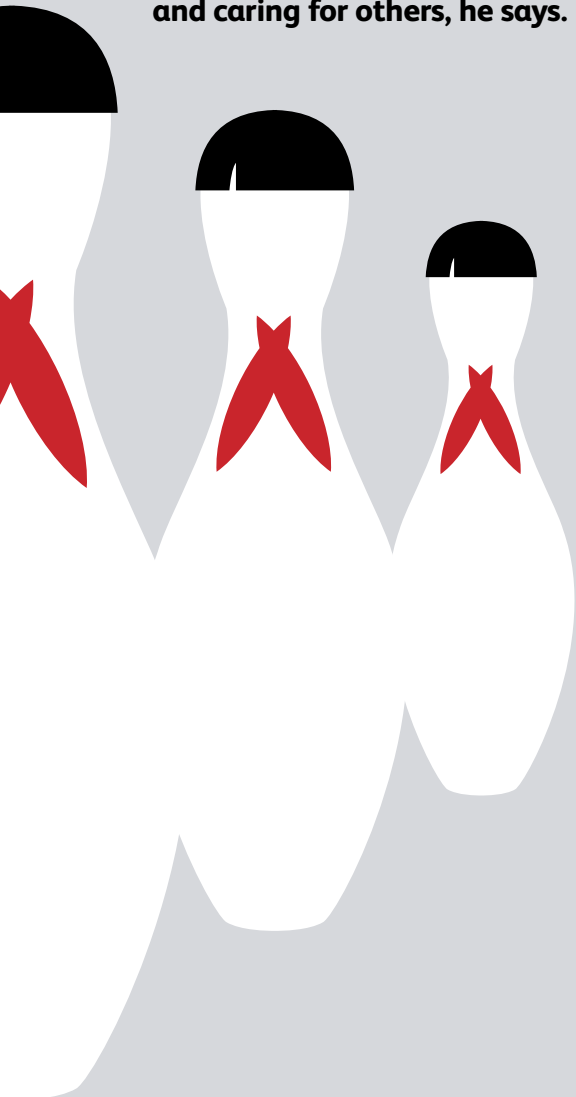


# Education Pressure Cooker: Social Darwinism and Status Ranking in Asia

By David Y. F. Ho



**Asia's educational systems are prey to two forces that are hindering their ability to develop the right values in the region's youth — social Darwinism and an obsession with status ranking, writes Hong Kong psychologist David Y.F. Ho. It's time to look at models of education that don't submerge basic human decency, kindness and caring for others, he says.**



THE COMBINED FORCES of social Darwinism and status ranking have created the pressure cooker atmosphere that now characterizes educational systems in Asia. The analytical framework that leads me to this conclusion derives from recognition of the dialectics between education and national economies: Each has the power to shape and is shaped by the other on the road to a knowledge-based economy. I pose two challenges to educators: First, how to counter the infusion of predatory business values into education, which is a threat to the foundation on which civic societies are based; and second, how to prepare the young for a knowledge-based economy without the pressure cooker, while preserving the joy of learning.

Utilitarian and especially economic considerations often dictate educational priorities and policies. Education in Confucian-heritage societies is under pressure to reform. Despite the weight of its own tradition, it is now responding to the socio-economic realities of the modern age. Economic viability in the 21st century depends on knowledge as a human resource. Nations that invest in this resource will thrive; nations that fail to do so imperil their own survival. Nowhere is the need for educational reform in response to economic imperatives more explicitly and repeatedly articulated than in Singapore. Especially impressive is the commitment to back policy with massive investment (e.g., treating teacher trainees as employees of the Ministry of Education, thus enabling them to receive remuneration starting from the beginning of training).

#### **EDUCATION AND NATIONAL ECONOMIES**

Education is generally seen as a key for moving ahead in international economic competition; it is essential for transformation toward a knowledge-based economy. Teachers play a crucial role in the development of knowledge, and hence in a knowledge-based economy. At the same time, education becomes an instrument in the service of economic agendas and is itself transformed by them. In our conception, then, education and national economies bear a dialectic relationship to each other: Each has the power to shape and is shaped by the other on the road to a knowledge-based economy.

Economic agendas work both on and through education policy: Education is not just the handmaiden of a national economy; it is also an instrument by which economic forces reach their goals. It is now integral to the machinery that drives economic changes, affecting the daily lives of teachers, students and parents. Educational establishments provide the training ground for the agents — such as business executives and specialists in information technology — who further economic agendas. They also see a pretext for demanding greater allocation of national resources to hire more staff, upgrade facilities, and enhance their own socioeconomic status. In making such demands, they stand to gain in a nation's quest for competitive advantages, and they also open themselves up to the charge of being subverted by economic agendas. At risk is their autonomy and ability to articulate the goals of education beyond pure economic profit — for example, the development of moral character. Thus, awareness of the dialectic tension between educational and economic goals is a necessary first step if educators wish to seize the initiative in giving direction to the ongoing transformations toward knowledge-based economies.

