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Reflective Essay # 2 –  
Goals of Education in Asian and American Cultures

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for TED 665

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February 21, 2008

Traditional Chinese proverbs such as: “The sea of learning knows no bounds; only through diligence may its shore be reached” and “If you don’t succeed, try again.” (p. 296) illustrate that educational success in the Asian culture is viewed as the result of a single notion – “hard work”. This paper will examine how this and other key educational goals differ in the American and the Asian cultures.

Traditional Chinese proverbs such as: “The sea of learning knows no bounds; only through diligence may its shore be reached” and “If you don’t succeed, try again.” (p. 296) illustrate that educational success in the Asian culture is viewed as the result of a single notion – “hard work”. This paper will first examine how this and other key educational goals differ in the American and the Asian cultures, referencing David Y. F. Ho’s findings in *Cognitive Socialization in Confucian Heritage Cultures* and finally offer ideas of how the two cultures can learn from one another when it comes to education.

First, Ho explains that in regards to the overall goals of education, Confucian educators believe that diligence is the key to successful academic performance (p. 296). But while the belief of success through diligence can be agreeably true, the pressure of succeeding can also work negatively, since many Chinese students repeat the same grade or take the same university entrance examination, often more than once, only to have their sense of frustration identified (p. 299). Also, most teachers in public schools in Taiwan require pupils to memorize every lesson in the Chinese language textbooks. The stress on repeated practice is reflected in the fact that students are expected to and spend an inordinate amount of time on homework (p. 299). Predictably, immigrant parents from Hong Kong and Taiwan to the United States often complain that not enough homework is assigned to their children. As Ho points out it is prudent for all to ask though, if overstressing the amount of homework to be done represents a misguided belief that quantity automatically translates into quality (p. 301). Even in the US, Chinese-American students are very strategic in their studies; examination-oriented only and studied only the materials on which they would be examined (p. 308) – a flawed practice not conducive to retaining information.

Secondly, Ho states that the ideal Chinese school environment is orderly and authoritarian; and strict discipline is emphasized and in line with the Confucian ideal of filial piety, where teachers are seen as authority figures, who are not be questioned or challenged (p.297). Their role is to impart knowledge; to instruct, not to stimulate students, while the typical teaching methods are formal, expository and teacher initiated. Students are treated as passive recipients, not active seekers, of knowledge and learn an implicit behavioral rule in the classroom: Avoid making mistakes and thereby being ridiculed - the safest strategy is to keep silent (p. 298). But there is strong evidence that the traditional authoritarian and passive Asian learning styles are not conducive to the development of critical intellectual faculties advantageous for learning at higher levels of education (p.297). Therefore, one could suggest that Chinese teachers could learn new strategies from observing the inner workings of the diverse classrooms of the United States, where students are actively engaged in the learning process and teachers are increasingly encouraging students to explore concepts through discovery learning; diving into the process of inquiry.

Thirdly, according to Ho, Japanese American mothers expect early mastery on skills indicating emotional maturity, self-control and social courtesy (p. 296). By contrast mothers in the United States expected mastery at an early age on items indicating verbal assertiveness and social skills with peers. Also, mothers in mainland China attributed their children's failures predominantly to lack of effort, where Chinese-Americans mother viewed effort as important, but also considered other factors. By contrast Euro-American attributed failure least to effort (p. 296). I would argue that the view in the United States is that effort is essential in the learning process, no one can doubt that, but

effort alone is not the end all; having access to resources and being engaged in a nurturing learning environment are also necessary for students to succeed.

Finally, a very distinct Chinese educational goal is the importance of succeeding in the field of mathematics. Chinese (both mainland and Taiwan), Japanese children consistently surpass US children in mathematics achievement (p. 307). But as Ho states upon reflection, the superior achievement of Chinese and Japanese children in mathematics is hardly surprising at all, given that people usually do better on tasks to which they attach importance and on which they spend a great deal of time (p. 308). The findings in relation to Asian high achievement in the field of mathematics should encourage US teachers and students to re-examine the emphasis currently placed in mathematics, attaining the goal of increasing US academic standings in both mathematics and science.

In summary, both Asian and American cultures can learn from each other when it comes to traditionally goals of education. But as Confucius tells us “The scholar who cherishes the love of comfort is not fit to be deemed a scholar” – encouraging us all to remain open to examining different ideals and finding the right kind of combination that creates a successful learning environment. For those teachers in the United States who often complain that the newly arrived Asian students typically do not participate in class, show little interest in extracurricular activities and are too preoccupied with examinations, Ho offers an interesting point to ponder: cultural incompatibility is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather incompatibility presents a challenge to the student and thus an opportunity to grow. These individuals may even serve as models of enculturation for the creation of world citizens in the not-too-distant future (p. 304).

Ho, David Y.F. (1994). *Cognitive Socialization in Confucian Heritage Cultures*. Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers. Hillsdale, NJ.