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## **Chapter Two: Philosophy and Comparative Education: What Can we Learn from East Asia?**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with some reflections on philosophy and comparative education. The philosophical ideas of East Asia are taken as an “other,” from which to look comparatively at some of the fundamental values that underlie educational thought in the West. Given the history of European colonization, and the attraction European models had for modernizing countries that were never colonized, these values became the foundations for modern systems of education. State schooling systems were first put in place in newly emerging European nations of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as we have seen in Chapter One.

Ideal types will facilitate this comparative reflection on Europe and East Asia. German sociologist Max Weber developed ideal types, as a way of identifying the distinctive contributions of differing religious and philosophical value systems to the process of social change. Weber (1994) defined ideal types as “an attempt to analyse historically unique configurations.....by means of genetic concepts.” (p. 266). He suggested that ideal types required a high degree of logical integration to be meaningful. Brian Holmes pioneered their use in comparative education as a way of probing the deep-rooted value orientations of different education systems.

Part one of this chapter gives a comparative overview of ideas of society, knowledge and the human person in classical China and Europe. It highlights the profoundly different implications of these philosophical traditions for education. The patterns and underlying values of two important models of modern education, the American and the Soviet, are also presented.

Part two traces the historical development of modern educational systems in East Asia, showing how they absorbed the Western patterns which had been borrowed or imposed. Japan was the first to surprise the world, with its remarkable recovery after the Second World War, and the development of a strong economy and democratic polity. It was followed by the “the four little dragons” of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong, whose development stimulated lively debates over an emerging East Asian model of capitalism (Vogel, 1991). Subsequently Mainland China and Vietnam adopted the idea of a “socialist market economy” and achieved remarkable reforms.

Part three offers reflections on East Asia’s modern educational experience within the three paradigms of comparative education which have been introduced in Chapter One: comparative education as a science, comparative education and imperialism; comparative education and globalization or the dialogue among civilizations. In taking each framework as a lens to analyse the East Asian experience, we will discover similarities and differences with education in other parts of the world. We will also explore some fascinating paradoxes that reflect deep-rooted philosophical differences between East Asia and the West.

Part four addresses the important question of what the West can learn from the educational ideas of East Asian societies, which share a common Confucian heritage,

though they have developed under diverse experiences of imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and socialism. Since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a dialogue among civilizations in the 1990s, space has finally been created for the inheritors and admirers of East Asian civilization to introduce its educational values to the global community. The same is true for other civilizations, such as those of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Later chapters of this text will explore some of their unique contributions to educational thought.

### **Comparing Chinese and Western educational values**

Brian Holmes suggested the use of ideal types as a way of identifying contrasting values about society, knowledge and the human person. In his 1981 textbook, he sketched out ideal types for comparing European, Soviet and American education by summarizing the views of Plato, Karl Marx and John Dewey (Holmes, 1981, pp. 111-175). Holmes was fully aware of the extreme generality of these types. His purpose was not to simplify complex educational phenomena, rather to identify deep-rooted differences, and interpret educational debates at a profound level.

Here we will give a brief consideration to the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE), which had a long-lasting influence on the development of European education. We will view them in comparison to Chinese classical thought, which was shaped primarily by Confucius (551-479 BCE), Mencius (372-289 BCE) and Xun Zi (313-238 BCE), also by the moderating influences of Lao Zi, the founder of Daoism, and by the ideas of Buddhism, a religion which was introduced to China from India in the first century CE.

In his wonderfully reflective volume, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, Benjamin Schwartz explains the ideas of society, knowledge and the human person in the dominant Chinese tradition, showing how different they were from parallel ideas in Europe. In Confucian thought, the ideal family is “the ultimate source of those values which humanize the relations of authority and hierarchy that must exist in any civilized society.” (Schwartz, 1985, p. 70) In the family, human beings learn those virtues which redeem society. Authority comes to be accepted and exercised through the binding power of religious and moral sentiments based on kinship ties. The rites or ceremonies established by the classical texts thus hold together an entire normative order, which is derived from the relations of the ideal family. This concept of social order was accepted and embraced across the entire Chinese Mainland, as well by nearby societies such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam.

By contrast, in the city states of Greece, Plato outlined the good society as one which was ruled by guardians or philosopher kings. They belonged to the highest of three classes of people, with warriors maintaining order and workers seeing to the mundane needs of society. The philosopher kings accepted a pattern of life that had no place for the family, which was viewed as particularistic and limited in its moral value. They were devoted to a vision of good that was attained through abstract mathematical thought rather than practical life experience. By the same token the good society was to be regulated by impartial laws, which ensured the fair and just treatment of each individual according to their place in a fixed social order (Boyd & King, 1975, pp. 32-36). Schwartz (1985) suggests one of the reasons for this fundamental difference in emphasis lay in the character and size of the Greek city state, compared to the Chinese empire (p. 69).