#### **SOCIAL DARWINISM AND CONFUCIAN STATUS RANKING**

Social Darwinism, the idea of survival of the fittest, is a dominant ideology underlying the new economy. Failure to transform into a knowledge-based economy condemns nations to remain in, or be downgraded to, Third World or even Fourth World status. Metaphors from the business world conjure frightful imagery: “cutthroat competition”; “predatory takeover”; and “You die, I live” (a literal translation from a Chinese expression). The stakes are high in the struggle for economic survival, as political and business leaders are fond of reminding the populace.

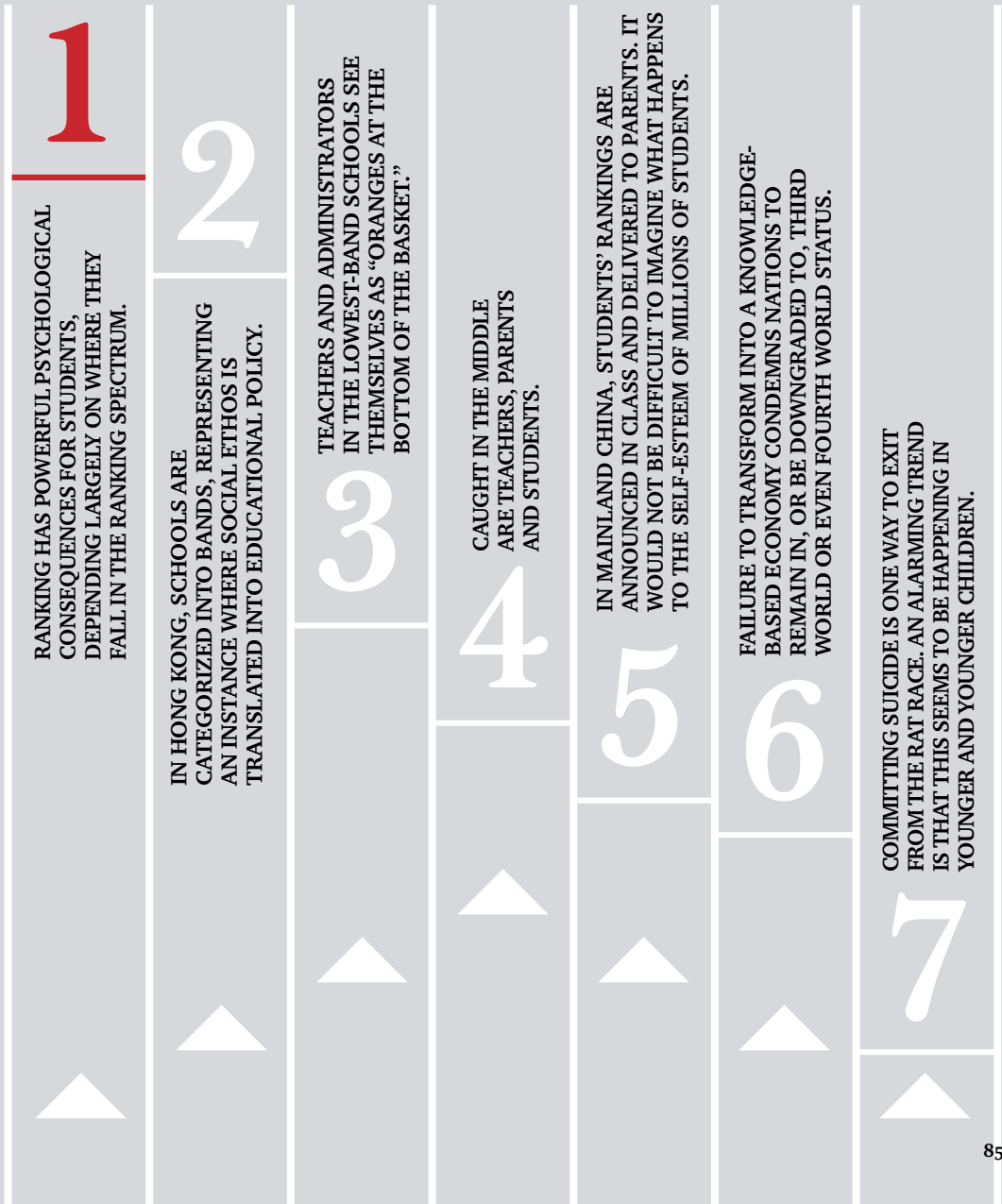
Carried into the world of education, social Darwinism breeds the mentality of a rat race: for students, to outscore others in examinations; for academicians, to outperform others in publishing papers; for administrators, to vie with other

