

# School effectiveness in East Asia

## Concepts, origins and implications

Kai-ming Cheng and Kam-cheung Wong

*Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*

### Introduction

The economic development in East Asian communities has aroused much interest since the 1970s (there has been a whole tide initiated since the publication of Vogel's *Japan as Number One*[1] in 1979). Such an interest has led to studies on all aspects of social lives in East Asian societies. Better known among these studies are ground-breaking theories in business studies which are heralded by the now classical works of Hofstede[2,3] and the alternative frameworks established by psychologists such as Shweder, Stevenson and Stigler[4-7]. Ironically, education, which is fundamentally a cultural enterprise, is a latecomer in this endeavour. Although it may be argued that the studies mentioned above all make significant references to education, and there is also a literature which looks at education in Japan, the reference to the East Asian system in the recent World Bank[8,9] papers on education policy should attract new attention to East Asian education at the levels of administration and management.

In almost all the writings about education in East Asia, there are the common observations of remarkable achievements, hardworking ethics and orderly behaviour among students. In other words, observers outside East Asia seem to adopt very positive views about education in East Asia (there are nonetheless reports about the social cost to such effectiveness, but this has been seldom discussed in the literature). They seem to perceive East Asian schools as effective. In this context, the writers of this paper find it necessary to examine the concept of school effectiveness in East Asian communities, to trace its origins and to explore its implications in the practice of school improvement.

This paper starts with findings of a research in Zhejiang, relates the findings to writings about East Asian culture and discusses the implications for school improvement.

### Experience in Zhejiang

Zhejiang is a coastal province in China not far away from Shanghai. It was chosen as the province in which to study the quality of basic education in

comparison with three other countries: Mexico, Guinea and India. The study was not meant to measure quality of education or effectiveness of schools, but rather, to study the processes of education by looking at various relevant aspects: students, teachers, principals, parents, local leaders, classrooms, schools and the localities as a whole. The study, which took place in 1989-1990, was designed for educational planners in order to understand the processes of basic education and the environments in which basic education takes place. Five sites were chosen so as to cover a range from the wealthiest to the least developed. Detailed descriptions and results of the study are not the concern of this paper (see [10]), but the broad findings of the study apply largely to most of the other studies the writers carried out in China.

Overall, the findings seem to suggest four points, namely that:

- (1) there is a consistent support of education from the community;
- (2) there is a demonstrated high degree of professionalism among teachers whose prime concern is student learning;
- (3) there is a built-in tradition of quality assurance; and
- (4) there are coherent high expectations of students.

In other words, most of the general features of an effective school prevalent in the literature (for example, summarized succinctly in [11, pp. 10-11]) are readily existent in the school system in China.

#### *Community support*

First, there is strong community support for education which is also echoed in government policies. Attendance in primary schools is remarkable. In the Zhejiang case, the net enrolment ratio was over 99 per cent which was slightly above the national average. Dropout rates are trivial and truancy is extremely rare. Qualitative study has revealed that it is less a matter of enrolment percentage than a fact that school attendance has become a social norm in communities. It is noticeable that in terms of attendance, there was no significant difference between research sites of different economic statuses. Attendance was less impressive only among the ethnic minorities who were less influenced by Confucius.

There is never a shortage of demand for basic education. Even among the illiterate parents, schooling is seen as the sole means towards future achievements of their children.

Schools and classrooms are in good physical order. In most of the cases, students learn in formal classrooms in purpose-built premises. Furniture varies in terms of quality, and the disparity is remarkable, but the basics (blackboards, desks and chairs) are never short in number. There is a national policy requiring every school to get rid of "dilapidated buildings", to secure a classroom for every class, and to secure a desk and a chair for every student. The national requirements are basically fulfilled, but largely through donations from the

local community or from local industries. It is a known fact that in many of the poorer rural areas, the best buildings in the neighbourhood are schools.

Availability of textbooks, which is a basic problem in developing countries, is never an issue in China; neither in cities nor villages. Even in underdeveloped villages, the supply of basic stationery such as exercise books and pens and pencils is again guaranteed. This is also supported by national policy which summons priority printing and priority transportation at crucial seasons of the year. It is also supported by parents since the government seldom subsidizes stationery.

#### *Teacher professionalism*

Second, there is a strong tradition of teacher professionalism. Teachers work hard. The general case is that teachers spend over ten hours per day in the school, apart from around seven to eight hours in teaching planning and marking, they spend over two hours per day on non-teaching duties such as supervising and counselling the class (as a class master/mistress) and extracurricular activities. Outside schools, in addition, teachers spend an average of over two hours per week for home visits and over three hours for student remedial tutorials, sometimes at the students' homes. Teacher absenteeism, which is very common in other developing countries, is almost unheard of in China.

All teachers use detailed teaching plans for individual lessons which they constantly revise. The teaching plans dictate detailed procedures in actual classroom teaching. No lesson is seen as acceptable without a lesson plan. Teachers spend as much time in writing the lesson plan as they spend on teaching.

