

MIXED: Educational Perspectives from Families of Mixed East and West Educational Background

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Abstract

Will my children's creativity be hindered if I place them within the rigidity of an East Asian school? Conversely, could my children's math and science skills benefit from the high expectations of an East Asian curriculum and teacher? The purpose of this study is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to demonstrate that comparison between Eastern and Western educational traditions can be framed in terms of a dialectic concerning students' development, autonomy, learning environment, and curricula. Secondly, it is to analyze the substance and effects of this dialectic in the context of 15 families of mixed educational background situated between Eastern and Western educational traditions. These families in Hong Kong have access to educational opportunities for their children in adherence to educational styles associated with either Eastern or Western culture, or a combination of both. This study seeks to illuminate the possible dominance, abandonment, and/or synthesis of cultural background when evaluating schooling options for children in families of mixed educational background. The study finds that these families largely inclined towards educational ideals more associated with Eastern characterizations while their children were at the primary level of education. In stark contrast, they unanimously favored Western propensities in education when their children were in secondary school and beyond. This study concludes that there may be wider ramifications of this model of intercultural compromise beyond the level of the intercultural family, particularly as it relates to broader global and comparative educational discourse surrounding notions of how creativity and innovation may be fostered in culturally defined educational contexts.

Keywords

Chinese learner, intercultural families, East vs. West education, creativity development in education, memorization, rote learning, chalk-and-talk teaching, East Asian schooling, high-stakes testing, STEM vs. Liberal Arts education, Tiger Moms and Education

Framing the East vs. West Dialectic in Education

The purpose of this study is to first demonstrate that cross-cultural notions of creativity development in education have been strongly influenced by debates regarding the four topics of students' development, autonomy, learning

environment, and curricula. Thus, comparison between Eastern and Western educational

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traditions can be framed in terms of a dialectic concerning these four categories. Secondly, this study aims to analyze the substance and effects of this cross-cultural dialectic over how to develop creativity and foster academic success in the context of 15 families of mixed educational background situated between Eastern and Western educational traditions.

Characterizations of Eastern and Western traditions in education can be framed in terms of a dialectic consisting of different focal points that some have called attention to as to “what matters” in encouraging academic performance and innovation and creativity in certain educational contexts described as adhering to Eastern or Western traditions. For each concern regarding students’ educational endeavors, there are two different topics of debate that feature prominently within the *East vs. West Dialectic in Education*.

The purpose of this paper is *not* to argue that “Eastern” or “Western” educational traditions do indeed universally adhere to the characterizations described below, although that may be a worthwhile debate. Rather, the paper does assert that these educational traditions have often been framed in cultural terms in recent years, and the efficacy of these

educational activities and learning environments has often been tied to the academic performance of students within culturally demarcated East vs. West delineations, and many of these are also relevant to how they influence creative development. The chart below outlines the substance of these debates according to what educationally significant activity students are perceived to be doing, as well as what some perceive to be significant about the educational environment of these activities. For each of these debate topics, the characterization is of East vs. West, or in other words, with the Eastern characterization of education on the left of the dichotomy.

The categories described in Table 1 arose out of a review of both academic literature as well as of popular education discourse, and their formation is further detailed in the following literature review. In addition, although the usage of terms such as “creativity” and “innovation” may fluctuate in definition throughout the literature review as employed by various actors and texts; for the ultimate purposes of this paper creativity will be defined as “novel” and “useful” solutions applicable to specific “social contexts” (Dow, 2016, p. 16). The underlying issue that this study seeks to address consists of both a micro- and macro-dimension. At the micro-level, this study investigates how East/West intercultural couples negotiate disparate

Table 1: *The East vs. West Dialectic in Education*

Concerns Regarding Students’	Debate Topics	
Development	Memorization vs. Deep Learning	Developed Intelligence vs. Innate Intelligence
Autonomy	Tiger Moms vs. Permissive Parents	Chalk-and-Talk Teaching vs. Participatory Pedagogy
Learning Environment	Collectivism vs. Individualism	Uniform Requirements vs. Diverse Requirements
Curricula	STEM Subjects vs. Liberal Arts	Standardized, High-Stakes Testing vs. Diverse Evaluation

educational traditions in order to make educational decisions for their children. At the macro-level, this study argues that the compromise and synthesis exercised by these intercultural couples may be a window to understanding how more global educational trends may also synthesize and reach mutual understanding in the presence of ever-increasing intercultural comparison and exchange.

Literature Review

Concerns Regarding Students' Development

Memorization vs. Deep Learning

Does rote learning inhibit creativity? Eastern education is often claimed to place greater emphasis on “surface-level” memorization techniques, as Chinese students have been “consistently” observed to be more “structure-oriented,” as opposed to “depth-oriented,” in their approach to learning, while Western education is often thought to have a greater emphasis on “deeper level understanding” (H. Cheng, Andrade, & Yan, 2012). For example, with respect to linguistic representation, in both Japanese and Mandarin Chinese, the word used for “study” and “learn” is pragmatically synonymous in meaning and in usage with “imitate” and “copy” (Goodman, 2003, p. 17). Educators have argued that too much of a focus on memorization will impede the more necessary acquisition of deeper level of knowledge (C. K. K. Chan & Rao, 2009; Deng, 2012, p. 107). Historically, some within China have blamed China’s high rate of illiteracy on “rote learning” and, “in order to place an emphasis on understanding instead of rote learning,” some encouraged a “Western pedagogical approach” in place of these “traditional Chinese teaching methods” (Bai, 2005, pp. 191-192). The education system in Shanghai, widely claimed to be one of “best performing in the world” (OECD, 2010), has

apparently in part achieved such a status by seeking to “overcome” some of the “problems caused by its cultural heritage” by discouraging the rote memorization techniques typified in traditional Eastern schools (K. Cheng, 2011, pp. 30-31). Proponents of educational reform in Japan have claimed that Japan wants to “move from a concentration on rote-learning to more individualized, project style teaching” (Goodman, 2003, p. 22).

