. Good habits help aid development. Which 5 habits do you think are most important?

GARDNER:
1) Plan your time and use it well.
2) Spend time organizing what you have to do, in what order, with what deadline, and monitor where you succeed and where you have problems.
3) Listen well to others and if you don’t understand what they are saying, ask them to explain.
4) Try to be clear to others about your expectations and encourage them to explain their understanding.
5) Try to be fair to everyone, and when you fail, apologize and attempt to make up for your mistakes.
Part 2

About your research

5. In your books, you said that, “Without a long-term interest in Art and Research, it would have been absolutely impossible to advance the theory of MI.” Why?

GARDNER: Because of my deep immersion in and love for the arts, I was primed to notice that most psychologists have paid no attention to the arts. And so from an early time in my scholarship, I was looking for findings about the arts—and when I could not find any, I worked with others to carry out studies. Similarly, when I was organizing materials that led to “MI Theory,” I was more sensitive than others might have been to uses of the mind that occur in one or more art forms.

6. In China, the Suzuki Method is very popular. But in your book *Frames of Mind*, you sharply point out that Suzuki develops skills rather than expression or creativity. Do you think that personality and creativity is more important to a children’s development? Is either important to other professional fields?

GARDNER: In general, I admire the Suzuki method for many reasons. It is especially helpful in training good listening. But as you say, ultimately, it is a ‘copying’ approach, and eventually we want performers to be original, not just to copy others.

In a study that I did in China many years ago, published in the book *To Open Minds*, I came to the conclusion that one can begin by developing skills and then turn toward creativity, or one can begin by encouraging play and then developing skills. Either approach is viable. But it is not good to emphasize ONLY skills, or ONLY creativity.

7. In Korea, a professor (Wen Longlin) of Seoul University put forward a theory of Moral Intelligence. The core of the theory is an ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In contrast to that, you think that moral intelligence does not exist. Instead you state that intelligence is an ability to process information. How one uses an intelligence then depends on his or her values and principles. My question is this: if moral behavior comes from moral judgment, then isn’t the ability of Moral Judgment an intelligence? What’s the different between moral thinking and moral intelligence?

GARDNER: Whether we think and act morally is not a product of our intelligences. Rather it is a reflection of the value systems in our culture, whether we accept these values, and whether one can act consistently with these values. Of course, various intelligences enter into moral decisions and actions, but basically morality is about character and about will, and not about intelligence(s).

8. There are many differences between boys and girls. Boys are good at sports\manipulation\computer\participation, while girls are adept at learning
from communication and reading. You proposed that individual-centered education is essential. But most schools use the same method, the same content, the same assessment. In China, most boys are raised as quiet-obedient, and are judged by reading performance. This is a major problem for Chinese boys. Do you think we should pay attention to gender difference in education? Does differential education accord with principles of MI?

GARDNER: In education, we should pay attention to all differences, including different configurations of intelligences and, as you say, also to gender. But one should NEVER teach someone in a certain way just because they happen to be a woman or from China or Jewish. Rather, knowledge of demographic background, including gender, can sometimes be helpful, but it should never dictate what one does.

9. You proposed that, for children’s brain development, the museum is more suitable than school, as a museum is more helpful to raise intelligence. Why? You mentioned that we can easily find out children’s intelligences through observation. For teachers and parents, how would they go about doing that? More importantly, how would one conform that their conclusion is appropriate and correct?

GARDNER: I write about museums because, in the United States, children’s museums allow lots of opportunities for play and for creativity, more so than in most schools. And so one can observe intelligences at work and nurture them. Of course a good teacher or parent can also make these observations, so long as the child is in a richly resourced environment.

You are right to ask how we can know whether we are correct in making judgments about a profile of intelligences. It is best to use a number of different indices, not just one, and to watch the child in several different environments, not just one.

10. In your book *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons*, Jacob's case left me very impressed. Although his Binet scale was very poor, he showed great talent in visual art and figures. I could not agree more that MI isn’t the only ruler for children, but a good way to discover the various gifts children possess. In China, academic examination is the only rule, how do you see this phenomenon? From the perspective of MI theory, do you have any suggestions to Chinese teachers and parents?

GARDNER: I am under no illusion that I can change the Chinese exam system. I cannot even affect the exam system in my home town. But school is more than examinations, and life is more than school. If parents or others want to nurture the rounded development of the child, we have to nourish and nurture the non-academic intelligences, whether or not the nation’s policies and teachers recognize the arts, music, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge. After all, we want our children to have every opportunity to develop their range of capacities.
11. One conclusion that your research points out is that most children have an intelligence strength as well as an intelligence weakness. Does this mean that the majority of children have the potential to become a genius? Do you agree that education should find and inspire the children's strengths? In Shanghai, a big city in China, there is a secondary school where students come from the bottom of society; academic and behavioral performances were not good. This school inspired students through succeed education, a kind of educational style. What do you think of this method?

GARDNER: I don’t think every child has the potential to be a genius, but every child will have some areas of relative strength and these should be detected and encouraged. Schools can be helpful in this regard but probably parents and community leaders are more likely to notice intelligences other than academic ones.

I cannot comment on the Chinese school, nor on the method that it uses.

12. In China, there is a phenomenon of young people, that when they enter university, they don’t have idea which specialized subject they should study; when they graduate from university, they don’t know which job they should do. In a word, they look at the future in confusion. In Beijing, the capital city of China, an educational institute designed a Career Assessment Test to help young people select majors and occupations. I think the research of MI will be the best theoretic guide for them. But you acted with caution involved in this area. Why?