Confucius viewed knowledge as beginning with the cumulative understanding of masses of empirical particulars, then linking these particulars to one's own experience, and subsequently to an underlying unity that tied everything together. By contrast, Plato saw knowledge as created through abstract mathematical reasoning and the perception of eternal forms, something that only philosopher kings could do, through a rigorous process of deductive logic. For Plato, knowledge had to rise above the limits of ordinary human experience. For Confucius, knowledge "does not rise from the chaos of the world of particulars to a world of eternal forms, since.....the way remains indissolubly linked to the empirical world." (Schwartz, 1985, p. 95)

As for the human person, Confucius called for a life-long pursuit of human heartedness, a learning for the sake of the self. The self, however, was viewed as a flowing stream, and human development as a way of harmonizing the self with the family, society and the world of nature (Tu, 1998, pp. 13-14). Traditional Chinese society had four classes, scholar-officials, merchants, craftspeople and farmers, yet Confucius made the important statement that in education there are no class distinctions, and stressed the unlimited potential of each person for development through education. Later philosophers debated whether human nature was fundamentally good, as proposed by Mencius, or basically evil and needing to be controlled by law and punishment, as taught by Xun Zi. Nevertheless, all agreed on the importance of education. The concept that "everyone is educable, everyone can become a sage, and everyone is perfectible forms the basic optimism and dynamism towards education in the Confucian tradition" (Lee, 1996, p. 30).

By contrast, Plato's view of the human person put more emphasis on innate characteristics, suggesting that human beings were born to be philosopher kings, warriors or workers, and should be educated to fulfil their ordained roles, in order that a society of justice and order could be maintained. Intelligence was not only inborn, but also passed on by heredity, in Plato's view. The philosopher kings were therefore given favourable conditions to ensure the continuance of a line of "superior" leaders. The ideal society maintained the distinction among the three classes, and there was no encouragement to educate either workers or warriors in ways that would enable them to become leaders (Boyd & King, 1975, p. 36).

Plato's ideas were challenged almost immediately, in the work of his disciple Aristotle (383-322 BCE), and that of many later educators. Yet they expressed an idea which has persisted in Western educational thought -- that there are certain innate qualities and abilities which no amount of education can change. By contrast, the Confucian view of the human person emphasizes the perfectibility of each person, if maximum effort is put into learning, with full support from family and community.

This Chinese conviction about human potential was further strengthened by Daoist ideas put forward in Lao Zi's *Classic of the Way*, which emphasized the relationship between human persons and the world of nature (Ames & Hall, 2004). Buddhism was later introduced to China from India, and this strengthened the Daoist understanding of the interconnection between human psychology and the natural world. It envisions a society where there are neither social nor cultural identities among its members (Weerasinghe, 1992, pp. 49-50).

The main motivation for learning in Chinese culture was intrinsic, a learning for the sake of the self, to develop one's full humanity. There was also an extrinsic motivation for learning in the famous civil service examination system, which took shape in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. It offered the opportunity for all male children to demonstrate their knowledge and ability through a series of examinations held at local, provincial and capital levels throughout the empire. Those who succeeded in these examinations were given the opportunity to serve as scholar-officials. The competition for such opportunities was fierce, yet there was a significant record of social mobility in traditional Chinese society. Nearly every village had at least one example of a boy whose study efforts had enabled him to reach the top (Lee, 1996, p. 38).

By contrast, oral rather than written examinations were used in early European education. The medieval universities gained Papal charters for a degree of autonomy and academic freedom from the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE but their students were largely male clerics. Only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Protestant Reformation were opportunities for literacy and self advancement opened up to wider populations, beyond the land-owning aristocracy. When European Jesuits went to China in that same century, they were greatly impressed by the Chinese system of government. They wrote admiring accounts of educational practices that enabled the emperor to draw upon talented people from all classes who had been educated to a very high level (Llasera, 1987).

To complete the circle of comparison between East Asia and the West, we will consider two other ideal types. John Dewey's idea of society, knowledge and the human person gives insight into the fundamental values underlying American education, which were to influence Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Karl Marx's ideal society found

expression in the patterns of modern Soviet education, and from there influenced such socialist countries as China and Vietnam.

In contrast to Plato's static view, John Dewey saw society as being in continuous change, and democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint, communicated experience" (Holmes, 1981, p. 146). Human beings, as members of society, should jointly find solutions for the problems that emerged in social development through the application of a scientific understanding of the natural and social worlds. Dewey believed that intelligence could grow, as the individual grew, and "the basic freedom is the freedom of mind and of whatever degree of freedom of action and experience is necessary to produce freedom of intelligence" (Holmes, 1981, p. 148). Dewey saw the future as open, for people to create according to individual or shared visions.

Dewey viewed the human person less as an individual with intrinsic rights and abilities than as "an organism continuously interacting with a natural environment." "The individual and the social should not be set against each other as separate entities, for without one the other has no existence. Therefore, under changing circumstances, individuality takes on new forms, and in doing so, further modifies the circumstances." (Holmes, 1981, p. 145) Holmes defined Dewey's ideal person as a reflective individual in a changing environment.

Dewey's idea of knowledge was strikingly different from Plato's. Knowledge is advanced through problem solving in the social or natural world, and predictions about the most effective solutions to problems are tested by experience. There is no authoritative body of knowledge, but established disciplines should be taught "in connection with [their] bearing upon the creation and growth of the kind of power of



observation, inquiry, reflection and testing that are the heart of scientific intelligence.”  
(Holmes, 1981, p. 156)

Karl Marx's view of human society also emphasized change, a process of social transformation from capitalist to socialist to Communist forms of society determined by a science of history. With the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, it was thought possible to construct a socialist polity under working class rule, with the Communist party as its vanguard. The abolition of private property and the shared ownership of the means of production would make possible an egalitarian society, in which all worked according to their ability and had their needs provided collectively.