However, these memorization techniques have not been considered to be completely without merit, and in Japan a curriculum that relies on extensive memorization has been described as the “glory of the Japanese education system” (Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011, pp. 86-87). Others have cited memorization as one aspect of the “paradox of the Chinese learner” as, despite the extensive usage of these memorization techniques, Chinese students still seem to acquire an exceptional degree of understanding of the material, which some claim they simply could not demonstrate had they not attained substantial depth in their knowledge acquisition (Kember & Watkins, 2010). In response to this, “memorizing and understanding” has been touted as “the key to the paradox,” as Chinese students purportedly use these surface-level memorization techniques as a *means* to gain deeper level understanding, and not as a substitute for it (Marton, Dall’Alba, & Tse, 1996). Finally, although some have attributed an overemphasis on memorization to a stifling of creative expression, educators from the United Kingdom have argued that they should learn from Japan that “rote learning...need not be at the expense of creativity but should complement more informal learning” (Phillips, 2003, p. 177).

Developed Intelligence vs. Innate Intelligence

Do views of innate intelligence inhibit the potential for the development of creativity and intelligence? The “classical view of intelligence” in the West has been one that regarded intelligence as “genetically determined” and a “biopsychological potential” within an individual that can “activated” in certain educational settings (Moseley, 2005, pp. 206-207). Recently, there have been many challenges to the notion of intelligence as an innate trait, and many of these objections have originated in East/West cross-cultural consideration. For instance, in Japan, the claim is made that children learn through “imitation and effort, in opposition to the Western idea of education wherein the child is seen as having innate abilities which need to be drawn out by the teacher” (Goodman, 2003, p. 17), and that in Japan “doing well on exams is about how hard you work, not how smart you are” (Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011, p. 85). Some have attributed this notion of intelligence as a skill that can be developed to Confucian influence:

[D]ifferences in intelligence, according to Confucius, do not inhibit one's educability, but the incentive and attitude to learn does. Therefore, although Confucius did not refuse to teach anybody who wanted to learn, he would have refused to teach a person who was not eager to learn. (Lee, 1996, p. 29)

In his book on how intelligence should be regarded as a skill that can be developed, Nisbett (2009) further argues the superiority of the East Asian characterization of intelligence:

There is no mystery about why Asian and Asian American children work harder. Asians do not need to read this book to find out that intelligence and intellectual accomplishment are highly malleable. Confucius set this matter straight twenty-five hundred years ago. He distinguished between two sources of ability, one by

nature—a gift from Heaven—and one by dint of hard work. Asians today still believe that intellectual accomplishment...is primarily a matter of hard work, whereas European Americans are more likely to believe it is mostly a matter of innate ability or having a good teacher. (p. 158)

Intelligence as a matter of nurture, rather than nature, is therefore linked to explicitly East Asian cultural values and viewpoints, and many are speculating as to whether this may be one reason to explain East Asian academic success. In addition, this debate is highly relevant to the topic of creativity, as many researchers have specifically linked the notion of developed and malleable intelligence to “creative achievement” (Dweck, 2006, pp. 11-12).

Concerns Regarding Students' Autonomy Tiger Moms vs. Permissive Parents

Does strict parenting squash creative development? Few publications have ignited such fierce debate surrounding the role of culturally delineated parenting styles, and their relevance towards child achievement as *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua, 2011). Chua's severe and demanding parenting style has been held up in popular imagination as one indispensable consideration in accounting for the academic success of the East Asian community, as well as for the lack of competitiveness and excellence in American education (Paul, 2011; Howard, 2011; Alden, 2016, pp. 127-152). However, others have argued that this type of parenting is ultimately destructive towards child development, irrespective of the short-term academic success it may help students achieve (Kohler, Kilgo, & Christensen, 2012; Derbyshire, 2011; Ritchie, 2011). Others have claimed that this type of parenting is a ridiculous, harmful, and misinformed misrepresentation of “Chinese” parenting, and that the actual parenting styles

utilized by Asians are far more nuanced and complex (Juang, Qin, & Park, 2013; Lui & Rollock, 2013).

Regardless, this idea of culturally influenced parenting practices being linked to academic, professional, and personal success by no means had its initiation with Chua's controversial memoir. The possible relationship between culturally defined parenting techniques and children's overall well-being was a topic of interest and scholarly exploration also in the years leading up to this contentious chronicle's release (Pong, Johnston, & Chen, 2010; Hayashino & Chopra, 2009). Moreover, the possible extension of parenting practices into considerations of how they contribute towards the efficacy of authority figures in schools was also an area of interest prior to 2011 (Ho, 2001). However, irrespective of when this debate began, or whether or not the debate is accurately labeled as one of "East" and "West;" the evidence of a culturally demarcated discourse on the appropriate demands and expectations placed on students by authority figures is quite apparent. Moreover, one of the chief criticisms in the popular debate concerning the "Tiger Mom" approach to parenting is that it impairs the development of creativity (Singer, 2011; Ticktin, 2016).