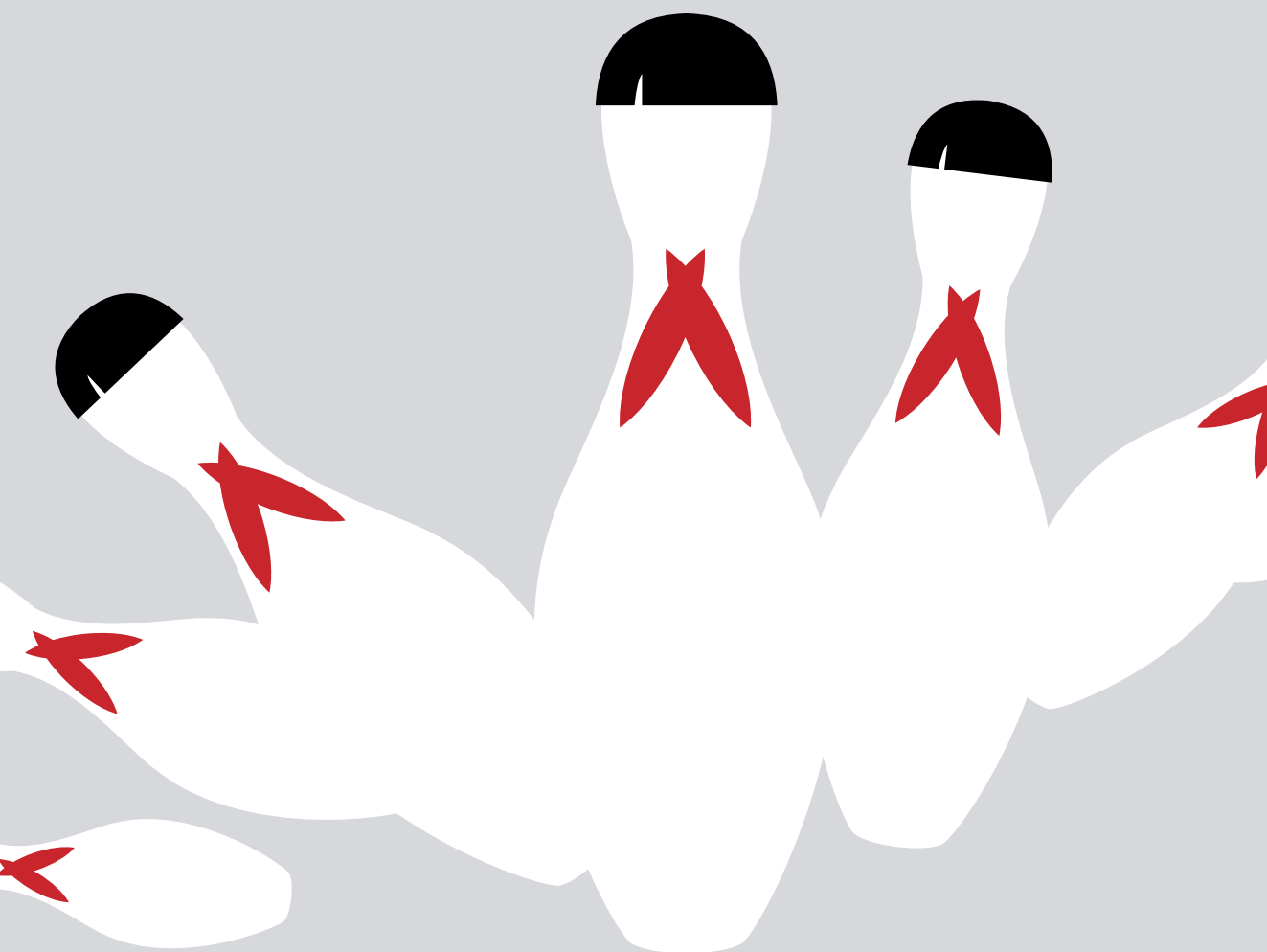
institutions in gaining prestige. In this climate, institutions tend to spend inordinate amounts of money and energy on image promotion, much like what is done in business. This is especially noticeable among tertiary institutions in Asia, where administrators habitually proclaim their school as “world class.” Increasingly, contract renewals for staff members, and allocation of resources both across and within institutions, are pegged to performance indicators — a practice sometimes referred to as “management by terror.”