Within Communist society, human persons were to be educated and re-educated, until their consciousness was freed from the exploitative social relations of the prior capitalist society. Each person could then serve the best interests of the collective in the distinctive roles and functions assigned to them by the state, and enjoy the benefits of an equitable set of social relations. The human person was thus seen as part of a collective that was defined by class identity, rather than a relationship within family, community or the world of nature.

Within Soviet Communism, knowledge was seen as encyclopaedic, embracing all of the subject matter developed over human history. Thus the major subject disciplines developed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe were preserved in the curricula of secondary and tertiary institutions. This knowledge was to be applied to the many-faceted task of socialist construction, and the model for education was described as polytechnical. Substantive knowledge of the basic scientific theories underlying a wide range of

technologies was to make possible an understanding of the entire cycle of production (Holmes, 1981, pp. 162-172).

We can see how these three ideal types, the Platonic, the Deweyan and the Marxist, overlapped with Chinese ideas in distinctive ways. Plato's picture of a fixed hierarchical social order, with distinct classes having their differing functions, has some resonances with classical Chinese society in terms of the hierarchical social order. However, the Chinese had quite a different view of knowledge than that of Plato, emphasizing learning through observation and experience rather than rational deduction and theoretical understanding. They also had a different view of human persons, as having infinite potential for transformation through education and as integrally connected to family, community and nature, rather than as individuals with innate characteristics.

We can also see the resonances between classical Chinese ways of thinking and those of Dewey and Marx. Dewey's idea of the human person in relationship to community, of society as changing with problems being solved collaboratively, and of knowledge as advancing experientially, are particularly close to Chinese ways of thinking. (Grange, 2004). Some aspects of Marxism also appealed to Chinese thinkers: its sense of historical evolution from one type of society to another, its ability to explain the causes of imperialism in the extension of capitalist economic dynamics to a global arena, and the priority it gave to the collective over the individual good.

#### [A]Modern Educational Development in East Asia

The term "Confucian heritage societies" is often used for East Asia, including Japan, Mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Macao.

Historically Japan was the earliest to develop a modern education system, while China followed shortly afterwards. Both Taiwan and Korea were colonized by Japan for lengthy periods of time, and Vietnam was under French colonial influence up to 1939. Hong Kong and Singapore are both essentially city states colonized by Britain. Singapore became an independent nation in 1965. Hong Kong's decolonization took place in 1997, when it was reunited with China under the formula of "one country two systems." In 1999 the former Portuguese colony of Macao was reunited with China under the same formula. The whole region can thus be seen as a kind of laboratory, where European, American and Soviet educational values interacted with shared Confucian traditions, in colonial, postcolonial and non-colonial settings, under conditions of capitalist modernization and socialist construction.

Insert Figure 2.1 Map of East Asia here

### **Education in Japan**

Japan's written history began in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, when it developed a writing system based on Chinese characters, and imported many texts of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, while developing its own religion of Shintoism. In the period known as the Meiji Enlightenment (1868-1912 CE), Japan began to selectively introduce western educational models in an effort to achieve rapid modernization. By the late 19th century, Japan had its own modern schooling system.

School subjects were defined in similar ways to those in the curricula of European schools, and a whole new vocabulary was developed using *kanji*

(Chinese characters) to name to such modern subjects as physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, and economics. Particular emphasis was given to the study of foreign languages, mainly English, French and German, to make possible the rapid absorption of scientific knowledge from the West. Japanese was the medium of instruction, and in 1890 an imperial rescript was passed which called upon Japanese people to maintain absolute loyalty to the Emperor, and preserve traditional values of family harmony and service to the public good. In this spirit they were to “pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual powers and perfect moral powers” (Horio, 1988, p. 399). Within Shintoism, the symbolism of the emperor was particularly important, since the sun goddess was seen as the ancestor of Japan’s first ruler (Ching, 1996, p. 379).

Japan’s success in modernizing began to be evident in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a military victory over Russia in 1905, and remarkably rapid industrialization. This economic success was accompanied by increasingly aggressive behaviour towards China, however, as Japan sought to secure raw materials for its industrialization. It also copied Europe in the acquisition of colonies. Taiwan was colonized by Japan from 1895 to 1945 and Korea from 1910 to 1945.

After experiencing defeat in the Second World War, Japan was occupied by the American military for seven years. A new constitution passed in 1947 committed the country to peace, democratization and the decentralization of education. Under American influence, the education system became more equitable, with provision made for the majority of young people to complete secondary education, and an increasingly large percentage to enter higher education. Japan was the first Asian society to achieve mass

higher education, in the same time period as the United States, Canada and the Soviet Union, and well ahead of Western Europe (Bereday, 1973).

Before 1945, the majority of teachers for primary and lower secondary education had been educated in normal training colleges that did not give degrees. After the war, most of these colleges were transformed into universities of education, and Japan became the second country in the world, after the United States, to require that all teachers hold a university degree. Professional courses for teachers are offered in both public and private universities, but certification is under the control of prefectural authorities. They select those who are most academically and professionally qualified for positions in their schools. This means that only about 20-30% of those who have the necessary educational qualifications for teaching are able to gain teaching positions. Teachers are civil servants, with a high social status and remuneration that is 30-40% higher than other public employees with equivalent qualifications (Shimihara, 1995).