Chalk-and-Talk Teaching vs Participatory Pedagogy

Do heavily didactic, "chalk-and-talk" teaching methods discourage creativity? The disputed qualities and/or deficiencies of the "Chinese" teacher is another fundamental component of the much discussed "paradox of the Chinese learner" (Mok et al., 2001; J. Wang, 2013). This part of the paradox surrounds "behaviorist" and "constructivist" approaches to pedagogy. "Behaviorist" techniques are thought to involve passive students and lecturing teachers, and have been claimed to be ultimately less effective when compared to "constructivist" techniques

that allow students to be active and participatory in building their own knowledge base. The "paradox" with respect to Chinese teachers is that they do indeed appear to require passivity on the part of their students; nonetheless they seem quite effective with regard to student outcomes (Watkins, 1996; Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2009, p. 264). The success of Chinese students has indeed led some to wonder if "chalk-and-talk teaching may be the best way after all" (Donnelly, 2014).

However, some in East Asia have seen this teaching style as detrimental to student success. For instance, in 2004 Singapore instituted the *Teach Less Learn More* educational campaign, as it was thought that its students were learning too passively (Stewart, 2011, p. 120). Others claim that this binary construct of teaching practice is far too simplistic, and that Chinese teachers have more sophisticated methods of maintaining students' attention (Ho, 2001, p. 112; Cortazzi & Jin, 2001). Some claim that certain Western-produced educational reforms haven't been as successful in East Asia due to fundamental differences in culture, and that teachers in China involve students in their own learning in different ways than in the West (C. K. Chan, 2001). Others have argued that "collaborative" and "peer" learning techniques that require greater student participation and activity are "latent" for Chinese students, or have other manifestations than what are seen in the West (Tang, 1996; R. W. M. Chan & Chong, 2012). Regardless, a culturally defined pedagogical dialectic is readily apparent. Teachers in East Asian contexts are perceived to talk more in the classroom than teachers in Western contexts, and many are debating as to whether this contributes to, or hinders, student achievement. Moreover, this debate has direct relevance to notions of creativity, as "chalk-and-talk" and "traditional" teaching methods have been cited by some to be directly detrimental to the development of innovation and creativity

(Quintin, 2009; Omdal & Graefe, 2016, pp. 207-208).

Concerns Regarding Students' Learning Environment

Collectivism vs. Individualism

Do individualistic cultures inherently foster creativity? Some argue that East Asia has psychological and social orientations that afford greater consideration to their environment, and regard their place in a collective society as having greater importance than their individuality (Lew, 1998; Sun, 2013). Some link this collective psychological and social orientation to their surroundings as one factor of East Asian academic success (Salili, 1996; Hau & Ho, 2010). Tucker & Ruzzi (2011) similarly claim that one cannot begin to understand Japan's success in education without understanding the "influence of traditional values," especially the concept of "group harmony," which obligates students to uphold the reputation of their schools and families through their individual actions (pp. 83-84). While they note that one of the chief reasons that Japan looks to the West in education is for ideas about how to "teach creativity," however, they assert this focus of attention to be somewhat misplaced in that:

Western nations do not teach creativity. They put more value on the individual than on the group, whereas the Asian nations place a higher value on the group. In Asia, the saying goes, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down. (p. 98)

Similarly, the claim is that: "the object of Japanese education...has never been to train the individual for independent action, but to train him for co-operative action—to fit him to occupy an exact place in the mechanism of a right society" (Hearn in Phillips, 2003, p. 171). As such, Japanese education reform has "advocated greater individualism" (Cummings, 2003, p. 33). The concepts of individuality and creativity are

hotly debated in Japan, as the concept of individualism is linked to "ideas of selfishness," which has "very negative connotations in the Japanese context" (Goodman, 2003, p. 16).

Fundamentally though, rather than a collective mindset being an inherently predisposed trait of Asian people, some claim that greater encouragement towards an "interdependent" mindset likewise encourages a "holistic," as opposed to "analytic," perspective of surroundings, of which the latter notices and fixates upon items on isolation (Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2010; Nisbett, 2009, pp. 162-168). In other words, if a collective mindset, which enables "holistic thinking," is indeed associated with higher academic success, or vice versa, then it can and should be trained. Therefore, the worth of Western practices that place greater emphasis on individuals as a purported means of fostering creativity, and the counter posed Eastern practices of priming and cultivating a collective, interdependent mentality, are thus an important consideration in the *East vs. West Dialectic in Education*.

Uniform Requirements vs Diverse Requirements

Does curricular rigidity destroy creativity in students? In commendation of Japan as a "perennial league leader" in international educational system comparisons, Tucker & Ruzzi (2011) argue that, "Japanese students have done so well...because of the curriculum" and that this curriculum has been marked by "very little flexibility" (p. 86). In stark contrast, while nevertheless employing the exact same language of description, Cave (2003) claims Japanese education is, "perennially in crisis, and perennially in need of reform—at least to many domestic commentators" and "problems tend to be blamed on the same features of Japanese education—its supposed rigidity, uniformity, and exam-centeredness" (p. 87). A common

understanding is that, “Western education philosophies often emphasize the importance of creativity at the cost of ‘learning the basics,’ while in Japan the emphasis is the other way around” (Goodman, 2003, p. 17). Also, in possible explanation of East Asian success in international comparative exams, the East Asian model of a “conducive school disciplinary climate” has been espoused as one likely reason for East Asian success in international exams, and thereby perhaps worthy of consideration in non-Eastern contexts (Ma, Jong, & Yuan, 2013). Similarly, the argument has been made that, “Chinese, Korean and Japanese children are groomed for the demands of schooling before they get there, in a way that Western children usually are not” (Watkins & Biggs, 2001).

