Education in East Asia

The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards. But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
THE CONFUCIAN VIEW: PUTTING EAST ASIAN EDUCATION IN CONTEXT

By Cheng Kai-ming

IT IS NOT EASY to give a name to the following societies, although their characteristics are quite distinct: South Korea, Japan, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam and, to a large extent, Singapore. Sometimes they are referred to as East Asia, other times as Confucian societies. I often refer to them as societies that belong to the “chopstick culture,” given that the use of chopsticks is a distinct feature of them all.

There are marked distinctions among them, but they share similar attributes such as collectivism, hard work and competition — as observed by people outside the culture. It is fair to say that these societies have all inherited very strong cultural traditions.

Until the 1960s, they were seen in Western eyes as exotic places, but never as economic competitors. Ezra Vogel’s Japan as Number One (1971) had an awakening effect, putting Japan on the map of world powers. However, Japan’s presence in the international arena preceded the 20th century. Then, in the 1980s, there was the rise of the Four Small Dragons — Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea — which created what were often seen as East Asian economic miracles.

What happened thereafter was even more dramatic: the sustained growth of China.

SUSTAINABILITY BEFORE ITS TIME

It is perhaps not unfair to refer to Confucius (551-479 BC) for the origin of the culture of these societies. Every society has to have a way to maintain stability in order to facilitate internal integration. In modern terms, this would mean polity, governance, resource allocation, conflict resolution and so on. Confucius was just one of the many “counsels” who advised kings during the warring period in a divided China. However, the thoughts of Confucius went beyond diplomatic strategies and war tactics to ideals about societies in ways that we now call sustainability.

His ideal was to maintain a stable social structure where every member of the society was assigned an identity and a role, and he or she was to act according to expectations. Such expectations, or li, often translated as rituals, could perhaps also be interpreted in the broader sense as a “code of behaviors.” It is a rather sophisticated system of codes tightly attached to roles: between father and son, husband and wife, subordinates and lords and so forth. Such codes, over time, shaped social norms, and were taken for granted. In other words, they were never fully challenged, and hence came to be a culture.

In Chinese societies, such codes are no longer part of structural protocols, but remain an expectation, for example, in formal communications. Otherwise, these protocols still prevail as matters of courtesy, such as seating order in a banquet, the arrangement of group photos or even the order of passing through an entrance.

However, the real cultural heritage stays in people’s assumptions. Fei Hsiao Tung, a renowned sociologist in China, as early as 1947 described Chinese society as a “hierarchy configuration” where people live, work and think in a vertical structure. It is an assumption taken for granted. In contrast, mainstream Western societies exist in an “association configuration” where people are assumed to be equal, broadly consistent with Christianity.

Such a vertical perception of society is often interpreted as “obedience” from a Western perspective. Obedience, on the one hand, is seen as submissive, surrendering individual will to a higher authority. On the other hand, obedience provides for the smooth realization of the will of those above. From there comes efficiency.

This is perhaps how most Chinese organizations work. The modes of organization may vary, but “top-down” authority is quite common. Organizations here may refer to government bureaucracies, professional institutions (such as education and medicine), and also commercial and industrial organizations. Other observers may see the same in Japanese and South Korean organizations.

ROLE OF THE MARKET

Some would relate this special type of efficiency to the economic success of these societies. Singapore is known for its “government market,” which is a well-managed system that thrives on market forces. The notion could easily be borrowed to explain the economic success of China. It has certainly moved away from the hard-nosed planned economy where a bureaucracy in disguise dictated economic activities, and the market was largely eliminated from the scene. However, even seasoned observers are increasingly confused.

Since the open-door policies that started in the late 1970s, for more than three decades China has claimed that it is running a “socialist market economy.” How could a market economy be socialist? However, in the 21st century it is increasingly clear that it is indeed a market economy of another kind. Although there was a mushrooming of private enterprises in the 1980s and 1990s, the last decade or so saw a gradual but immense expansion of former state-owned enterprises, occupying the market at the expense of genuinely private enterprises. With few exceptions, the major economic giants in China are somehow strongly associated with the state in one way or another.

Such pseudo-state enterprises successfully rid themselves of the bondage of a planned economy,
The overemphasis on examinations, almost total reliance on extrinsic motivations and downplaying of individuality all seem to have adverse effects on the development of individuals as autonomous and innovative human beings.

and have become major competitors in the market. Not only are such enterprises able to manipulate and create the domestic market, they can also wrestle with other economic giants in the global arena. Market economy? No doubt! Socialist? Yes, with a renewed interpretation.

