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How Asian Values May Inform Models of Western Education

To educate the American South about civil rights and affect change in ethical and practical realms, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. looked toward South Asia and its moral leader, Gandhi, who embodied an oft-neglected Hindu belief in *ahimsa*, or non-violence. On a practical level, Dr. King could see in Gandhi's tumultuous but ultimately democratic India a model of how passive resistance could work; by blending principles from India's Hindu thought into sympathetic principles of his Christian faith, Dr. King could more persuasively convey a universal doctrine that defied America's un-Christian caste system, affecting the collective moral consciousness of blacks and whites alike. In his book *The Moral Sense*, Professor James Q.

Wilson discusses how most great religions have the same core philosophical values:

“Westerners...often suppose that it is our unique religious tradition that explains the emergence of universal standards of morality,” but “Morris Ginsberg, like many others, has pointed out how much most religious doctrines have in common: ‘A list of virtues or duties drawn up by a Buddhist would not differ very greatly from drawn up by a Christian, a Confucianist, a Muhammedan, or a Jew. Formally, all of the ethico-religious systems are universalist in scope.’”

(Wilson, 199) Seemingly opposing philosophical systems may combine in a natural way.

Yet philosophies in the West (America and Europe) and East (Asia) too often seem like oil and water: Western individualism versus a Buddhist and Confucian connection to others; capitalist desire versus a Buddhist freedom from desire; action versus meditation in the enactment of knowledge; the direct discourse of efficient capitalists versus the elliptical discourse of Chinese sages; the Christian desire for heavenly permanence versus the

impermanence of Buddhist thought and cyclical Hinduism. Yet to achieve the highest level of moral understanding, leaders of Western institutions must acknowledge the values of the East and blend them ethically and practically with Western values. Perhaps Asian philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism could remedy social ills in the United States. Medicine provides an apt metaphor. Some Western doctors, such as liver specialists toiling over arguably the most mysterious organ, now seek wisdom in traditional Chinese medicine—a homeopathic practice carefully honed over thousands of years, but until recently largely ignored by the pharmaceutical West.

What ails the *body politic* of America today? No matter the symptom—corruption in government, racism, class inequality—in all probability, the disease traces back to America’s educational system. Much like those noble liver specialists seeking secrets from Chinese medicine, leaders in America’s public schools should look for answers in Asia. Western educators may more lucidly understand problems inherent in Western education models by placing them alongside more collectivist Asian education models. Western schools elevate the concept of self-improvement over concepts that remain more in the provenance of Asia—interdependence and moral growth.

Researchers have compared Western models of education with Asian models, and they have uncovered trenchant philosophical differences that might explain gaps in student motivation and achievement. In the article *Rethinking the Value of Choice*, Euro American schools compel students to perform tasks independently; assessment mechanisms such as standardized exams prove the worth of the task and accrued knowledge or understanding. (Iyengar, 349-351) During this process, students see their self-improvement as the best end for their endeavors, leading to the “pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness,” to paraphrase America’s Judeo-Christian founding

fathers. Yet successful students may fail to see the invisible web of social forces holding them aloft above the less fortunate.

Society is nothing more than a collection of groups, and each group a collection of individuals; if students grow up to think of “self” first without acknowledging how social networks helped to elevate them to loftier positions than others, then one must not wonder why class inequities have become a permanent fixture of American society. Within these inequities lay urban public schools, dilapidated and neglected—psychologically so distant to wealthier suburban schools with higher rates of literacy and graduation. No wonder one of America’s most persistent moral problems remains unanswered—the lack of opportunity for so many urban minority students.

THE BENEFITS OF AN ASIAN EDUCATIONAL MODEL

Asian schools value collectivism over autonomy; conversely, American schools value autonomy over collectivism. As part of the West, America underwent the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement, and this philosophy informed the construction of its models for government and school. Professor Wilson elucidates the core values of the Enlightenment:

As the historian Henry May has suggested, a belief that man could be understood by the use of our natural faculties and without relying on ancient custom or revealed religion. The generally shared corollaries of that belief were a commitment to skeptical reason, personal freedom, and self-expression. Elsewhere, communalism, tradition, and self control remained the dominant ethos.” (Wilson, 197)