However, those in the East do not universally share this positive perception of an environment of uniformity and rigidity. Zhao (2012) claims that China is “flunking innovation and creativity” with its inflexible educational structure. Modern Chinese preschools have borrowed ideas from the West in order to incorporate less regimentation (Tobin, 2009, p. 80). The need to develop creativity in students is seen as a key area of challenge and change that is being pursued in Hong Kong, China, Korea and Taiwan (Lei & Zhang, 2011). Moreover, South Korea’s high-pressure, rigid education system has been argued to be tantamount to “child abuse” and an “assault” upon its nation’s young people (Koo, 2014). Moreover, some in the United States have begun to blame an overly “scripted curriculum” as a “barrier” to the development of creativity in American classrooms (Omdal & Graefe, 2016, p. 211).

However, some in Japan have countered that, because of Japan’s high ranking on international educational league tables, it is “utterly irrational” for Japan to look to the United States for ideas on education reform, particularly with regard to possibly adopting the practice of grouping students according to

ability, rather than heterogeneously, as they have been done traditionally in Japan. Instead, the model of presenting every student with exactly the same curriculum and requirements is maintained (Lewis, 2011, p. 243). So, while the West admires the academic success generated in the highly regimented and structured environments of the East, the East also at times looks towards the West as to how to generate creativity and original expression in contexts of individual emphasis, while also considering whether or not to maintain its traditional practices of exacting universal, uniform requirements on students.

Concerns Regarding Students’ Curricula *STEM Subjects vs. Liberal Arts*

Do liberal arts curricula effectively develop creativity in students? In illustration of the high regard that many Western countries have for East Asian prowess in imparting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) knowledge and skills, the United Kingdom has made plans to bring in math teachers from China in order to improve the mathematics performance of the students there (Paton, 2014). According to Nisbett (2003), Chinese historically have not been interested in exploring the unknown, but instead have had a “genius for practicality,” and “have always been far more interested in the pragmatic application of knowledge than with abstract theorizing for its own sake” (p. 8 & p. 40). Chinese psychology is said to have a fundamental aversion to “abstract and complex theories,” and instead is “satisfied with surface solutions, order and stability” (Zhang & Wei, 2011, p. 15). Many in Asia have considered this to be a deficiency in the Asian education model. For example, there has been a call for Chinese scholarship to loosen its focus on utility and pragmatism and consider embracing the more Western orientation towards an exploration of knowledge for knowledge’s sake (Yang, 2011). There has been a

push for Chinese schools to become more “quality oriented” with a greater focus on “holistic development” (Cravens, Chu, & Zhao, 2011).

However, in popular documentaries critical of the American public school system, such as *Two Million Minutes* and *Waiting for Superman*, American students are portrayed as overly self-confident, thoroughly and dangerously unaware of how inferior their math and science skills are relative to their Asian peers (Guggenheim, 2010; Heeter, 2008). However, others have cautioned that an over-emphasis on STEM subjects is placing students in danger of becoming too narrowly focused in education and ultimately unable to adapt to changing economic landscapes (Charette, 2013; Collins, 2002). Nonetheless, many in the West are claiming that Eastern education is setting a better example with regard to STEM education (Duncan, 2010; Jackson, 2012; Noguchi, 2016), while many feel that East Asian education is not broad enough, thus failing to instill “creativity and character” (Chew, 2016).

High-Stakes, Standardized Testing vs. Diverse Evaluation

Does high-stakes testing quell creative exploration and learning? One of the most widely touted developments in educational restructuring initiated by the West is the use of quantified learning outcomes and high-stakes exams in order to increase “accountability” and “transparency” in pursuit of educational outcomes (World Bank Group, 2011, pp. 5-6). In support of the results and structure of its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) claims that:

Setting standards and showing students how to meet them matters. Most of the high-performing countries have developed world-class academic

standards for their students and almost all have incorporated those standards into a system of external examinations that are used to construct clear paths into the workforce and good jobs or to the next stage of education or both. Indeed, PISA shows that the existence of such external examinations is positively associated with the overall performance of school systems. (OECD, 2010, p. 104)

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reform in the U.S., “was based on the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education” (Moore Jr., 2012). The reform’s proponents assert that, “Accountability systems have been developed almost universally across the states to deal with the aggregate performance shortcomings that are now widely recognized” (Hanushek & Raymond, 2001, p. 368). Negative stereotypes had previously prevented East Asian countries from being used as a reference point to guide educational development, but now this has changed due to a sense “crisis” reflected in Western countries, and as fostered by their outstanding results in tests like PISA (Trohler, 2013). Concerning the benefits of these exams, some argue that Japan is highly meritocratic precisely because “merit is determined by exams” and to do well on these exams one must work hard over long periods of time (Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011, p. 85). Some argue that a fundamental commonality within East Asian countries is not a “vernacular” adherence to Confucian values, but rather an adherence towards a high-stakes testing framework (J. L. Wang, 2013).