Most teachers are class teachers with a pastoral responsibility. In the context of holistic care for students, a class teachers plays the multiple roles of an organizer, a leader, a counsellor, a social worker, a remedial teacher, often a nurse, and sometimes a voluntary private tutor for the academically weak.

Teachers' hard work has to be perceived in the context of low remuneration and poor working conditions. About 40 per cent of the primary school teachers in rural areas are community teachers whose incomes are contingent on the local economy. Occasionally, teachers salaries are overdue and teachers have to live on other means.

#### *Attention to quality*

Third, there is a traditional infrastructure for quality assurance and improvement for instructions. The lesson plans mentioned above are there as a tradition rather than an administrative requirement. They are usually inspected by the principal, and are meant for public consultation whenever it is necessary. Teaching plans are also examined when it comes to teacher awards of excellence and the best ones are published. The lesson plans reflect the general notion of target orientation in teaching. Lessons are usually intense. Teachers follow very tight schedules such that a large number of topics are covered in one

---

lesson and, for more experienced teachers, a large number of activities are involved.

Classroom observations are commonplace in China and are just part of the school life. Classroom observers include new teachers who learn from experienced teachers, peers in the team for mutual exchange and scrutiny, principals or local advisers for supervision, or just any outsider for purposes of improvement or mutual enlightenment. The number of demonstration lessons conducted by a teacher is often counted towards their merit and professional standing. Teachers work in teams. In most places, there are afternoons designated weekly for professional development. Cross-school or cross-locality professional development activities are also possible.

Teachers are given rather light loads in terms of classroom teaching. The average teaching hours are 15-20 a week for primary schools. The average pupil/teacher ratio for Zhejiang was below 30 at the time of the study. The low teaching load is understandable only when one realizes the high demand on each lesson, the high achievement expected of the students (discussed below) and the demand on non-teaching responsibilities as mentioned earlier.

Principals are expected to be professional leaders in schools. They are supposed to be role models for a good teacher. In the Zhejiang case, most of the school principals did classroom teaching and most of them used up to 30 per cent of their time in teaching. They used around 15 to 20 per cent of their time in actual counselling and helping teachers.

There are advisers in local educational bureaux who work most of the time in the field. They operate across schools to assist new teachers, disseminate new teaching materials or observe teachers teaching. These advisers often bear no control responsibility and hence enjoy high respect among teachers. Advisers are often themselves known for their previous teaching experience. Recently, a national system of inspectors, who are independent of the administrative organs, has been introduced. Inspectors are there to see that national policies are implemented. There are constant ongoing long-term experiments in schools which pertain to innovations in teaching or whole-school reform.

#### *High expectations*

Fourth, there is a strong tradition of high expectation of students and teachers. China operates the almost unique system that compulsory education requires more than attendance. As one of the indicators of fulfilling "compulsory education" a county should achieve a high percentage of passes among primary school graduates (95 per cent for urban areas, 90 per cent for the developed rural towns and 85 per cent for rural villages). Teaching is designed by objectives and the objectives are often uniform for different students (it is only recently that there has been a slight diversification of curricula and curriculum targets. But still, diversification occurs only among provinces). The whole idea is that students will achieve when they work hard, and their genetic abilities are secondary. "Diligence can compensate for stupidity" is the common belief and it does seem to work for a large part of the system. Elsewhere, high expectation is

a notion that is applicable to only the most successful schools. Laying high expectations on all students, and yet with uniform targets, is almost inconceivable in other societies.

In the Zhejiang study, almost 70 per cent of the primary six students under study have achieved, respectively, the perceived basic needs in numeracy and literacy. Over 50 per cent of them have achieved the same at primary four. Regional disparity again is much less remarkable than expected. The perceived basic needs in numeracy as is defined in the study, for example, include the four arithmetic operations, their combined use on integers and decimals, and the application of these to daily problems. In literacy, the basic need is recognition of 2,000 characters, the ability to write a formal memo and a readable essay of 400 words.

It has to be added that expectations of students are much more than learning in the academic sense. The general objective is for students to be “good in three aspects”: conduct, learning and physical fitness, in that order. In many places in China, students are required to pass a threshold in physical education before they can be promoted to a higher grade. Conduct of students is considered of prime importance. In the Chinese tradition, a student with good conduct but poor learning is unfortunate; a student with good learning but poor conduct is unacceptable. The meaning and standards of “conduct” are expectedly fluid. Traditionally, the importance paid to conduct has led to a heavy emphasis on moral education. In recent decades, “conduct” has been subject to various interpretations with different political colours according to the political climate of the time.

Teachers are seen as role models for students. Whatever is expected of students, teachers are expected to achieve the same and indeed to perform better. In other words, in the Chinese context, teachers are not only expected to know more than students, but they are also expected to act as examples in all the moral aspects. In the Chinese tradition, teachers are respected by the community not only because of their profession, but also because they are seen as those who should possess the ideal personalities. Hence, the high expectations of teachers are not only a matter of school management, but rather, one of social expectations.