The main direction of the post-War reforms in Japanese education was to reduce central control over the education system, and give greater autonomy to teachers and greater responsibility to local educational authorities. The Ministry of Education has nevertheless retained strong control over the national curriculum, with a continuing concern with moral education and education for patriotism. Some educators have been highly critical of this emphasis, wishing to emphasize children's individuality and right to learn, rather than the state's concern for shaping loyal citizens. Japan's major teachers' unions also have tended to be strongly oppositional to government, and left leaning in their orientation. There have thus been lively ongoing struggles over educational policy. Teruhisa Horio's writings give many interesting insights into these debates (Horio, 1988).

There is nevertheless widespread agreement that Japanese children learn well and have comparatively high achievement, from early childhood through primary and lower secondary education. The upper years of secondary education are clouded by the intense pressures of competitive examinations for entry to the top universities, with a sense that the university one enters will determine one's career chances far more than the subjects studied, or the academic grades achieved. This is sometimes described as an examination hell and viewed as part of a widely shared Asian heritage (Miyazaki, 1971). William Cummings, one of the best known comparative educators writing on Japan, has commented on the striking difference between Japan and the United States. Great importance is given to higher education in the United States whereas basic education is emphasized in Japan (Cummings, 1999, p. 425).

### **Education in Mainland China and Taiwan**

China was greatly influenced by Japan's Meiji enlightenment reforms, which began in 1868, and shared a sense of pride in Japan's success in defeating Russia in 1905. From the 1890s to China's Nationalist Revolution of 1911, when the last imperial dynasty was overthrown, China's leaders emulated Japan in creating a modern education system. Hundreds of Chinese teachers studied in Japan and there was a strong belief that the Japanese model would enable China to absorb Western science and technology for national strengthening. At the same time, they could retain their Confucian identity and embrace gradual change through the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, along Japanese lines (Reynolds, 1993).

It soon became evident that this approach would not work for China. After 1911, China launched itself on a journey of change that involved radical experimentation with a range of Western models of education, and an overt rejection of its Confucian heritage as a value system then seen by many as antithetical to science and modernity. From 1912 to the early 1920s, European models were most influential in China's modern educational development, due to the leadership of scholars who had studied in Germany and France. Efforts were made to lay a foundation for basic education of five to six years, then to develop a small number of academic secondary schools and a few newly established national universities. Other specialist secondary schools offered programs in teacher education and various forms of vocational and technical education.

The May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919 was sparked by the decision of the victorious leaders of France, the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States to give Germany's possessions on China's East Coast to Japan after the First World War. Students and professors in China's major universities, led by Peking University, marched in protest against this decision. Both progressive thinkers and Marxists came to believe that China's evident weakness on the global stage was a result of its Confucian heritage, and that education for science and democracy was the only way forward. In a situation where the political leadership was weak and divided, educators and local leaders made vigorous efforts to expand basic education and many specialist colleges were upgraded to university status.

An educational law of 1922 adopted American patterns of decentralized educational administration, and community responsibility for schools (Hayhoe, 1984, p. 38). This was shortly after John and Alice Dewey had spent two years in China, travelling

throughout the country to lecture on education, science and democracy (Keenan, 1977). An American-style schooling structure was also adopted at this time, with six years of primary education, three years of lower secondary, three years of upper secondary and four years of tertiary education. While Dewey's ideas about education, child development and democracy were widely appreciated by educators and scholars, China's economic conditions were such that progressive education developed in only a few relatively prosperous cities and regions. Illiteracy was widespread in most of the country, and no means were available to develop a comprehensive modern schooling system.

In 1928, the Nationalist Party came to power and established a national government with Nanjing as the capital. In the brief nine years it had before the invasion of Japan in 1937 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, great efforts were made to develop a national education system. The American structure was retained while European ideas were drawn upon to create a national curriculum and establish national standards in all the main subject areas.

The Second World War was followed by a civil war between China's Nationalist and Communist forces, with a definitive Communist victory in 1949. The Nationalist forces retreated to Taiwan, and there gained American support in developing Taiwan into a modern scientific power that built upon the infrastructure left by Japanese colonizers. Taiwan's schooling system had a structure similar to that of the United States, but conscious efforts were made to recover aspects of the Confucian heritage emphasizing family and community support for children's learning (Smith, 1991, pp. 1-98). While Taiwan was ruled by martial law under the Nationalist Party until 1987, multi-party



democracy gradually emerged, and there have been several peaceful changes of government through national elections since the mid-1990s.

After the Communist revolution of 1949, China's education developed in an entirely different direction from that of Japan and Taiwan. Chinese Communist leaders felt their only recourse was to turn to the Soviet Union for assistance in the early years of the Cold War. Therefore the Chinese education system was reformed in the early 1950s to follow Soviet patterns, with a strong emphasis on basic education for all, then a highly selective academic secondary schooling system open mainly to youth in urban areas, those academically capable, and those from the working class selected for leadership positions.

The school structure remained the same as before 1949, with six years of primary schooling, three years of lower secondary, three years of upper secondary, followed by unified national examinations to select those who would enter higher education (Price, 1987, p. 166). The higher education system was fundamentally reformed according to Soviet patterns, with many Soviet experts helping China to design specialized institutions which would serve the planning needs of the state in such fields as engineering, agriculture, medicine and teacher training. Most university programs required five years of study. Entrance was highly competitive and all graduates were assigned positions as state cadres in the new system (Orleans, 1987, pp. 184-195).