Greater Good
This echoes the Confucian doctrine that, apart from the code of behaviors, places the worth of individuals in terms of the greater interests of the nation. Known to almost all intellectuals of Chinese origin are the four layers of goals for individuals: cultivate the self, harmonize the family, manage the state, govern the world. The private goal is to serve the collective goal, and the eventual goal is the whole world.

Francis Hsu, a renowned psychologist, some 30 years ago concluded that the notion of “self” in the Western sense of the term does not exist in China. There is always a “smaller self” that is meant to serve the “greater self.” This is so insightful. There is no pure individual. Individuals are there to serve the nation, if this is translated into today’s language. Hence, even if the planned economy is gone, and indeed nobody would welcome its return, the higher national goal remains ultimate. The ideology, though still a matter of analysis, seems to work in the economic arena. When it comes to the political arena, there could be a different story. Following the above Confucian doctrines, the population at large expects an intelligent and benevolent supreme leader, rather than placing its hopes on voting in a democracy. This was how emperors in ancient times came to power, and also how they lost their thrones.

There is also an underlying deep attention to results rather than procedures, as was the case with Confucius. It is not that the Chinese citizenry does not like democracy, which has been a rhetorical ideal since the revolution of 1911, but they take democracy as a pragmatic way of getting a great leader rather than a matter of procedures to avoid autocracy. In other words, they will tolerate a non-democratic situation if there is a leader they love and respect. Such a political culture may still prevail among the populace, particularly in rural villages. But it faces challenges on two fronts.

First, the existence and expansion of the market economy, which is now a given, will inevitably incube private interests. The freedom and flexibility of a market economy, be it capitalist or socialist, provides room and incentive for personal ambitions to grow. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that such personal ambitions are the fundamental driving forces in markets. The present scandals of greed in the West, and the notorious cases of unbelievable corruption in China, all seem to prove this basic principle. To what extent, one might ask, are national interests still in the minds of people who run such enterprises?

Second, while the rise of the middle class in China continues, the emerging class of intellectuals is a very different generation. Many of them have been exposed extensively to the West. Others have been leading a lifestyle that is very different from the population in mainland China. Still others have gained prominent positions and enjoyed reputations in the international community. Not that they are “polluted” by Western thought and hence want to betray their own culture, but they would like to see China develop on a different path. These people are still relatively small in number, but are becoming increasingly influential.

Educational Impact
Hence, it comes to the matter of education. So-called Confucian culture was consolidated and transmitted over the centuries thanks to the Civil Examination that started in 603AD, and was only abolished in 1905. The Civil Examination was a device to select people for officialdom. It was clever with multiple merits. It was seen as a fair mechanism for competition, because the examination was supposed to be very strict and unbiased. It was a test of scholarship, which was about policies and political ideas based on the classics. It was simple, consisting of only the writing of essays to express ideas. It required minimal resources, as it was based on self-motivated training in reading and writing. The most remarkable feature of the Civil Examination was that it was seen to be “family-proof”: it was the only (narrow but accessible) ladder of social mobility and the rewards of success were tremendous. It was such an attractive mechanism that it was soon borrowed by Japan and Korea in the same century.

The Civil Examination’s influence in China transcends the dynasties. It is influential even now among education systems in Confucian societies. On the positive side, the unchallenged emphasis on education, ethics of hard work and respect for competition all help to shape the workplace in these societies, which in turn may help explain their spectacular economic growth. On the negative side, the overemphasis on examinations, almost total reliance on extrinsic motivations and downplaying of individuality all seem to have adverse effects on the development of individuals as autonomous and innovative human beings.

Change Afoot
There are disruptions, nonetheless. The ancient Civil Examination in China provided a very cohesive mechanism where submission to the system would bring about intellectual power for the nation, but also admirably reward individuals. In contemporary China, and perhaps Confucian societies in general, this is beginning to collapse. Organizations are getting smaller, flatter and looser, whereas individualized workers are growing dramatically in number. The trend is perhaps irreversible because it is associated with fundamental changes in the economy and ways of production. The interests of the nation are beginning to dim into the background. One would ask, if a young person is working hard, what for? This is certainly a well discussed issue in China.

However, in the case of South Korea, the collective will for the public good is still strong and yet the collective culture does not seem to hinder the development of creativity, which requires an autonomous mind.

Cheng Kai-ming is Emeritus Professor of Education at Hong Kong University.