#### *A matter of culture*

In any case, the Zhejiang study is a useful illustration of how education actually takes place in schools. The study was designed as a case study for in-depth understanding and hence the study *per se* does not allow us to generalize the findings to China as a whole. Nevertheless, observations by the writers in various parts of China and by other researchers tend to concur with findings from the Zhejiang study. The general conclusion, from a comparative point of view, is that schools in China bear most of the characteristics of an “effective school”. It is not the intention of this paper to evaluate the degree of effectiveness of Chinese schools, but it is not difficult to establish that the

---

processes of schooling in China seem to match most of the expectations of an “effective school”, at least in the fashionable sense of the term.

The characteristics of effective schools occur in the system which is consistent within itself. The expectations and objectives are more or less identical among principals, teachers and students. Such characteristics also occur in the society where views about education and schooling are basically homogeneous. That is, what the community and parents aspire for, what the government policies provide for and what the schools are striving for are largely in agreement.

In other words, there is a culture in China which favours education in its formal sense. It so happens that such a formal system of education is now honoured by most other countries as the model for effective schools. The culture for education infiltrates into all aspects of the society in China (such a culture is also reflected in the interface between education and employment, but this is beyond the scope of this paper – see [12] for some preliminary discussion) and seems to explain most of the outstanding features of education in China. In this context, we turn to the literature which studies the Chinese or East Asian culture.

### **Education and culture in the literature**

It is useful to survey the basic views about East Asian culture commonly accepted in the contemporary literature. Running the risk of oversimplification, such views could be put under three major categories: the individual-community relationship, the ability-effort dichotomy and the holistic and idealistic tendency. The following tries to relate these views to practise in China’s education.

#### *The individual-community dimension*

The seminal work on the place for an individual, or “self”, in East Asian societies is perhaps the empirical comparative study done by Hofstede[2] on work-related values. Hofstede detected the extraordinarily weak notion of “individualism” among East Asian employees. He noticed that employees in the three Chinese communities, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan “are less individualistic than their wealth would warrant”. This is against the belief that degree of individualism is a matter of wealth. His findings are widely used in management studies and are included in typical textbooks such as Pugh and Hickson’s *Writers on Organisations*[13].

Hofstede built his statements about the East Asian culture on earlier writers such as Hsu. Hsu asserts that “the concept of personality is an expression of the western ideology of individualism”[14, p. 24]. The Chinese language has no equivalent for “personality” in the Western sense[15]. Hsu explains:

In old China the thinking scholars used to speak of *ta wo* (greater self) as distinguished from *hsiao wo* (smaller self). The latter referred to the individual’s own desires and actions for him or herself, albeit they might encompass spouses and children. The former referred to the individual’s concern for the wider society and even humanity as a whole[14, p. 24].

The general expectation is for the individuals to sacrifice the “smaller self” in order to perfect the “greater self” (*xisheng xiaowo, wangcheng dawo*). As Hofstede has observed in quoting Ho: “Collectivism does not mean a negation of the individual’s well-being or interest; it is implicitly assumed that maintaining the group’s well-being is the best guarantee for the individual”[2, p. 216].

This is quite different from the Western notion of the individual-group relationship where the group cannot thrive unless and only after individuals in it thrive. Hofstede uses this to explain the considerably low scores in the individualism dimension of his study for the Chinese-majority societies Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore when compared with the Western world[2, p. 215]. He also used this to explain the moral stance in contemporary China: “for Mao Tse-tung, individualism is evil”[2, p. 216].

Fei provides a sociological explanation to a similar observation. He perceives the Chinese society as one with *hierarchy configuration* where people are born into a certain position in the social hierarchy and are expected to be conscious of one’s position in the hierarchy, and behave accordingly. This is in contrast with societies in the West where, in an *association configuration*, social structures and norms are formed according to *ad hoc* needs among individuals[16, pp. 21-8]. In this context, in a Chinese society, individuals do not simply react to visible codes in the society, but rather, actively self-control according to internalized social norms. Ho[17], for example, sees “face” as something which is lost “when the individual, either through his action or that of people closely related to him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies”. That is, “social needs take on great significance as part of the individual’s psychological composition”[18, pp. 285].

If the above arguments are accepted, then a number of issues seem to fall into place. First, there is the feature of conformity and uniformity. When collective views prevail, when submission of individuals to the community is seen as a necessity, there is a tendency for the entire society to conform to what is seen as favourable. In education, there is the known uniformity in syllabuses, in textbooks and in teaching styles in China. This is shared by most other East Asian societies. Even the education system is much more uniform when compared with systems in the West. In almost all the East Asian systems, before the end of secondary schooling, there is a monolithic type of school where the majority of the population attends (there is a recent emergence of a variety of technical/vocational schools in mainland China and Taiwan and this demands close examination).

Second, human relations is of prime importance in Confucian societies, to the extent that human relations may play a predominant role in individuals’ lives. Reddings[19], for example, has discovered that there is an emphasis on relations in East Asian organizational behaviour, in contrast to Western organizational behaviours which are “ego-centred”. This is now shared by most of the observers of Chinese organizations. Hofstede[20, pp. 124-5] challenges McClelland’s achievement-oriented theory of motivation and in effect echoes

---

Redding's observation of a relation-oriented concept of motivation. The emphasis on relations may help explain a number of phenomena in Confucian systems of education.