While Americans enjoy freedom of expression unparalleled in the history of humanity, independence has become so stressed that individual citizens often lose sight of *interdependence*, a ruling ethos for so many societies from ancient times until today. Non-Western cultures did not undergo the Enlightenment philosophical movement, which elevated science and skepticism over received wisdom from ancient sources. Perhaps China provides the most preeminent exemplar of

a non-Enlightenment culture; its culture traces back continuously over thousands of years, far into the Bronze Age. The Maoists shifted the cultural and educational model of China away from the gentle space of Confucianism and to a more stringent terrain, yet the culture is still continuous when contrasted with the West and its core values, which trace back not to the Bronze Age, but to the eighteenth century. Professor Wilson outlines a Chinese philosophical system that does not stress individual freedom:

For several millennia the ruling spirit of China was harmony and conformity, whether based on the flexible moral principles of Confucian thought or the rigorous and exacting legal codes of the Qin and Han dynasties, and the ruling doctrine was that of collective responsibility: families were responsible for the conduct of their members. Under these circumstances, it was most unlikely that claims of individual freedom would make much headway. (197)

Though freedom seems axiomatically positive to a Westerner, Professor Wilson does not mean to disparage the communal “ruling spirit” of China before the inception of Maoism and Communism. Instead, most Chinese elevated collectivism over independence even before the cruel injunctions of Mao and his ilk. In valuing collectivism or interdependence, China resembles other Asian countries—even traditional rivals such as Japan.

Three philosophies explain why Asian schools, and thus vastly different Asian societies, place such enormous value on interdependence. Confucianist, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophical systems have informed the Eastern consciousness just as the Enlightenment informed the Western consciousness. These philosophies reside on an illuminating and warm spectrum, from the personal spirituality of Taoism to the societal pragmatism of Confucianism. Yet Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—the spiritual and the practical planes of Eastern thought—all stress interdependence. Concurrent in China with Confucianism, Taoism flowed well with Indian emissaries of Buddhist thought. Buddhism then spread to Japan and flowered into Zen Buddhism. Buddhists believe that the self is an illusion; each person is tethered to the present by

their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents; by the environment they live within, and by their means of apprehending this ever-changing, sensual world. Ironically, by learning to meditate and focus on the self, one becomes not selfish, but instead more aware of the interconnectedness of all things. After all, there is no self to possess.

Taoism, meanwhile, stresses that the path to perfection remains within each person; one achieves harmony and perfection by doing what comes naturally, a way of living integral to childhood but elusive throughout the rest of life. Taoists “let it flow,” like water eroding a stone, and seek balance between extreme states of emotion; indeed, this ever-shifting process becomes identity. Our identity can be found in motion, not stasis. Unmoored from a fixed identity and aware of interconnectedness, Taoism and Buddhism engender a natural sympathy towards nature and all of life. The author Mel Thompson writes:

The simplicity and naturalness leads to awareness of all living things and of the place in humankind within nature. Rather like Buddhism, this encourages empathy for other species. Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly, and on awakening, posed the interesting question: *How do I know that I was a man dreaming that I was a butterfly, or that I am now a butterfly dreaming that I was a man?* (Thompson, 172)

These Asian philosophies, highly personal and spiritual, contrast in China with Confucianism, which focuses on strictly societal concerns. Confucianism also believes that the self is an illusion, but it offers a more pragmatic explanation for the illusory self. An individual defines herself only by the roles and relationships she plays, as explained eloquently by the eminent Confucian scholar, Professor Henry Rosemont:

In order to be a friend, neighbor, or lover, for example, I must have a friend, neighbor, or lover. Other persons are not merely accidental or incidental to my goal of fully developing as a human being, they are essential to it indeed they confer unique personhood on me, for the extent I define myself as a teacher, students are necessary to my life, not incidental to it...Our task is to meet our responsibilities to others. (Rosemont, 9)

While attending to social duties with alacrity rather than with drudgery, the devoted Confucian practitioner embraces three essential tenets of the philosophical code:

Jen: Human-heartedness (goodness, proper being)

Li: etiquette (propriety, rules)

Chi: righteousness (proper behavior)

Founded in this philosophical tradition, an Asian school often sees education as a means to ultimately relate well and serve others. This abiding philosophy fosters an educational atmosphere in which the concept of interdependence becomes deeply internalized in each student. In structured group activities, researchers have shown that Asian American children possess higher levels of motivation than Euro-American middle class children when “choices were determined for them by valued in-group members.” In other words, Asian American students work hard to please their family or peers and do not see such a world-view as a stifling burden. Their motivation is joyful, or *intrinsic*, rather than *extrinsic*, a state of being with attendant and potentially negative competitive qualities.