However, the benefits of these exams are by no means conclusive, and debated extensively within these regions. Within Hong Kong, there have been inquiries into how students cope with the pressure of these exams and whether or not they should be amended to improve overall student achievement and development (Carless,

2011). Singapore is considered as one of the top performers in education, however it wants to change its “content-heavy curriculum that is reinforced by high-stakes assessments” (Stewart, 2011, p. 132). In Japan, the criticisms of their long-established assessment system are particularly harsh (Hawkins & Su, 2003, p. 351), and also Goodman (2003) cites Dore’s “memorable” and abrasive critique that claims:

One has to think of education in Japan as an enormously elaborated, very expensive testing system with some educational spin-offs, rather than as the other way around. In order to make the system appear meritocratic, the curriculum has been the same in all schools (public and private); multiple choice examinations have been favored over essays...two main groups, employers and parents...have been pushing for reform of this system for the past twenty years. (p. 20)

Whitburn (2003) also claims that this high-pressure system has been “alleged to be a contributory cause of increasing behavioral difficulties” for many students are unable to deal with the stress of these examinations especially among lower secondary school (p. 152). Standardized testing systems are accused of failing to encourage creativity in Japanese and Korean students in favor of producing students who are “only being good at getting high scores in academic achievement tests” (Park, 2013, p. 72). The same is very much true in China as well as its college entrance exam is at the “epicenter” of tension and debate concerning China’s educational reform (Ross & Wang, 2011). The Chinese education system is considered to be too exam-oriented and ultimately inadequate in developing well-rounded students (Zhao, 2014a). China, particularly Shanghai, is currently considering moving from some of its high-stakes testing practices, and apparently even mulling over whether to opt out of further

participation in PISA entirely, despite its massive achievements in that international comparative exercise (Zhao, 2013; Zhao, 2014b). Some have claimed that countries like the United States would be foolish to try and emulate its antiquated traditional assessment frameworks (Coppola & Zhao, 2012). Ultimately, the argument against these tests is that they fail to develop an atmosphere of creativity and innovation and entrepreneurship crucial for students in a rapidly evolving, unpredictable economic landscape (Meyer & Zhao, 2013; Omdal & Graefe, 2016, pp. 210-211).

Intercultural Marriage and Education

Foundational to the premise of this study is the quandary as to whether certain cultural elements of education can be synthesized, or whether they must remain as insoluble entities, incapable of adjustment. Li (2012) makes an impassioned case for the latter:

East Asian educational systems were initially eager but clumsy copies of the American and European education systems, which only gave the appearance of Western practice. Today they are mandating Western-style practice (e.g., emulating Western children’s free-exploration and creativity on the school ground). As cultural exchange deepens, we have reasons to believe that cultural differences may one day disappear and that we all will reemerge as one culture under the sun...however...research evidence...suggests that the basic patterns of cultural learning models are tenacious and unlikely to melt in grand unification...Indeed, despite all these melting characteristics, comparative research on Western and East Asian psychology, child development, and education has overwhelmingly demonstrated very large and persistent cultural variations that show no signs of

disappearing. This evidence casts doubt directly on the forecast that all culturally diverse people would one day become alike under one culture, specifically more like Westerners. (pp. 331-332)

If this assertion is true, that distinct and irreconcilable Eastern and Western educational approaches and practices will remain unaffected by increased global cultural exchange, then an interesting testing ground for this claim would be in the context of an East/West intercultural marriage. In his book on intercultural marriage, Romano (1988) posits a model of four possibilities of adaptations made by intercultural couples: 1) Submission – one partner gives up his/her culture and submits the culture of the spouse, 2) Compromise – both partners give and take certain elements of their own culture, 3) Obliteration – both partners abandon their own culture and adopt an entirely new one, or 4) Consensus – neither partner changes their culture and they both agree to live with their differences (pp. 120-126). In reference to this model, Waters (2005) found that many East/West intercultural couples adopted the model of “compromise” with regard to their home customs and lifestyle practices (p. 81). If Romano’s model of intercultural marriage can be considered on a global scale and applied to education, Li (2012) is arguing above that, contrary to popular opinion, the world is not adopting a “submission” model in sole adherence to Western educational models that “mandate...free-exploration and creativity”. Rather, globalization is producing a “consensus” model of education in which the East remains as the East, and the West as the West, neither adapting to the other’s practices, but each content to recognize their own indigenous strengths.

However, intercultural couples cannot realistically adopt a “consensus” approach when it comes to their children’s education. While this approach may work for other customs that

intercultural couples can do separately and individually, such as what to eat for dinner, or what holidays to celebrate; *one* child simply cannot attend *both* a Western *and* an Eastern-oriented school for the entirety of K-12 education. If then the assertion holds true that these East/West educational traditions are not able to merge, then it should also follow that the approach adopted by more intercultural couples is one of “submission,” in adherence to *either* Eastern *or* Western inclinations. However, if Waters’ findings regarding East/West couples’ lifestyles also holds true for their thoughts and decisions regarding their children’s education, then some level of “compromise” and synthesis between the two traditions should become apparent.