*Moral education* has a specially important position in China's education. Education is much more than imparting knowledge and transmitting skills. Moral education is seen as an essential process of socialization, without which young people are not seen as prepared for life.

*Discipline* is seen as a necessary part and indeed the fundamental part of moral education, because it trains compliance to collective norms. It is not a mere training for obedience as is suspected by many observers from the West, nor a pragmatic means to keep classroom order, as is the case elsewhere. This is basic to the debate among Westerners on their interpretation of discipline in Chinese classrooms (see discussion in [21, pp. 12-14]) and underlies White's observation that the most orderly classrooms (in Japan) require no control [22, pp. 181-2].

*Extrinsic motivation* seems to prevail over intrinsic motivation in students' effective learning. There is no doubt that children in East Asian communities are highly motivated by international standards, and some relate this to the "workaholic" feature of the East Asian culture. However, in many studies, it has been discovered that among Japanese and Chinese students, either it is difficult to separate extrinsic from intrinsic motivations, or extrinsic motivation prevails. In other words, motivation for student learning is either a result of social expectations or incentives which carry a heavy social flavour (for example, competition), (see discussion in [23,24]).

#### *The effort-ability dichotomy*

The East Asian communities are seen to highly regard effort and play down genetic abilities in one's achievement. This is an argument that is shared by many writers. If this argument is valid, it bears tremendous implications for education. The most comprehensive discussion about this issue is done by Stevenson and Stigler [7]. After collating various research findings, they concluded:

Americans, it turned out, were more willing than were Japanese and Chinese to attribute children's academic successes and failures to innate abilities and disabilities; the [East] Asians referred more to environmental factors and children's own effort in their explanation of school performance [7, p. 8].

This seems to be fundamental to the call for high expectations which is so essential to the notion of effective schools. High expectations work only when the students thereby discover their unused potentials and strive for higher targets, but the perceived baseline for one's potential obviously affects one's confidence to achieve more. The traditional philosophy of education in East Asia seems to believe that there is no limit to one's ability as long as one strives hard.



The trust in effort in East Asia is deeply rooted in the culture which is closely related to the social structure. If one adopts Fei's notion of a hierarchical society in China, then this hierarchy does allow for some mobility. However, in ancient China, this mobility was achieved almost purely through education. Dynasty after dynasty, chief government officials were selected among scholars, and only scholars, through civil examinations held in the imperial court.

In this process, there is folklore which prevails to the present day. First, poor scholars are highly respected. All success stories belong to scholars with poor family backgrounds. Second, success goes to those who work hard. Prodigies are not always highly regarded. Third, success is often the result of a long and painful process. Students have to perceive "an ultimate light as well as lengthy tunnel", as Gardner[25, p. 293] has observed. Fourth, innovation is not a requirement for success. Scholars, for hundreds of years, followed the *Four Books and Five Classics*, and their interpretations are assessed only according to the favour of the Emperor or whoever was in real power. This process of education is perhaps best summarized by Solomon:

Parents and teachers raised his [the child's] anxiety about fulfilling obligations to the family through their strict demand for performance and harsh punishments for failure; yet they also provide him a clear if painful path, and distant yet appealing goal, by which he could relieve these anxieties, meet his filial obligations, and make a name for himself[26, p. 88].

It is immediately clear that the individual-community and the effort-ability dimensions are not totally independent. The derivations from the two categories are intertwined when it comes to practice. For example, the emphasis on efforts and the downplay of abilities have deprived the Chinese of the need to develop alternative routes for students with varied abilities, because it is not seen as a necessity. Hence the conformity and uniformity. The emphasis on efforts highlights individuals' adaptation to community needs, and this is compatible with the prevalence of social pressures and extrinsic motivations.

Critical analysts would argue that the emphasis on effort is a tool by which the imperial rulers succeeded in continuously raising false hopes among the ruled, because a change of their status was seen as a matter of their own effort. Thereby, the imperial system was sustained for almost 2,000 years. The education system is therefore responsible for the backwardness in the Chinese societies. Optimists would argue the opposite. They would say that despite all the historical setbacks, the emphasis on effort has contributed to the hardworking ethics in the East Asian communities which have in turn contributed to the economic success in the region. It is, after all, beyond the remit of this paper to pass judgements on the culture.

#### *The holistic and idealistic tendency*

The third dimension relates more to methodology than social values. Liu[27] has identified, through his observations of the Chinese language and lifestyles, a synthetic tendency in the Chinese philosophy. In language, the Chinese tend to use common names (or name-parts) for objects of the same categories (for

---

example, names of all fish end with the character *yu* (fish); all flowers end with the character *hua* (flower)). The Chinese use all-purpose bowls and chopsticks for different types of food. The all-purpose chopper in Chinese kitchens is another strong indication of the general methodology. The synthetic approach is particularly significant in Chinese medical science which sees the human body as a holistic system. The role of medical intervention is to mobilize different parts of the human body so as to achieve an equilibrium. Chinese medical doctors seldom resort to analytic examination of individual organs of the human body. Liu[28], a different writer, has extended this holistic approach (which he calls “the Chinese systems thinking”) to analyse the methodology in Chinese ancient astronomy, management thoughts, medicine, aesthetics and agricultural ecology.