This system trained experts to serve the rapid development of a strong socialist economy, yet contradictions soon emerged. On the political side there was concern that the majority of young people, especially those in rural areas, had little opportunity to advance beyond basic education. On the cultural side there was a reaction against the

narrow specialization and segmentation of knowledge, and the top-down centralized control. This went against China's traditions of holistic knowledge and community involvement in learning. There was thus an intense reaction against Soviet influences during the Great Leap Forward of 1958 and the Cultural Revolution of 1967. The length of schooling was shortened from twelve to nine years, five at the primary level and four at the secondary level. The curriculum was greatly broadened and access was opened up to the majority of young people to complete secondary education. While there were only 9 million students in secondary schools in 1965, by the end of the Cultural Revolution there were 58 million (Hayhoe, 1999, pp. 99-100).

Political struggle reached an extreme in the Cultural Revolution, as Mao Zedong encouraged young people to rebel against all forms of authority, and parents, elders and teachers were subjected to violent forms of criticism. There are many interpretations of this period. The most common attributes the violence to a power struggle between the radical and conservative factions of the Chinese Communist Party. It can also be seen as a reaction against patterns imposed from the Soviet Union, which were hierarchical, centralized and highly restrictive in the Chinese context. When Mao died in 1976, and the infamous "Gang" of four leaders who had supported him fell from power shortly afterwards, a new period of development in Chinese education opened up under Deng Xiaoping.

Deng was a veteran Communist leader and also a pragmatist. He focused on providing conditions for China to modernize and open up to the world, with education as the key to successful modernization. It was a great relief for Chinese educators, teachers and students to see increasing investment in education, greater autonomy for teachers,

and educational planning focused on supporting the nation's economic and social development. At first the curricular patterns of the 1950s were restored but they were soon broadened to respond to the changing needs of the modernization process.

Particular attention was given to respecting teachers and ensuring they had adequate academic and professional training to nurture creativity as well as academic excellence in their students. Educational research included classroom based studies carried out by working teachers who tried to make learning more effective and more enjoyable. There were lively debates over Soviet, American and European educational theories, and many experimental partnerships and projects. One influential educator described this period as “spring time for educational science” (Hayhoe, 2006, p. 69). It was a great relief that education was no longer a tool for class struggle, but a process of learning, growth, experimentation and change. It was also a time for recovering some of the positive values of the Confucian tradition, which had been negated and neglected ever since the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919 (Gu, 2001a).

### **Education in Vietnam and Korea**

Vietnam and Korea suffered as much as China and Taiwan had done from the impact of the Cold War on East Asia. For Vietnam, French colonialism ended in 1939, but the country was divided into two parts after the Second World War, with the North under Soviet influence and the South under American influence. After the end of the Vietnam War and the US departure in 1975, Vietnam was unified under socialism and its educational patterns reflected Soviet influence. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Vietnam had begun to adopt its own forms of market socialism, and

education has played an important role in invigorating the economy and opening the minds of children and young people to a wider world (Dung, 2004; Hac, 1995; London, 2004).

In Korea, Japanese colonialism ended in 1945, yet the country was divided into North and South, with the South occupied by the United States until 1948 and the North under Soviet influence. The Korean war of the early fifties ended with an armistice that is still in place. South Korea's development parallels that of Taiwan in many ways - successful industrialization, the creation of a science-based economy, and the end of martial law in 1988. Education has been influenced by American patterns, yet there are also strong Confucian and Buddhist influences (Seth, 2002). Mass higher education was achieved in the 1980s, as a dynamic private sector responded to social demand. Teacher education was upgraded to degree level, and a number of universities of education were created to support teachers' work. For the people of Korea and Korean educators, the most painful ongoing issue is the division of the country, and the continuing poverty and isolation of the North.

### **Education in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macao**

Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, after 98 years of British colonial rule. Some elements of the British education system continue to have influence, and English has been the main medium of instruction. Yet there has been a recovery of interest in Mandarin, as well as promotion of the Tamil and Malay languages for Indian and Malay minorities. There has also been a gradual move beyond the original elitist education system to a more open one, with three universities and a large number of

polytechnics providing higher education for an increasing proportion of the population (Tan, Gopinathan & Ho, 2001). Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Singapore government made the decision to become a hub for transnational education in Asia, inviting top universities from all over the world to establish branches there and attracting students from all parts of Asia (Sanderson, 2002, Lee, 2014).

Education in Hong Kong and Macao developed in completely different ways from China, due to their status as colonies of Britain and Portugal. Because they are located on the Western and Eastern sides of China's Pearl River Delta, decolonization could only mean a return to Mainland China. Negotiations between China and Britain over this process began in 1984, reached culmination in 1997 under Deng Xiaoping's formula of "one country, two systems." Two years later, Macao returned to Chinese sovereignty under the same principle and with an education system that had already gradually adjusted to its Chinese context (Bray, & Koo, 1999).