Research Methodology

In comparing the educational cultures of “East” and “West,” and with lumping in countries as different from each other as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, it is a danger to present them as “monolithic.” Instead, this study argues that within and across cultures, “values are discussed collectively--they have to be examined in the context of individual choices” (Mason, 2007, p. 166). Indeed, as Mason further asserts:

[C]ulture is not a fixed entity that shapes the lives of the individuals. It is more accurate to speak of a dialectical process between people and their social environments, which involves also the shaping of the culture by those people as they manipulate its conventional symbols and to create new meanings. (p. 172)

This “dialectical process” is of particular importance to this study, as individuals from different educational and cultural backgrounds in an intercultural marriage must form a discussion as to how they will construct a new, joint family culture that can inform and guide education for their children. Ultimately in this study, the comparison is not necessarily of the

cultures of these places, but rather of the mediated *perspectives* of cultures of intercultural couples as they evaluate the hybrid educational options available to their children, and as influenced by their respective, and combined, cultural experiences. So in that sense, the comparison in this study is a more indirect comparison of cultures, and may more accurately be compared to Tobin's (2009) work on "multi-vocal ethnography." Similar to Tobin, this study does not endeavor to analyze these cultural interactions in first-hand fashion, but rather asks others to do the analysis, and then compares their analyses.

Hong Kong presents an ideal location for this study. With centuries spent under Chinese jurisdiction, and roughly a century and a half under the control of the United Kingdom, "Hong Kong has always been under the influence of Chinese and Western cultures" (Mok et al., 2001, p. 162). Moreover, Hong Kong has a plethora of educational options available for parents to choose from (Yamato, 2003). These options include both local and international options, fully representative of a spectrum of Eastern and Western educational traditions.

Participants and Protocol

The families in this study have one primary characteristic in common. They have one parent

with extensive experiential knowledge of a Western school system, and the other of an Eastern system of education. One spouse has been through K-12 education in the East and the other in the West. Individuals educated in North America, Western Europe, or Australia acted as the Western representatives in this study. As to their Eastern partners, participants from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea provided their perspectives. These Eastern countries/regions were chosen due to their asserted adherence to Confucian learning traditions, or shared "Confucian Heritage Cultural Background" (Li, 2012; Lee, 1996; J. L. Wang, 2013).

A secondary feature: at the time of the study these families have children younger than 18 years of age and were thus considering the diverse educational options available to them, or had needed to do so within the past 10 years. This attribute was included so as to take into account the more recent increased credibility afforded to Eastern education models vis-à-vis large-scale international assessments, which have placed East Asian educational systems in prominence over many educational systems in the West (OECD, 2010). The 15 participant families were of the following ten combinations:

Table 2: Participant Family Nationality Combinations

Hong Kong & United States	4 families
Hong Kong & United Kingdom	3 families
Hong Kong & Australia	1 family
Hong Kong & Germany	1 family
China & United States	1 family
China & Australia	1 family
China & United Kingdom	1 family
South Korea & United States	1 family
Singapore & United States	1 family
Japan & United Kingdom	1 family

The 15 families comprised a total of 31 children. At the time of the study, 14 of those children were 5 years old or younger, and the remaining 17 children were divided fairly evenly between 6-12 years of age, and 13 and up. In the findings section, each couple is referred to by (C) and a number assigned to them by virtue of the chronological order in which the interview took place.

This study used semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection, with 10 open-ended questions sent to interviewees ahead of time in order to elicit free and open discussion (Grix, 2004, p. 127). For each of the interviews, the husband and wife were interviewed simultaneously. The interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes in length. All interviews were transcribed in their entirety and then coded according to the various themes of the *East vs. West Dialectic in Education*, and also according to instances of intercultural compromise, submission, obliteration and consensus.

Interviews with these couples of mixed educational background revealed that the *East*

vs. West Dialectic in Education plays a significant role in their educational decisions. In agreement with Waters (2005) finding that East/West intercultural couples adopted a “compromise” approach to daily customs and lifestyle, these families also employed “compromise” throughout their decisions in education for their children. With regard to educational decisions for their children, none from this group elected a “submission” approach in wholesale adoption of their spouse’s culture, or elected to “obliterate” both of their cultural models in choosing a third option foreign to both of them. These acts of compromise often took the form of seeking “balance” and a “happy medium” in recognition of their respective cultural tradition’s strengths at various times in schooling and with regard to different subjects. Of particular significance was the overwhelming preference for “local schools” (i.e. Eastern-style schools) at the *primary* level of schooling, while in stark contrast these families desired to enroll their children in an “international school” (i.e. Western-style) for *secondary* school and beyond.

Findings

Table 3: Individual Nationality Representation of Participants

Hong Kong	9 people
China	3 people
South Korea	1 person
Singapore	1 person
Japan	1 person
United States	7 people
United Kingdom	5 people
Australia	2 people
Germany	1 person

Interview Data

As to the acceptability of a more structured primary school experience, while at the same time expressing reticence towards that experience being extended into secondary school:

C1 WEST: One thing that I don't agree with that I should mention: our son's local kindergarten gives homework every night. I think, for children in kindergarten--what we'd say is pre-kindergarten in the US--I don't think it's necessary at all.

C1 EAST: I don't know about that though. I like the idea of homework and the amount of homework the school has been assigning them, which isn't a lot and takes them on average 15-20 minutes to finish, which I think is totally acceptable. Most of it's like handwriting skills, that kind of work; learn to write letters, Chinese characters, simple calculations. For me, it's just getting them ready for primary school. I was raised in a very similar system. I have no problem with that.

C1 WEST: The teachers here are very centered, they get in front of the classroom, deliver a lot of material and then students take notes and sit quietly, there's very little interaction, very little communication, there's not a lot of give or take from the students. A "good lesson" is when the teacher can talk. My experience wasn't like that; my teachers were very interactive and we did a lot of projects with a lot of engagement and a lot of group stuff, I think that'd be a major difference for us.