GARDNER: Certainly by the time the person is in the university, it is useful to give them some kind of a career assessment task. But no one should follow a career, just because of the advice of a vocational expert. When I was a youth, I was subjected to a battery of tests, and the vocational expert said that I should become a clerk! I am glad that I did not follow his advice!

13. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences is a world phenomenon; different countries are undertaking multiple intelligences educational practices. You seemed doubtful about most of them, but quite satisfied with Indianapolis Multiple Intelligences School. Which aspects of Indianapolis are worth learning from? For Chinese practice, could you give some suggestions?

GARDNER: I am not going to comment on specific schools. I believe that a good use of MI theory entails two features: 1) Individuation - Knowing as much as possible about the intelligences of students and giving them opportunities to learn in ways that are comfortable for them; 2) Pluralization - Deciding what is important and then spending a lot of time on that topic, so that one can present it in ways that stimulate various intelligences. A school that does these things is a good school, even if the teachers have never heard of MI theory. And a school that does NOT pay attention to individual differences, and does NOT present ideas in a variety of ways, is not a good
14. It is said that American education is an experience system for long-term knowledge, with an emphasis on creativity; Chinese education is more about hammering facts, with less of an emphasis on creativity. As a result, the education system really only works short-term, with a focus on testing. So, what is the role of creativity?

GARDNER: One cannot be creative unless one has some mastery of a topic and some skills. Yet from an early age, it is important to convey to young children that there are many ways to approach a question or problem; that many answers could be correct; and that ultimately it is more important to raise and try to answer your own questions than simply to parrot back questions and answers created by others.

15. Chinese students have the heaviest curriculum in perhaps the entire world. You suggested schools should give up the flawed teaching model of CONTAIN ALL. Instead, the principles of teaching should be “LESS IS MORE.” Explain.

GARDNER: I have always believed that we should study fewer topics, in more depth. That is what you will retain in later life. Now, with the invention and proliferation of smart devices, tablets, etc. there is NO POINT in giving massive amounts of information and expecting students to memorize that information. All of us can look information up instantaneously on a smart device. So the focus should fall on deep understanding, the raising of significant questions, and figuring out how to answer, or at least make progress, with these worthy paradoxes, puzzles, and problems.

16. You propose that we should supply specialized education during childhood (8~14). It can helpful for children to achieve high level performance in specific field; it can impact a children’s career and happiness throughout their life. In fact, 70% of Chinese children were sent by their parents to technical courses, in order to raise a specific skill, like music, painting, dancing. But you said that this approach was non-systematic? What do you mean?

GARDNER: I was referring to my impression, thirty years ago, that young person went to children’s palaces and cultural palaces, usually after school, to acquire a high level of skill in one or another pursuit. I think that this is a good idea but I think that we should match students to areas where they have an interest and some talent, and not do so randomly. In China, in the early 1980s, I had the impression that students were simply assigned to a talent area. But I might have been wrong.

17. You made a new criterion for excellent teacher——one concept, multiple windows. All lessons can be taught in 7 different ways, like the theory of MI proposes. In China, where large classrooms (over 60 students) are common, how is this
conceivable? In this case, what should teachers do? What should parents do?

GARDNER: I don’t think we can or should teach every lesson in seven ways. That would be foolish. Pluralization means that we should never teach something only in ONE way, rather, we should find a variety of appropriate ways to convey difficult materials. Of course, this is easier to do when one has ten students than when one has fifty or sixty. But one cannot let oneself be defeated by the numbers. Rather, one should make use of student groupings; get older students or parents or grandparents to help the students; and make use of technology which can allow individualized education.

18. In your new book *Truth, Beauty and Goodness*, you propose that circumstance impacts the development of children’s views of truth/beauty/goodness. Truth comes from schooling; Goodness comes from family education; Beauty comes from peers and media. It’s very important to build a uniform moral judgment criterion. Obviously, a model containing family/school/society is necessary. I called it *cooper-education model*. What are your thoughts on this model?

GARDNER: I think that the situation with truth, beauty, and goodness is somewhat more complex than you indicate, but as a first approximation, it has value. An important new idea in American education is that of ‘connected learning.’ Connected learning seeks to link the home, the school, and the community (e.g. museums, libraries, cultural palaces) both in person-to-person ways and via the digital media (internet, web, etc.). We also want to make connections in the mind and the brain of students. Some students will make connections, even appropriate connections, on their own. But most students will need help in making connections, and particularly ones that are appropriate, productive, and ethical.

19. You don’t consider that intelligence itself has moral character. More specifically, you propose that the combination of intelligence with morality is crucial. You called it *humanized intelligence*. You made a promise, “I’ll work for humanized intelligence until my last day.” Why is this combination so important? There is a Chinese quote which reads, “a moral and ungifted person couldn’t do big business; an immoral and gifted person could be harm.” Gift is intelligence. Do you agree with this quote?

GARDNER: Most of our societies have more than enough persons with high IQs, with high measured intelligence. Stalin was quite smart! The challenge is: what do you do with this intellect? Unless we help all students to use their minds and their talents, to try to improve society, to try to make a better world, we will not have a world in which anyone will want to live. And that is why I have devoted the last two decades to developing the moral and ethical sense of young persons. You can read about this in some of my recent books and also at the website