Hong Kong's return to China meant a re-emphasis on the local Cantonese dialect as the medium of instruction in schools, intense debates around citizenship education (Lee, 2004), and an increasing emphasis on learning Mandarin. It also meant a definitive move away from the British-derived structure of education, with Advanced Level examinations limiting university entrance to a small proportion of secondary graduates. A structural reform undertaken between 1997 and 2011 reduced examination pressures so that all students could move smoothly from primary to secondary education and face only one set of competitive examinations for university entry, as in Mainland China. (Hayhoe 2012) The other dramatic change after 1997 was the upgrading of teacher education to

university level with the establishment of the Hong Kong Institute of Education as a degree granting institution. (Hayhoe, 2001).

### **Comparative Reflections on Education in East Asia**

Three approaches to comparative education theory were outlined in Chapter One: Comparative Education as a Science; Comparative Education and Imperialism/World Sstem; Globalization, Comparative Education and the Dialogue among Civilizations. Each provides a distinctive framework for reflecting on the experience of educational development in East Asian societies.

To begin with Comparative Education as a science, we can see how the human capital argument has played out in East Asia – with remarkable economic results for the educational investments in Japan after the Second World War, later similar patterns emerging in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Given that these are all capitalist societies, this is not particularly surprising. Notably, however, China's leading comparative educator, Gu Mingyuan, argued for human capital theory being equally applicable to socialist societies. (Gu,2001b) He encouraged China's leadership to invest heavily in education after the Cultural Revolution. The resulting economic growth has been nothing short of remarkable. Vietnam subsequently followed a similar model with parallel success. Thus the human capital argument has been extended to include socialist societies, reflecting the flexibility of Confucian pragmatism.

Another aspect of the approach to comparative education as a science that emerges in the Asian context is the sense of the liberating power of science. In both China and Vietnam the move away from the use of education as a tool of class struggle

towards education as a science signalled an end to vicious political struggles. There may be a parallel here with Jullien's early idea of educational science liberating teachers and students from the narrow rules of those controlling education on behalf of the state.

While there are good reasons to critique positivistic science for its mechanical model of understanding and for legitimating the domination of the West, the East Asian experience reminds us that science may have different connotations at different times and in different socio-cultural settings.

Turning to comparative education and the world system, East Asia is a veritable laboratory of different types of imperialism. Both Japan and China developed their modern education systems in order to strengthen the nation in face of imperialist incursions. This worked well for Japan though it later became an imperialist power, occupying both Taiwan and Korea and invading China in conscious imitation of Europe's colonial adventures.

China was never fully colonized, yet its Nationalist leader, Sun Yat Sen, described it as a "hyper colony" because of its experience of British, French, German, Japanese and American imperialist incursions at different times. Hong Kong became a colony of the British, Macao of the Portuguese and Manchuria fell under Japanese control for more than a decade. China's educational policies were thus consciously selected to strengthen the nation's resistance to imperialist influences.

It is ironic, however, that China's experienced education as imperialism most acutely after its successful Communist revolution. The Soviet Union's assistance in economic, political and educational development came to be seen by the Chinese as an unacceptable form of social imperialism. China's experience can thus be better

understood within Johann Galtung's structural theory of imperialism than Lenin's view of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism.

Smaller counties of East Asia, such as Korea and Vietnam, experienced the full brunt of imperialism and the Cold War, with both countries being divided for lengthy periods of time. South Vietnam experienced American influence in education under partition, then later replaced this with Soviet influence between 1975 and the late 1980s. Nevertheless, it has found its own road to educational development, and its indigenous values have flourished under market socialism.

North Korea has experienced isolation and severe economic difficulty, in striking contrast to the affluence and success of South Korea's capitalist economy. While American educational patterns have had some influence in South Korea since the 1950s, there has also been an active anti-Americanism expressed in various popular movements. Educational development has taken its own unique forms based on indigenous traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism.

As for Singapore and Hong Kong, both are prosperous city states, though different in their political standing. The heritage of British common law, administrative systems and educational patterns has been transformed to suit their particular development needs and interests. Macao has also done well in moving beyond the Portuguese colonial legacy.

We can see how the East Asian experience of education and development challenges a simplistic application of dependency theory or world system theory in comparative education. If taken as tentative hypotheses to be tested against the realities of the East Asian experience, the most striking failure of these theories has been an under-



estimation of the resilience of local cultures in the face of external political domination and economic exploitation.

It may be within the perspective of globalization and the dialogue among civilizations that we can best reflect on the lessons of the East Asian experience. In spite of the dramatic differences in political destiny experienced by each of the eight Confucian heritage societies in the geo-politics of the Cold War, there are remarkable similarities in educational processes and outcomes. Children from East Asian societies tend to have high educational achievement in international tests of mathematics, science and language knowledge. There has also been a largely positive relationship between educational investment and economic development, within both capitalist and socialist political systems. These successes have led to considerable interest in what the West can learn from East Asian education. It seems that the most profound explanatory factors for their educational ethos and the learning achievement of their youth lie in shared views of knowledge, society and the human person rooted in Confucian philosophy.

### **So What Can We Learn from East Asia?**

Given the European tradition of knowledge and education, Western endeavors in schooling have tended to be diversified, individualized and process-based; student learning activities are facilitated by teachers, who trust children to learn on their own. By contrast, the East Asian tradition is more focused, demanding and formalized, valuing education as a critical instrument in the perfection of the individual and society. This goes back to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century CE when China's civil service examination system was

institutionalized; students tend to be pressured to learn by teachers who are seen as authoritative sources of knowledge.