Although analyses in this dimension are still emerging, it may help to explain a wide range of phenomena in Chinese schooling. The basic aims of education, to start with, seldom stop at knowledge and skills which are often seen as the basic components of education elsewhere. Chinese education places moral conduct as one of the most essential aims of education, and indeed in most circumstances regards the moral dimension of educational aims as something that should transcend knowledge and skills. As such, the emphasis on moral education does not only reflect the value on human relations as mentioned earlier, but is also related to the expectation of an all-season human being as the end-product of education.

This is immediately related to the high expectations placed on students and teachers. Students have to achieve excellence in all aspects: conduct, learning and physical fitness. Such all-rounders, who would otherwise be seen as members of a very exceptional élite, are taken as norms for everybody. Teachers as role models for students have to aim even higher; principals as role models for teachers should aim still higher.

This may also further explain the lack of diversity and alternatives for different students. The ideal student, the gentleman (to which we shall return later), is an all encompassing concept. When combined with the expected uniformity and conformity mentioned above, such a concept allows no fragmentation and tolerates no alternatives. Under these holistic and idealistic concepts, education is regarded as a comprehensive process and, hence, teachers are seen as a more important role than classroom tutors.

### **Origins in ancient philosophy**

Those who are familiar with ancient Confucian writings in China will not be surprised by the discussions in the foregoing sections. In the Confucian writings, individuals are ever seen as serving the community; they are ever expected to be industrious in order to comply with the social norm; and they are ever expected to achieve the ideal state of a human being.

In the traditional Chinese society, individuals are always identifiable only in the context of social relations. An individual’s role is defined in the love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband

and wife, precedence of the old over the young, and faith between friends[29]. This is referred to as the five human relationships which are conceived in a hierarchy. Within the group, be it family, clan association, or secret sect, individuals' positions are defined by these relationships. Such relations carried with them a hierarchy, where the individuals are always the lowest, hence the sacrifice of the "smaller self" for the perfection of the "greater self", as is mentioned earlier.

It is spelled out categorically that the aim of life for an individual is to put in order "whatever is under the sky", that is, the world. This is the ultimate aim of education in preparing a human being. In the Confucian tradition, education was not for imparting knowledge or transmitting skills. Education is for the training of character, learning to be conscientious and altruistic. But learning is insufficient if one keeps learning to oneself. The gentleman (the superior man or the ultimate man) must also serve the common people[30]. In one of the *Five Classics*, the *Great Learning* (Daxue), how this could be done is spelled out in steps: to make one's will sincere, to regulate one's family life, to bring order to the state and to pacify the world, in that order.

Hence, learning in the Confucian tradition always necessarily carried with it an extrinsic objective. Since the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), and until the Qing dynasty (AD 1644-1911), it was a continuous tradition that an imperial academy was set up by the state in order to prepare scholars for the civil service. Throughout more than 2,000 years, almost without exception, members of the officialdom were selected from among scholars. Such scholars were trained for, and assessed on, their understanding and interpretation of the *Five Classics* (and the *Four Books* after the Ming dynasty), and civil service was seen as a way of practising Confucian teachings. After the Song dynasty (AD 960-1279), such selections were done through competitive civil examinations held at the imperial court[31]. Therefore, the respect for examination and competition, which are commonly seen as characteristic of the East Asian education systems, are inherited from very ancient practice.

There is also the related element of conformity. Confucius, the dominant figure in Chinese thought and philosophy, never composed but compiled. Confucius said, "I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancient..." (*The Analects*, 7:1, in Lau[30, p. 31]). He edited the *Five Classics* which became the most essential text of learning since the Han dynasty. Following his example, it has become the tradition of scholars of the classical studies to compile rather than to compose. This tradition was not confined to the classical studies of the Confucian school but extended to other schools such as Taoism in preserving the writings of Lao Tzu, and to some extent to some of the contemporary styles of writing in East Asia. It is perhaps in this context that Fairbank, a well-known sinologist, in his latest book criticized this tradition and went as far as suggesting that the classical scholars who constructed their own works by extensive cut-and-paste replication of phrases and passages from those sources of classics were engaged in plagiarism[32, p. 101].

---

The Confucian school of thought has always valued effort in learning. Confucius himself was a teacher who placed great emphasis on opening the door of education to all. In *The Analects*, there is a demonstration of a wide range of abilities among students of Confucius. The very notion of learning in the entire *Analects* emphasizes practice and applications as a way of continuous learning. Mencius, the great disciple of Confucius, built on the philosophy of Confucius and developed his entire philosophy on the doctrine that man is good by nature, and most of a man is acquired after birth in the society. Mencius' line of thought has tremendous influence on the whole movement of Confucianism, in particular the Neo-Confucianism which has affected the thinking of the Chinese. The Chinese would not have internalized the value of learning and effort if teaching and learning were not supported by later development. The creation of the Confucian officials since the Han dynasty has provided both opportunities and evidence that effort paid off. As mentioned earlier, numerous scholars, many of them were from humble origins, did succeed in their endeavours and achieved spectacular social mobility.