Many Chinese children learn to embody this intrinsically motivated learning practice from an early age. Professor Jin Li has researched the motivational differences between kindergarten learners in Western cultures and those from China and other Asian cultures. Western societies might stress talent over effort in successfully completing a task; Asian societies see effort as the supreme force in any endeavor. In truth, the learning process is a moral process; hard work, which has an inherent moral quality, drives learning. Natural ability does not prescribe success; a person’s success stems from developing an ethic of hard work rather than from inchoate talents. Chinese students often have a social influence in their motivation—the constructive desire to earn respect from their family. Social influences, meanwhile, can be destructive for Western students as they compare their assessed achievements to students in

higher tracked classes. In Chinese families, the desire to please others has moved from the self-aware, competitive realm of extrinsic motivation and has become intrinsic to the student's character. These character traits arise daily in diligent classroom work. They fulfill social and moral roles through the process of learning. (Li, 3)

A greater intrinsic motivation seems apparent in very young Japanese children as well. Though Japanese and Chinese cultures differ greatly in many aspects, both cultures experienced the influence of Buddhism, and this unifying philosophy may have influenced how Japanese students learn at home and in school. The article *Cultural Support for Schooling* contrasts Japanese and Euro-American middle class expectations of school. American mothers wean their children to arrive at rapid, singular answers to problems—an approach exemplified by how mothers narrate picture books to their children. The mother prods the child to answer questions regarding plot and action, and the child chimes in with a response. American schools are set up in this manner of rapid discourse, but Japanese schools nurture a patient, intrinsic motivation for learning already nascent in school-aged children. Japanese mothers favor skills in their preschool children that promote respect for teacher figures, and they develop empathetic skills in their children. For young children, these empathetic skills might play out by watching traditional Noh dancing and imitating dancers, free from a parent's control or judgment. (Hess, 2-9)

This patient emphasis on the imagistic present may stem from Zen Buddhism, which focuses on the unfolding imagery of the present and the holiness of the ordinary moment. Such a tradition gave birth to haiku, a poetic form made more spiritual by its crystalline brevity. Rather than brandishing figurative language such as metaphor or simile, so typical in Western poetry, haiku only works with concrete imagery. But things are essentially empty; they only have meaning in their relationship with other things, like a still pond pierced by a jumping frog:

Frog jumps in pond
 water-sound
 —*Basho*

With a haiku poet's patience for distilled time, a keen eye for detail, and an attuned ear, Japanese schools often devote lengthy blocks of time to minute topics. A fourth grade teacher might spend two class hours on two haikus—an idea unfathomable in scope and practice to most Western schools. In the United States, more extrinsically motivated students look outward instead of within. Student motivation for learning often flags without any intrinsic drive, and instead students rely on an already over-burdened teacher to stimulate their waning desire to work.

In their article *Motivating Students*, Robert Sternberg and Wendy Williams note that extrinsic motivation is more effective for younger students, but such forms of motivation do not sustain older students. (Sternberg, 348) Indeed, Jean Piaget, a seminal researcher and theorist on educational psychology, seems to solve the riddle of the failing classroom: “Intrinsic motivation of thinking creates excitement; if that can be kept alive in any particular learning process, success is practically insured.” (Piaget, 125) For a love of learning to extend into high school, post-secondary school, and adulthood, one must feel an intrinsic motivation that has interdependence as its core value. This ideal model of a student mirrors the character of the Chinese student in Professor Li's article. According to these researchers, an ideal student is intrinsically interested in mastering a task while at the same time not seeking competition with others. This ideal seems reflected in the renowned psychologist Kohlberg's six-stage hierarchy of moral development, which places the extrinsic desire to please others on a lower plane than a deeply intrinsic sense of right action that seems universal. (Wilson, 192) University of Chicago

psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi believes that focusing on “interactions,” or interdependence, over “the self” enhances an individual’s quality of life:

A person who pays attention to interactions instead of worrying about the self obtains a paradoxical result. She no longer feels like a separate individual, yet her self becomes stronger, growing beyond the limits of individuality by investing psychic energy in a system in which she is included. Because of this union of the person and the system, the self emerges at a higher level of complexity. This is why ‘tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all... The self of a person who regards everything from an egocentric perspective may be more secure, but it is certain to be an impoverished one relative to that of a person who is willing to be committed, to be involved, and who is willing to pay attention to what is happening for the sake of the interaction rather than purely out of self interest. (Csikzentmihalyi, 212)

This conceptual awareness of interdependence flows well with Confucian thought and illumines the benefits of an Asian model of education, for the practical moral development of the West:

Now this way of seeing ourselves, as most basically co-members of a family, of groups, of communities, of the human race, can easily lead to a conception of social justice far more robust and substantial than that which currently dominates our moral, political, and legal thinking. If what binds us together is felt more strongly than what separates or individuates us, we can come to appreciate that every person has dignity and insist on a more equitable distribution of material goods sufficient for each person to maintain their dignity, flourish, and contribute to the flourishing of others. (Rosemont, classroom lecture handout, 3)