C1 EAST: I do agree with that. With secondary education, we're filled with a lot of information from teachers. We were

seldom given assignments which were student driven. I think that's what the education reform in Hong Kong has been about lately.

As to the importance of instilling a collectively oriented ethos at the primary school level:

C6 EAST: I think education has changed a lot, the school and its respect for harmony. When I was a kid, they really emphasized harmony and how it was very important. But now, maybe because of globalization, the government starts to change the idea, maybe because people want to go abroad and they want to work together with foreigners. Actually, when I was in junior high school they already started changing their idea, emphasizing that the individual is very important and maybe now they've actually gone back to the original idea that harmony is very important. Of course the individual is very important as well, individuality is very important, but because young people actually started to become very selfish, so people started thinking again that actually harmony is very important.

C6 WEST: It's very important for our son to have an understanding of the Asian mindset, like an understanding of manners and etiquette and things like that. Ideally, that's what she would like for our son to get out of the Asian primary school. I think it's also an Asian way of thinking, a mentality, a sense of responsibility, a sense of duty, of discipline, just a quite different way of thinking that you wouldn't necessarily get from an international school.

As to the benefits of learning how to deal with pressure in an East Asian school, but at the same recognizing the shortcomings of a curriculum that over-emphasizes exam skills:

C4 EAST: I think education's getting worse, it's more...occupied, instead of free- thinking, like way earlier than I think it should be...but I've been thinking that, if we stay in Hong Kong, at least for me, I'd like them to stay in a local school. But also, I met with the headmaster of their school before they started and said, "Getting good grades or doing lots of homework isn't what we're after. I'd just like them to work on their social ability." So, I'd like them to continue in a local school because I do think there's some advantage to it, to learn Chinese language, to know how Asians deal with pressure.

C4 WEST: Yeah, basically, I have no problem with that idea,

C4 EAST: I think it'd be good if education could model life, and be more like reality. So, they don't feel like when they're growing up they're living in a bubble, you know, they never have pressure, they never need to deal with difficulty. For a local school, I think so many of those schools are very, very stressful. I mean, it's good to go to a local school because the reason they have tests and exams is to see how they deal with deadlines and stress, and how we as parents help them to channel through it. It's not so much about grades; it's more about the character development. So, I think it's still pretty good to have, to deal with a little bit of pressure.

C4 WEST: Yeah, like my school was TOO easy, so I didn't even apply myself, I didn't try that hard. I think if I'd have had more pressure, I'd have applied myself more, because my school wasn't that hard.

As to the benefits of developing memorization skills in primary school, but recognizing its shortcomings when continued to secondary school:

C13 EAST: In local schools, the teacher will tell you everything, and you have to remember it, just memorize it, you have to do a lot of dictation to remember a lot of stuff.

C13 WEST: Even though our daughter is in local school for primary, for secondary school, we want her to have a broader thinking, not just to learn facts.

On the relevance of creativity and whether schools are preparing students for the "real world":

C4 WEST: What is the real world looking for or what does the real world need? I think the real world needs creative thinkers who can solve creative problems creatively. I think that's one side of the Asian education system that fails miserably. I mean, look at China, they haven't created one single thing in the last, how many years? They just copy. So that's a major issue. Also, when we lived in China, a phrase that always drove me crazy was "meiyou banfa" (There's no way). They would always say that. So, nobody's thinking of creative ways to solve the problem, they're just making excuses for them. So, we need to get more creative thinking and creative problem solving in the world. So, is the education system of "pass-this-test," "get-this-grade" preparing them for that? Probably not.

C4 EAST: I do think this issue is very tricky. I mean, what are universities looking for and what are employers looking for? These are two totally

different types of people, and it depends on the employer. If you look at high school graduates, I'm not too familiar with the States, but here with high school graduates, they are just looking for robots. So, actually the school prepares them really well for that! Just take orders! But, if you say university, I would say that the high school system does not prepare them well for university, at all. Because, like, I grew up in a very driven high school, and as soon as I got to university, I needed to make decisions so often, like, what dorm should I take, or what class should I take? And all these things, and I felt like, at the moment, to think back, I never really knew how to know what good decisions really were. And, universities are often about how to write papers, but in my experience, the whole school system from K through 12 was only about how to pass tests, and how to pass exams. So, actually we never really needed to think much. As soon as we got the model answer, we were good, you know? So, I think the schools are not preparing them well in that area.

On the initial benefits of an Asian primary school despite a lack of encouragement for creativity, and the eventual necessity to change to a Western secondary school:

C14 EAST: In the local system, students are required to be very well-behaved, you have to be very quiet in class. There's not as much encouragement for creativity in local schools. However, the flipside of that is children do learn to be very well-behaved. They do learn to respect and speak politely to adults. I believe for the primary school sector that's actually a good thing. We do try to give our kids opportunities to practice speaking in

public, creative thinking, to prepare them for the secondary school.

C14 WEST: One of things that worried me with local schools is when I taught English at the university, I could see the effects of local school, especially with children who went there from kindergarten to senior high school. If you have too much rote learning, and too much piled on homework, the kids tend to not like to learn, they tend to hate learning and they tend to just be burnt out. So, that was a big concern of mine as well. But we made a conscious decision, you know, we think primary they can have that rote learning for their advantage to learn language and then hopefully after that they don't get too turned off on learning. And then in junior high they can switch to a more, so-called, fun curriculum and so hopefully they don't lose their love of learning throughout the process so that's another concern that we had.