Farmers interviewed in the Zhejiang study have confirmed the tradition. They support education very much, but the essential sole reason for such a support was to change the social status of the next generation. In all the systems in East Asia, relevance of curriculum was seldom paid much attention. The actual "relevance" in people's minds is to score high in examinations so as to achieve high social status.

The characteristic "workaholic" attitudes among East Asians could also be attributable to the emphasis on effort. "Hardworking pays off" and "diligence can compensate for low ability" are the kind of mottos deep-rooted in people's minds from their school days.

Traditional Chinese educational philosophy also sees a student as a holistic human being. The aim of education is to inculcate in the student the ideal of a gentleman. The notion of a gentleman is not well defined in analytic terms. In *The Analects*, Confucius provided differing answers to different questions about the meaning of a gentleman. One can only realize from Confucius what a gentleman would do in specific situations. As such, the notion of a gentleman is also idealistic. A gentleman is an all-weather, all-purpose human being who can cope perfectly with all situations. Yet, it is also the belief of Confucianism that such an ideal is attainable.

### **Implications for school management**

What are the implications of these cultural characteristics on educational administration in schools in Chinese or East Asian communities? Like all other organizations in East Asia, personal relations loom high in schools in Chinese communities. Various studies of job satisfaction in Hong Kong, for example, indicate that teachers tend to be more sensitive about how they are viewed by peers, students and superiors than their counterparts in the West[33,34]. The net effect is that teachers are motivated by factors of which monetary incentives

play only a small part. Appreciation and recognition by students, peers and superiors play a prime role.

Although schools everywhere are never serious bureaucracies in Max Weber's definition of the term, schools in East Asia are even less so, because factors such as personal charisma, school traditions and peer norms often have more significant bearings on schools than formal structures and regulations. The extreme case is in China, where personal connections (*guanxi*) are often seen as a legitimate element in personnel matters such as recruitment and promotion.

However, the personal relations are not all a matter of individual interests. There is a general belief in collective aims and objectives. In Taiwanese schools, for example, school mottos often play an essential role in the shaping of a collective culture. In mainland China, the collective aims were once subsumed under national goals of socialist constructions, but have now returned to less political versions. Even in the fairly Westernized Hong Kong school system, successful schools are often led by objectives beyond individualistic aims such as "full development of personal potentials". Even in schools where the school objective is not explicit, there is a general ethos that teachers who work in a school belong to the school. There is some subtle bonding among teachers in a school, that members of the same school should unite and work towards the common goal of the school. This incidentally again matches one of the recognized characteristics of "effective schools" in the international literature. However, the submission to the common goal is not the result of rational consensus building, or anything emerging from any device of the system. It is a traditional value where individuals are expected to submit to organizational goals. The general "trust" which is insightfully discussed by Fukuyama[35] remains the backbone for most schools in East Asia.

Teachers often consciously view the school as a hierarchy and regard that as a matter of course. Teacher participation in schools, for example, is therefore hierarchical. Teachers in different levels of the administrative ladder hold different expectations of participation. Teachers at the rank-and-file often see participation as a privilege granted from above, rather than as a right. While this does not mean that participation is rare in East Asian schools, participation is often seen as a matter of pragmatic needs rather than a matter of democracy.

With the emphasis on effort rather than ability, competition still remains the essence of schooling in most East Asian systems. Competition is not only seen as a way to achieve better results, but more importantly as a means of socialization, so as to prepare the young for tougher competitions in society. In all the East Asian systems, with the exception of a few avant-garde schools, students are ranked according to academic scores. In this context, individualized teaching, where students work towards diverse targets at different paces, is almost inconceivable in East Asian societies. Therefore, the emphasis on the administration of teaching is more on how students of different abilities could learn to adapt themselves to the common curriculum and common examination, rather than adapting the curriculum and teaching to the

---

diverse needs of the students. The spirit of competition infiltrates the inter-relationships between students, teachers, classes and schools. As such, it is not surprising that East Asian students perform better in international comparisons and competitions. They are trained to do that, which is fundamental to the school system.

Since the holistic and idealistic approach has led to the emphasis on the moral personality, moral education is of prime importance in East Asian schools. The emphasis on pastoral care in East Asian schools is seldom paralleled by schools elsewhere. In almost all schools in Chinese communities (be it mainland China, Taiwan or Hong Kong), there is often a person in charge of moral education (often known as prefect of moral education or prefect of discipline, where discipline is sometimes seen as a synonym for moral education) as a parallel to the prefect of studies who is in charge of all academic affairs. Classes are regarded as a fundamental infrastructure for the collective development of students, rather than as an economical means to maximize resource utilization. Class teachers are expected to play a comprehensive role in fostering personal development for each and every student in his/her class. Many schools in East Asia have weekly themes for moral education, which is a very strong tradition that started long before the call for whole-school approach or mass counselling ever emerged in other societies.