In theory and practice, Asian schools offer insight into models of education that stress effort and interdependence over talent and personal achievement. Each student has an intrinsic motivation because they are fulfilling their social role of interdependence: family and community take precedence over the needs of the self. Achievement cannot be credited to individual genius, but rather to the social and communal context. Perhaps educational institutions could consciously look toward beneficial Asian values and make them a mission objective, co-existing with the best of Enlightenment values. Individual students would benefit from this harmonious world-view, and on a macro level, so would America’s separate and unequal public educational system.

ASIAN MODELS OF EDUCATION, PRACTICED IN WESTERN SCHOOLS

Though Confucianism seems to perpetuate the status quo by emphasizing traditional roles and relationships, ethical role-playing remains the key to all interaction. Mencius, an acolyte of Confucius, said that if all else fails, an individual must raise the banner against the corrupt king. Metaphorically, one could see America's public educational system as the corrupt king—corrupt not in a malevolent way, but in terms of health. So many urban public schools lack nourishing resources to thrive and the moral imperative to empower and enrich students academically.

Western philosophy often presents seemingly irreconcilable dualities: mind and body, life and death, male and female, happiness and suffering, action versus contemplation. John Dewey, a philosopher of education, saw knowledge as an instrument for action, not contemplation, and yet wouldn't schools benefit from more contemplation regarding their mandates to educate and inspire moral growth?

Indeed, dualities are simply an illusion in most situations. In China, Taoism and Confucianism seem dialectic: one philosophy emphasizes free-flowing intuition, the other a committed practice to social roles. Yet many Chinese citizens consider themselves both Taoists and Confucianists—reserving the harmonious ideas of Taoism for their personal spirituality and Confucianism for their social and moral life. A true education must reconcile dualities, and this occurs even in China, so well known for its insularity and Communism. In its December 8, 2006 edition, *The Christian Science Monitor* put a deceptive headline on an otherwise exemplary change in Chinese education: *Confucius re-enters China's schools to parry Western ways*. The article then discusses how some Chinese schools are now blending values from the West into their curriculum even as they emphasize the moral teachings of Confucius:

As the government asks schools...to focus more on classic Chinese literature and art—including the teachings of Confucius, who emphasized traditional values and a respect for elders—recent national curriculum reforms also call for more creativity and critical thinking in the classrooms,

including some approaches to teaching and learning more traditionally found in the United States and Europe.

In Beijing's government funded Confucian School, East and West once again meet in harmony. According to the April 23, 2007 edition of the *Taipei Times*:

The school hopes to combine the best of traditional China with the great classics of the world and is aiming to train "human beings who know their culture as well as the advanced culture of the West," said Tao Ye, another school official.

In the same way, American public schools could blend traditional Western educational values with untapped Asian values; such values are not oil and water but rather peanut butter and jelly—each value-set serves its own complementary purpose. Schools could emphasize not only rapid-response action, assessed subject matter knowledge, and individual achievement; they might also embrace a conceptual development of interdependence within the consciousness of each student, and in this way, affect their moral development. As Professor Henry Rosemont states, "For the Confucians, civility thus becomes personal, not merely social, and by following custom, tradition, and ritual, we mature psychologically..." (Rosemont, 16) Civics class and health class do not have provenance over moral development; students should understand that learning itself has a moral dimension to it, with hard work and societal roles engrained in memory and practice. Like the ideal Chinese student, all students should strive for an intrinsic motivation with interdependence and not competition at its core. If such Asian educational ideas are actively brought into the discussion of western education, then American society will have remedied some serious ills in its system.

Even if society seems unable to ameliorate entrenched social inequities, perhaps urban public schools can learn from successes in Asian models of education. Public charter schools, which have risen to challenge underperforming urban public schools, might have the freedom to

balance practical education standards with new ways of thinking, which might incorporate moral development more transparently into learning.

One such Boston-based public charter school, the Academy of the Pacific Rim (APR), has already taken this step. A Chinese-American dentist named Robert Guen founded APR ten years ago, out of concern that Boston schools were not addressing the values and needs of its Chinese families. Yet the school now serves a distinctly non-Asian student body: only 3% Asian and 54% below the poverty line. Many of the students hail from Haitian immigrant families. APR students take courses on ethics and Mandarin to prepare for a twelve-day trip to China. As quoted on the APR web site, school director Spencer Blasdale shows a concern for ritual, patience, and interdependence, at once Confucian and Zen Buddhist: “Our first priority is to establish hundreds of small rituals, routines, and rules for how we work together. Building a culture of achievement allows for great teaching and learning to occur.” Students learn to embody Japanese words: *kaizen*, which means “the continual improvement of the whole,” and *gambatte*, which means “never give up.” According to the APR web site, students and faculty greet each other with *gambatte*, the Japanese equivalent of “good luck.”