Fundamental to the East Asian educational model is Confucian humanism, which viewed the purpose of education and schooling as to let one's inborn virtue shine forth, to renew the people, and to "rest in the highest good", as stated in *The Great Learning* (Chai & Chai, 1965, p. 294). Learning, teaching and schooling have thus been the first priority in any political agenda, as made explicit in *The Theory of Education (Xue Ji)*, China's earliest essay on education (Xu & Hunter, 2016). Concomitant with the high importance given to education, teachers are usually given the most respected socio-political status. Teachers are important cultural symbols in Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Mainland China, Macau, Singapore, Taiwan and Vietnam, and there are very high expectations of their performance. Xun Zi (313-238 BCE) put teachers on the same level as sovereigns and made the point that teachers must be respected if the nation is to prosper (Knoblock, 1994, p. 231). Later in the Tang Dynasty, Han Yu (768–824 CE) depicted the responsibility of the teacher as encompassing the following three roles – transmitting moral values and principles (*chuandao*), delivering knowledge and skills (*shouye*) and solving the puzzles that arise in learning (*jiehuo*) (Li, 2016a). Such a concept of the teacher is deeply implanted in the East Asian model of schooling. The education and development of teaching professionals is thus recognized as the key to the success of basic education and student learning and both normal universities and universities of education have given teacher education a high status in East Asia (Hayhoe & Li, 2010).

Confucian humanism is not merely an idealist philosophy but also a pragmatic orientation for policy action and school transformation. This can be seen in the Confucian

concept of the golden mean (*zhong-yong*). *Zhong* means central, just or right, while *yong* means pragmatic within a norm (Li, 2016a). This is not merely a matter of pursuing a middle course, but involves a spirit in which humaneness and rationality reach a perfect harmony (Lin, 1939). To give an example, the late Qing incrementalist Zhang Zhidong (1837–1909), founder of China’s first independent normal school in China in 1902, put forward the idea of “Chinese learning as the essence, and Western learning for its practical utility.” (Chen, 1981, p. 117). A parallel example can be found in the influential Japanese politician and educational leader, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) who advocated national freedom and independence through personal strengths by pragmatically linking individual development to the independence and prosperity of Japan as a nation (Fukuzawa, 2012).

Institutional openness and diversity have been two core elements of the East Asian systems of teacher preparation and development. Thus Japan adopted the French and German models for its teacher education system during the Meiji Restoration to ensure teacher education would ensure stability in terms of teacher supply, social development and nation-building. China adopted the Japanese model at an early stage and then shifted to an American model which relied on comprehensive universities, within which teacher education lost its unique identity. A Soviet model influenced by France was adopted after 1949 but now the Chinese model is an open and inclusive hybrid system which continues with the French tradition but incorporates elements of the American model (Li, 2016b).

Confucian heritage values can be seen in studies done by social psychologists Harold Stevenson and James Stigler in the 1980s, at a time when Japan’s economic and

educational success was taken as a challenge to American education. They looked at children's learning in three East Asian cities, Sendai in Japan, Taipei in Taiwan and Beijing in China, as well as two American cities, Minneapolis and Chicago. They made an intensive study of a large number of first grade and fifth grade children and their home, community and school environments, taking into account the viewpoints of the children themselves, their mothers, their teachers and their school leaders. They found that East Asian children spent many more days in school than American children, also that school and home life were more closely connected. Teachers tended to stay with one class for two or three years, building close links with the children's families, while parents provided their children with space to work at home, even in crowded living conditions. Children spent more time in homework, including during vacations, and their parents often purchased additional workbooks to help their children. (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992).

At school, East Asian classrooms tended to have larger numbers of children than American ones and all children learned to be responsible for classroom order. East Asian children had more opportunities for participation in group activities before and after class and in frequent recesses which allowed for vigorous play. By contrast American children spent more time in the classroom, with less opportunity for group exercise and play during the day, and more time spent working alone at their desks. East Asian children felt very much part of a group, enjoyed learning and gradually developed "self-direction, good study habits and motivation to do well in school" (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992, p. 70).

The East Asian school also took considerable responsibility for the socialization of children. Role models were consistently used and upheld for children to learn from and admire. Group identification was strongly encouraged, and children became adept at an early age in group problem-solving. Children were also explicitly taught routines relating to the management of their own learning – how to keep their desks tidy, how to take notes, how to organize their clothes when change of dress was required for an outdoor class. “Asian parents regard doing well in school as the single most important task facing their children” while “American parents seek to balance academic achievement with other goals, such as developing social skills, high self-esteem and broad extracurricular interests.” (ibid., p. 83)

One of the most striking differences in the attitudes of East Asian and American parents and children towards education was the importance of effort as against ability. East Asian teachers, mothers and children had a strong belief that, with effort, every child could learn successfully, while American parents and children had much stronger beliefs in the innate ability of children as explaining success and failure in learning, and placed a higher priority on life adjustment and the enhancement of self-esteem than on academic achievement. They assumed that “positive self-esteem is a necessary precursor of competence” and forgot that one of the most important sources of children’s self-esteem is realizing that they have mastered a challenging task” (ibid., p. 111).

While East Asian countries considered a national curriculum extremely important for standard setting, Americans emphasized the importance of individual differences, and saw the goal of education as maximizing children’s differential potential. Textbooks reflected this difference, with most East Asian textbooks having to be approved by a

national ministry of education before being adopted. East Asian textbooks also tended to be slimmer and less rich in illustration, but more explicit and coherent in their content.