The emphasis on the moral dimension of education has placed high responsibilities on the school administrators about the behaviour of the teachers. School administrators feel responsible for the moral behaviour of their teachers. Although this has become rather vague in Westernized societies in Hong Kong, it is still a general expectation in other systems in East Asia. In those systems, it is not exaggerating to say that school principals are also expected to play a pastoral role over their teachers.

Moreover, under the holistic and idealistic approach to education, schools are judged in a holistic way. Schools in Chinese societies are judged by their *xiaofeng*, literally meaning "school atmosphere", which is something in between school culture and school climate. Management skills are seldom a concern among Chinese school principals, because they do not quite believe that schools are managed by skills. They believe that petty skills and techniques in management are no replacement for a good principal who is respected by all the teachers, students and parents as a comprehensive leader – gentleman. This to some extent concurs with the notion of moral leadership which has attracted much attention in the international literature on management.

It is difficult to describe the school scene facing a school administrator in a short space here, but the above perhaps suffices to highlight the basic difference between school administration in East Asian societies and other parts of the world.

### **Challenges ahead**

The Zhejiang experience, which is typical of most of the provinces in China, seems to meet what people look for as effective schooling. Such a model requires

consistency of educational values within the school system but also beyond schools. It is a reflection of a culture which has lasted for about 2,000 years, which infiltrates into all sectors of the society. An ancient tradition which did not necessarily emerge from educational intentions has now contributed to the operation of a modern school system. There are, however, challenges from at least two directions.

First, the emphasis on conformity, on effort and on idealistic targets seems to be more effective as long as the system remains selective. It worked in situations where those who could not cope dropped out of the system. When education is spread from the selected few to the entire population, as is already the case in basic education in most of the East Asian societies, such features may or may not survive. When universal education has become more or less a reality, when children with a full range of abilities are in schools, and when even children with special needs have become part of the school population, how the old tradition will adapt itself to new demands is something which remains to be seen. If we again use China as an example, the recent effort to universalize primary education has demonstrated some retention of the high-achieving nature of the education system, but has also shown the decline of some fundamental features such as teachers' professionalism.

Second, the social structure is changing. The most spectacular example is the introduction of the market mechanism in mainland China, which will create, and indeed has already created, new incentives which may cause a collapse of the traditional hierarchies in the society, and may correspondingly change people's ideologies about the individual-community interplay[36]. With the market in force, educational credentials have become only one of the many means for social mobility. Talents and intelligence which are not academic in nature will soon receive recognition at least equivalent to examination scores.

The case of Hong Kong poses a very good demonstration. Hong Kong schools, from kindergartens to secondary schools, are torn between cultures. Kindergarten teachers who are professionally trained in the Western philosophy would try to avoid elements of pressure competition in the early years, but traditional parents would shun kindergartens which do not incorporate serious reading, writing and homework in the curriculum.

Again in Hong Kong, policies of individualizing the curriculum and teaching are introduced as a matter of "modern trends". However, schools implementing such policies are often at odds with the parents' expectations which favour a system where the students are given the opportunity to become the unique "champion" in the system. There is a constant struggle in teachers' minds: to ask and help students to adapt themselves to the system, or to adapt the system to the students. Such a dilemma has become a matter of political sensitivity when there is a sense of crisis in the quality of school education (such a dilemma is highlighted in a recent report of the Education Commission which attempts to reverse the decline in quality).

Related to this, the ability-effort dilemma haunts almost all Hong Kong schools at all levels. On the one hand, there is the general doctrine taught by

teacher educators that individual needs should be catered for and teaching should adapt itself to varied student abilities. This has also led to the subconscious conclusion among policymakers and curriculum developers that when students are not achieving, the curriculum and teaching are to change. All these have deviated markedly from the traditional belief, which is still shared by parents and most teachers, that if students are expected to achieve and they do aim high, they would achieve through hard work.

However, one may also argue that what is happening in Hong Kong does not necessarily happen in all East Asian systems. Cities in mainland China and Taiwan have achieved universal basic education, but teachers in these societies seldom face the crises that Hong Kong teachers are facing. Decline in quality is even less visible in more traditional Confucian systems such as those in Korea and Japan. One may argue that the dilemma occurring in Hong Kong is a result of the fact that Hong Kong teachers and the system are “polluted” by Western educational philosophies which are not suitable for the society.

More optimistic arguments would see a happy marriage of the different cultural values with regard to education. This is of course another matter of debate. Scholars of culture seldom endorse the idea that cultural values can be transferable. Borrowing across systems is seldom successful. The authors of this paper would also maintain that educational thoughts and systems have to be consistent with the general beliefs and social infrastructure of societies. In this context, Hong Kong perhaps should submit itself to a more serious cultural analysis, such that the educational values in Hong Kong should reflect both the traditions which remain in the society and the value changes that have taken place. If this is accepted, then the successful mix of Eastern and Western values in Hong Kong society in general should also lead to a successful marriage of educational values from the East and the West.