Embodying not only Japanese but Confucian Chinese values, the school claims that a moral education in school, based off time-honored Asian values, will help students to become more aware and more able in their tasks:

In our culture of achievement, effort (and not luck or innate ability) determines success...Also from the East we emphasize a person’s obligations to the community and blend that with acknowledging the rights and achievements of the individual. The spirit of *kazien*, or continual improvement of the whole, captures the pillar of our school. For example, students are responsible for cleaning...serving and clearing lunch...we do not have a full-time janitor or maintenance staff...students work together in small groups called *han* in their academic work. As in the East, we are intentional about teaching character and practicing character virtues.

Group work finds balance through in-depth individual counseling and after-school instruction for students in need. Confucians, after all, value social interaction above all else, and they place firm moral value on the *particulars* of social interaction. “Confucian morality is particularistic,” writes Professor Rosemont, “in that it insists that at all times we do what is appropriate, depending on who we are interacting with, and when.” (Rosemont, 14) Learning how to interact amicably with peers and teachers is just as vital as accruing subject matter knowledge, like algebra. In this moral view, the smallest of interactions—writing an answer on the chalkboard, sweeping the floors, picking up rubbish from the hallways—helps give meaning to life. Students might not fully understand universal moral views as posited by Kant and abstract forms of knowledge, such as algebra, but surely they can learn from the sensual particulars of Confucian practice. For instance, one student might not understand the word “responsibility” until she learns to sweep up her own trash from the classroom floor. Concrete experience leads to a truly deep form of understanding.

These transparent Asian ideals of moral development, so unusual in an American public school, have borne national recognition and standardized results. Profiled in the October 18, 2004 edition of *The New Yorker*, a complex article about the trials and tribulations of the school ends with a note of quantifiable hope: on national Stanford 9 tests, sixth-grade students rose from the 39th percentile to the 51st; in math, they ranked in the 78th percentile. 82% of tenth grade seniors demonstrated good or excellent English skills, and that number rose to 90% for similar skills tested in math. The school has experienced exponential growth in enrollment and may serve as a leader and a model for other schools interested in accessing Asian models of education.

With a Confucian's eye for the particular in social situations, the article chooses one student as its central character. Rousseau Mize, a child of Haitian immigrants, possesses a sensitivity that belies his robust frame. Teachers and administrators encouraged Rousseau and his natural gifts for language, despite his hesitancy to demonstrate and practice them. Through the course of his studies at APR, he begins to actively understand the transcendent value of hard work and to care for his other classmates as if their fortunes affected his own. He attains an intrinsically moral world-view that may never have come to light in a public school that stresses only Western values of personal achievement. The article closes with Rousseau on the steps of Boston's Faneuil Hall. He is just about to deliver the commencement address to his graduating class, but then pauses to think. "The next time life got hard—and it would get hard, he suspected—there was something he was keen to remember: that once, when challenged, he rose." (Boo, 175)

CONCLUSION

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. appears on the Academy of the Pacific Rim's web site: *Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.* Dr. King understood that education is not just about performing a task well and demonstrating that knowledge for assessment; education is an act of moral courage. Education is not solely a means to a material end, but a daily process in which ideal, core values collide with an unpleasant reality. Too often schools neglect to cultivate a moral inner-being. Those with a well-developed morality carry with them a constellation of transferable life skills, which last long after other content lessons have faded away from memory.

The discussion of morality in school remains politically dangerous. Our society has a fractured identity and moral belief system; the United States is kaleidoscopic in its dazzling,

wheeling cultures and histories. Though America operates upon an Enlightenment foundation of personal freedom and rational inquiry, modern and agreed-upon concepts of morality prove elusive.

Yet a moral education may focus solely on the process of learning, and within that process, the universal ideals of hard work and interdependence. If schools can teach core values such as hard work and interdependence, or at least make those core values into a mantra, a student who has truly learned will find that success in life derives from engaging with society, creatively and practically; at the same time, inevitable setbacks will seem less lonely. It seems like a great challenge to promote interdependence in a society that values independent achievement. Yet schools have the power to reconcile false dualities, bringing Eastern and Western values into a more harmonious and ennobling world-view.

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