The teaching profession also functioned differently in that American teachers had considerable freedom to decide on curricular issues and teaching approaches, while East Asian teachers worked to a national curriculum. They typically had fewer classroom hours and more time scheduled for collaborative class preparation work. Different images of the ideal teacher in Beijing and Chicago at that period give an interesting insight. Beijing teachers viewed the most important qualities of the teacher as the ability to explain things clearly, with the next most important being enthusiasm, then standards, sensitivity and patience. Chicago teachers saw sensitivity as the most important quality, reflecting their concern with treating children as individuals. This was followed by enthusiasm, patience, standards, and last of all clarity. In East Asia, the teacher was seen as a skilled performer, striving to perfect the script in presenting each lesson, while American teachers were expected to be innovative, inventive and original, writing their own scripts for each lesson (ibid., pp. 166-168).

More recent studies, that attempt to explain the outstanding results of East Asian students in PISA tests, have shown that Westerners have much to learn from East Asian values of learning and teaching. Based on PISA scores, Ho (2010) observes that East Asian students share similar strengths in terms of consistently high aspirations for learning and an orderly disciplined climate in school; they are also high achievers in terms of problem-solving, which challenges the stereotype that East Asian students are rote learners who can only drill for traditional tests (pp. 342-345). Experts at the OECD (2011) conclude that there are at least 12 important lessons Westerners can learn from

such strong East Asian performers as Hong Kong, Japan, Mainland China and Singapore. The first is to develop “a commitment to education and a conviction that all students can achieve at high levels” (OECD, 2011, pp. 231-233), key values of education that have been formed and practiced over a long history in East Asian societies. More specifically, both Shanghai and Hong Kong adopt a moral approach to educational reform, seeing the whole system and the whole student as held accountable by tough public examinations (OECD, 2011, pp. 105-108). In the case of Japan, the total commitment to students is not just rhetoric but “a concrete and enduring priority, for which individuals and the nation as a whole are prepared to make real sacrifices” (p. 150). All of the East Asian societies give a high status to education and teachers, and favor centralized and standardized curricula. Their school systems have been improved by continuous and committed public funding oriented to both individual development and national strength. All East Asian societies have managed to pilot their unique pragmatic means to achieving educational success, while keeping their school systems dynamic and open to learning and change.

### **Conclusion: Reflecting on the Paradoxes in East Asian Learning**

The main point of this chapter has been to show how important it is to learn about the religious and philosophical traditions of a society or region, when seeking to understand educational policy, schools, curricula, and teaching practices. It is also important to see how the dialogue among civilizations can take us beyond national schooling systems and help us to understand ways of learning that are common to a region.

The chapter has illustrated how ideal types may be used to clarify core values about the human person, society and knowledge, to identify contrasts and explore commonalities. Thus the notion of “Confucian heritage societies” can be fleshed out by reference to ideas of the human person as perfectible through education, of society as a macrocosm of the human family, and of knowledge as built up through a cumulative study of experience in both the social and natural worlds.

This can help us to reflect on the puzzles and paradoxes of the East Asian experience of education at a level that goes deeper than that of regional geo-politics or national educational policies. We can understand in a new way the discourses around the relative importance of ability and effort in educational achievement, the relationship between individual and collective in schooling, and the distinction between internal and external motivation in learning: these polarities can be held in balance within a flexible and dialectical thinking process. Likewise, theoretical constructs such as human capital in a socialist society, social imperialism and market socialism are understood in relation to the lived historical experience of diverse societies that share the Confucian heritage. They take on connotations which might not be allowed in the more linear patterns of Western theoretical scholarship. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Confucian educational heritage is a profound and humane pragmatism that insists on the advancement of knowledge through thoughtful reflection on experience.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. How do the ideal types of Platonic, Deweyan, Marxist and Confucian values stimulate you to reflect comparatively on teaching and learning in your schools?



2. What was the most significant new fact you learned about education in East Asia in this chapter, and why?
3. Which framework for comparative education best explains East Asian schools?
4. How might you apply these East Asian educational values in your school context?

### **Film Resources**

The video clips listed below, each about 15 to 20 minutes, were made by the Pearson Foundation. They draw lessons from China, Japan, Korea and Singapore, all Confucian heritage societies, which have been superior performers among all participating countries in the OECD Programme for international Student Assessment (PISA). It provides the world's most extensive and rigorous set of international surveys assessing the knowledge and skills of secondary school students. Behind the stunning performance of their students, these superior East Asian performers all share similar Confucian values of education, though they differ from each other in educational applications.

*Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: China* (Pearson Foundation).

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxT94FXwSPM>

*Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Japan* (Pearson Foundation).

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygInMvH30QU>

*Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Korea* (Pearson Foundation).

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJhzdIBUPs0>

*Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Singapore* (Pearson

Foundation). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Km25TAnPbI4>

Users of this text might also find the following video material helpful:

*Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States* (1991)

In this film Joseph Tobin explores the similarities and differences among the three cultures. Viewers watch preschool children go about their daily activities and hear Tobin explain how teachers from the other two cultures responded to the structure, discipline and activities of each class. Part 1 of an updated version done in 2009 can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rz6HEcxXq2Q>, while both DVDs (1991 and 2009) can be purchased from the following website: <http://www.joetobin.net/videos.html>

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

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