These sentiments were echoed throughout the interviews as these intercultural families expressed a desire for their children to experience the regimentation and structure present within many East Asian primary school settings, but also acknowledge that this rigidity and uniformity was not something that they wanted for their children at the more advanced stages of education. Moreover, this preference was expressed in their concern that continued placement within the local system, though desirable initially, would ultimately stifle their children's ability to think creatively, thus leaving them ill-prepared to deal with many of life's future challenges. Therefore, with regard to the earlier questions of whether or not certain characteristics of East Asian schooling inhibit creativity, the answer of these intercultural

families seems to be quite nuanced. Although continued exposure to an East Asian schooling environment does seem to inhibit creativity in the long term, placement within this schooling environment in primary school seems to be a preferred option for supplying the raw material of knowledge that can allow creativity to foster in a Western-style secondary school and beyond.

Discussion

This phenomenon of a preference for a more structured *primary* school experience, while also abandoning this strict regimentation later in *secondary* school and beyond in order to foster creativity, may be indicative of a possible synthesis between these two educational traditions. As Huang (2014) notes:

Why is that, in terms of primary education, Chinese kids so easily beat American kids out of the gate, but Americans have, in the end, won the most Nobel Prizes in the world? There are two kinds of knowledge: that which we, as human beings, know and that which we don't. Chinese education creates excellent exam takers while American education cultivates learning explorers. This is an essential difference between Chinese and American education. The purpose of...PISA and every other standardized test is to evaluate students' ability to recapitulate already-established knowledge. The Nobel Prizes in scientific disciplines encourage scientists to explore and discover new knowledge. (p. 236)

As the world is currently a paradox of an unprecedented amount of knowledge that needs to be learned, while also an unprecedented number of complex and unsolved challenges that need to be addressed in creative and novel ways; certainly the strengths and weaknesses of both models should be considered with a similarly

sophisticated assessment as exercised by these couples of mixed educational background. Indeed, while some may rightly argue that an ongoing adherence to East Asian models of schooling will eventually impair creativity within students; other questions that need to be discussed are: Can creativity eventually exist in a university student *without* the initial investment of structure and discipline needed at the *beginning* stages of schooling? Is there a requisite foundation of knowledge that needs to be built through emphases on rote learning, rigid curricula, strict teachers, etc that can then allow meaningful innovation and creativity to ultimately prosper in less structured educational settings?

Limitations of the Study

There was no component of my research that evaluated the socio-economic status of these families, which may be an important consideration. In addition, the majority, although *not* all, of these couples have Western fathers and Eastern mothers. There may also be some further discussion and research needed as to the possibility of gender roles influencing educational preferences within these families. Another inherent limitation of the study has to do with the age of the children within these families. As mentioned above, nearly half of the respondents had children 5 years old or younger, and were thus talking about their *plans* for their children's education, rather than their *experiences* with having them educated. Therefore, another interesting line of inquiry might be to follow whether their perspectives and ideals will remain constant over time, or perhaps change, as different challenges are encountered.

Conclusion

This study argues that discourse surrounding Eastern and Western traditions and practices in education can be framed in terms of an *East vs.*

West Dialectic in Education. This framework highlights certain debates surrounding the concerns over students' development, autonomy, learning environment, and curricula all of which are related to whether or not these educational factors ultimately stifle or encourage the development of creativity in students. Semi-structured interviews with 15 families of mixed East/West educational background confirmed that all of these families had given extensive deliberation to the differing cultural options available to them. These parents often shared their respective experiences with each other in contemplation over a desired future for their child. At times, individuals held a negative view of their spouse's educational background, and at other times, a less than favorable perspective of their own, thus enabling them to consider both the positive and negative aspects of their personal educational upbringing. Despite the claim of incompatibility between Eastern and Western propensities in education, this study suggests that a synthesis of Eastern and Western inclinations in education is possible. Acts of compromise utilized by these couples to take advantage of the relative strengths of their respective culture's educational practices evidences possibilities of wider ramification, namely that a highly structured, "Eastern" *primary* school experience may be very desirable in allowing for the development of creativity and innovation at a "Western" secondary school level and beyond.

Supplementary Information

The questions below were all sent to participants ahead of time, and participants also had a copy during the interview:

1) Please tell me about your child/children, and particularly about any educational decisions you have made for them so far.

2) Can you tell me about the process for how you went about making those decisions?

3) Would you describe your own educational experiences as being very different from each other? Why or why not?

4) What do you perceive as some of the advantages and disadvantages of the schooling you received in either the "East" or "West"?

5) Do you think schooling has changed much since you were in school? If so, what are some of the positive/negative aspects of these changes?

6) If money and other practical aspects were not an issue, what do you feel would be the ideal educational experience for your child/children to have?

7) What do you feel should be the ultimate outcomes of your child's K-12 education? In other words, what skills, knowledge, experiences, attitudes, behaviors, outlooks, etc would you most like your child to possess when they graduate from high school that would make you feel that their schooling had been a success?

8) Conversely, are there any experiences from your own time in school that you are keen to have your child/ren avoid?

9) Some people say that kids these days are under too much pressure in school, and others say they aren't under enough. Can you tell me about what kinds of expectations you feel are appropriate for children regarding studies?

10) What do you think universities and employers are looking for in high school graduates these days? And do you think schools are preparing them well enough for that?

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