#### References

- 1 Vogel, E., *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1979.
2. Hofstede, G., *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1980.
3. Hofstede, G., *Cultures and Organisations: Software of Mind*, McGraw-Hill, London, 1991.
4. Shweder, R.A. and LeVine, R.A., *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1984.
5. Shweder, R.A., *Looking through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991.
6. Stigler, J.W., Shweder, R.A. and Herdt, G. (Eds), *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990.
7. Stevenson, H.W. and Stigler, J.W., *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education*, Summit Books, New York, NY, 1992.
8. World Bank, *Higher Education: The Lessons of Experience*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1994.
9. World Bank, *Priorities and Strategies for Education: A World Bank Review*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 1995.



10. Cheng, K.M., *Quality of Basic Education in China: A Case Study of the Province of Zhejiang*, International Institute for Educational Planning, Paris, 1996.
11. Herman, J.J., *Holistic Quality: Managing, Restructuring and Empowering Schools*, Corwin, Newbury Park, CA, 1993.
12. Cheng, K.M., "Educated unemployment: absence or late-coming", in Muta, H. (Ed.), *Educated Unemployment in China*, Asian Productivity Organisation, Tokyo, 1990, pp. 477-85.
13. Pugh, D.S. and Hickson, D.J., *Writers on Organisations*, 4th ed., Sage, Newbury Park, CA, 1991.
14. Hsu, F.L.K., "The self in cross-cultural perspectives", in Marsella, A.J., Devos, G. and Hsu, F.L.K., *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives*, Tavistock, New York, NY, 1985, pp. 24-55.
15. Hsu, F.L.K., "Psychosocial homeostasis and jen: conceptual tools for advancing psychological anthropology", *American Anthropologists*, Vol. 73, 1971, pp. 23-44.
16. Fei, H.-T., *Xiangtu zhongguo, (Earthbound China)*, (in Chinese), Joint Publishers, Hong Kong, 1985.
17. Ho, D.Y.F., "On the concept of face", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 81, 1976, pp. 867-84.
18. Redding, G. and Wong, G.Y.Y., "The psychology of Chinese organisational behaviour", in Bond, M.H. (Ed.), *The Psychology of the Chinese People*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1986.
19. Redding, G., "Some perceptions of psychological needs among managers in Southeast Asia", in Poortinga, Y.H. (Ed.), *Basic Problems in Cross-cultural Psychology*, Swets and Zeitlinger, Amsterdam, 1977.
20. Hofstede, G., *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, (abridged ed.), Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1984.
21. Bond, M.H., *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights from Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, 1991.
22. White, M., *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children*, The Free Press, New York, NY, 1987.
23. Lynn, R., *Educational Achievement in Japan: Lessons for the West*, Macmillan, London, 1988.
24. Biggs, J.B., *Why and How Do Hong Kong Students Learn. Using the Learning and Study Process Questionnaires*, Education Paper Series 14, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 1992.
25. Gardner, H., *To Open Minds: Chinese Clues to the Dilemma of Contemporary Education*, Basic Books, New York, NY, 1989.
26. Solomon, R.H., *Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, MA, 1971.
27. Liu, T.-Y., Address at the Congregation for Honorary Doctorate Degrees, University of Hong Kong, 1988.
28. Liu, C., *Zhongguo xitong siwei: Wenhua jiyin toushi, (The Chinese Systems Thinking: Perspectives on Cultural Genes)*, (in Chinese), China Social Science Press, Beijing, 1990.
29. Lau, D.C. (trans), *Meucius*, The Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 1984, p. 105.
30. Lau, D.C. (trans.), *Confucius: The Analects*, Penguin, London, 1979.
31. Gu, S.S., *Zhongguo lidai jiaoyu zhidu (Education Systems in the Dynasties)*, (in Chinese), Jiangsu People's Press, Nanjing, 1981.
32. Fairbank, J.K., *China, a New History*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Boston, MA, 1994, p. 101.

- 
33. Lau, H.W., "Factors that motivate teachers in government secondary schools", MEd dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1992.
  34. To, C.S., "Job satisfaction of education officers (administration) in the education department", MEd dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1992.
  35. Fukuyama, F., *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, The Free Press, New York, NY, 1995.
  36. Cheng K.M., "Young adults in a changing socialist society: post-compulsory education in China", *Comparative Education*, Vol. 30 No. 11, 1994, pp. 63-73.

**Further reading**

- Cheng, K.M., *Planning of Basic Education in China: A Case Study of Two Counties in the Province of Liaoning*, International Institute for Educational Planning, Paris, 1991.
- Lee, W.O., *Social Change and Educational Problems in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong*, Macmillan, London, 1991.
- State Education Commission, *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China, 1991-1992*, People's Education Press, Beijing, 1992.
- Stigler, J.W. and Perry, M., "Mathematics learning in Japanese, Chinese and American classrooms", in Stigler, J.W., Shweder, R.A. and Herdt, D. (Eds), *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1990.