Social Darwinism finds ready acceptance in Confucian-heritage cultures, where social ranking is ubiquitous — in line with authoritarian values. Students, teachers, professors and educational institutions are all ranked, formally or informally. Social ranking is determined not only by performance or status within an institution, but also the status of the institution with which they are affiliated. Institutional affiliation may assume overriding importance in defining social identity and in affecting attitudes and behavior. In social encounters, knowing a person's ranking serves to locate his place in the hierarchy of status, which is important for “proper” interaction. What is new is that ranking by achievement has largely replaced ranking by ascription.

When the Confucian proclivity for status ranking is wedded to social Darwinism, the result can be literally deadly. Ranking has powerful psychological consequences for students, depending largely on where they fall in the ranking spectrum. Suppose you rank at the bottom of the educational hierarchy? What happens to your self-esteem? And suppose you rank at the top, how would that affect your interpersonal attitudes and relations? These are questions addressed in the Singaporean film “I Not Stupid”, which portrays the plight of primary school children in the lowest academic stream and their parents. It captures the essence of educational themes that resonate across Asian societies, such as stigmatization of children with poor academic performance and parental obsession with their children's homework. It succeeds in raising consciousness about the ills of Confucian-heritage

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education beyond what academicians and professional educators can hope to achieve.

In Hong Kong, schools are categorized into bands, representing an instance where social ethos is translated into educational policy. Within schools, classes at the same grade may be ranked; and generally, students are ranked within classes. Students, teachers and administrators in the lowest-band schools see themselves as “oranges at the bottom of the basket.” Students in these “notorious” low-band schools or low-ranking classes generally have terrible self-esteem. So do students admitted into tertiary institutions perceived to be at or near the bottom: They feel ashamed and depressed. On the other hand, students admitted to high-ranking institutions are prone to have an attitude problem, namely, arrogance. They find it difficult to admit that they may have learning problems, and so they tend to blame their teachers. I call this the *famous-school syndrome*.

Thus, for both the top and the bottom, there are adverse consequences for learning and mental health. The Hong Kong educational system functions like a huge machine, sorting students into institutions ranked hierarchically and warping their development in the process. A clinical psychologist put it this way: “You couldn’t design a more efficient system for producing generations of intellectually stifled, emotionally crippled, psychologically illiterate, politically apathetic and socially cynical citizens — and ensuring the continued employment of mental health professionals.” These education-induced pathologies are not unique to Hong Kong. In Mainland China, students’ rankings are announced in class and delivered to parents. It would not be difficult to imagine what happens to the self-esteem of millions of students. New policies prohibit the practice of making grades public. Beijing’s Ministry of Education has announced further that class rank-



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ings will no longer be based solely on examination results — which means, however, that class rankings will continue to be practiced.

Together, status ranking and social Darwinism fuel the pressure cooker that is coming to characterize Confucian-heritage education. It strikes fear into the minds of school principals. Thus, schools vie against one another in fierce competition, striving to rank among the top, or at least not at the bottom. Caught in the middle are teachers, parents and students. But creativity, let alone mental health, does not flourish in a pressure cooker. Committing suicide is one way to exit from the rat race. An alarming trend is that this seems to be happening in younger and younger children. A case in point was a 7-year-old boy in Hong Kong, who failed an examination in Chinese dictation, went home and leaped out of his high-rise apartment. Another was a 10-year-old Singaporean girl who committed suicide because she was stressed out with schoolwork. In a conversation with the family’s maid, the girl said that she did not want to be reincarnated as a human being because it would mean going to school, doing homework, getting scolded and arguing with siblings. To combat suicide among school children, education establishments have organized crash courses on suicide prevention for teachers. But this is a band-aid approach; it does not address the root causes of a problem that lies within the educational system itself.

**CONCLUSION: TWO FUNDAMENTAL VALUES**

To make explicit the values on which this article is

based, I regard two as fundamental. First, happiness above achievement; academic achievement is important, but it is not an ultimate value. Second, cooperation above competition; academic competition must not be allowed to submerge basic human decency, kindness and caring for others. These values reflect the Eastern intellectual tradition, Confucianism included, which places the development of the whole person at the heart of education. They provide guidance to the teaching profession on how to move closer to the ideals of that tradition, and particularly on how to meet the two challenges I posed at the beginning.

**David Y. F. Ho is the founder of Chizi Institute, a philanthropic organization dedicated to civic and environmental education in China. He has authored more than a hundred scholarly contributions in psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and education, and was the first Asian to serve as President of the International Council of Psychologists (1988 – 1989).**