In both Hong Kong and the United States, educational practices, especially those in the early stages of development, often do not lay an adequate foundation for lifelong learning. Using an approach rooted in developmental psychology, however, can help educators understand how individuals, groups, and societies develop or fail to develop an orientation towards lifelong learning. In Hong Kong, the prevailing ideology of Confucianism upholds moral virtue and familial unity and places tremendous importance on education. Parents in Hong Kong make enormous sacrifices for their children's education to secure both status and comfort in their old age. Despite a turbulent history and future uncertainty, people in Hong Kong generally remain optimistic about the future, in contrast to the cynicism widely felt in the United States, where the individual is the focus and family ties are weak. The educational burden in the United States is largely placed on the schools, resulting in a wide range of disparate opportunities for advancement. The comparatively lax educational attitudes result in under-preparedness for students, but provide more opportunities for lifelong learning through such means as community colleges. While Hong Kong requires stability and greater emphasis on the intrinsic value of education, the United States requires more effective family and educational support. Attainment of these goals would foster supportive environments for lifelong learning, with both nations benefiting immensely. Contains 24 references. (YKH)
Lifelong Learning in the United States and Hong Kong: Before 1997 and After

Albert H. Yee
Joseph Y.S. Cheng

In: Lifelong Learning: Policies, Practices, and Programs
Lifelong Learning in the United States and Hong Kong: Before 1997 and After
by Albert H. Yee and Joseph Y. S. Cheng

This paper examines and compares the development of and support for lifelong learning in Hong Kong and the United States with the framework of certain psychological and sociocultural perspectives. Of specific interest are Erikson's Eight Stages of Life, Confucian philosophy, family values and related influences, political uncertainties, and institutional variety in support of lifelong learning. Further, this paper argues that some factors which positively influence the development of a learning culture in Hong Kong, are absent in the United States, while certain strengths related to learning opportunities in the United States are weaker or absent in Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

The approach used to explore lifelong learning in this paper embraces psychological views which consider human life from lifespan perspectives. This approach is taken because it emphasizes significant and manifold possibilities and adaptations that affect human lives. To maximize human potential, and curtail the waste that can ravage lives, learning and development throughout the lifespan deserve our critical attention, especially from parents and teachers. Proper nurturance and growth of children and adults require that key factors associated with human development are appreciated and taken into account. As well, since people do not develop only in families and schools, it is important to recognize and consider sociocultural factors that underlie and influence individual behaviour.

Few would dispute the notion that the early period of socialization and human development is a time when foundations are set, and that these largely determine the course and quality of human life including much of the preferences and attitudes that set the stage for lifelong learning. However, though much is known with regard to effective activities that could be practised during this period, actual practices most often don't reflect the best methods for producing and supporting development opportunities, socialization practices, and an orientation towards lifelong learning.

Attacks against education in the United States are commonplace, often criticizing school and teacher quality. Further, many pupils and parents in the United States perceive learning to be laborious and not "fun", clearly building a poor foundation for lifelong learning. This perception may be seen as frivolous, contrasting with the
very serious attitudes of Chinese pupils and parents (Stevenson & Lee, 1990). Compared to the United States, the rote curriculum and study approaches to learning in Hong Kong, Japan, and other societies in Asia and Europe force young people to study hard under conditions of extreme anxiety as they seek to pass life-determining examinations (Yee, 1989; 1992, Chapter 6). Whether through indulgence or drudgery brought about by poor application of what is known of psychological development, lifelong learning may be lost in both these contexts at precisely the time when it should be taking root.

**DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

In the past, psychologists focused mainly on very early child development in order to study the obvious and remarkable changes in life; however, more common now are approaches that consider human development as a broad lifespan issue, based in part on the realization that people develop and change from birth throughout life. Learning to crawl and walk, recognize close family members and surroundings, speak and understand language, and so forth, are pivotal stages in early maturation. The names and works of developmental psychologists, including Jean Piaget on cognitive development, Mary Ainsworth and many others on attachment, and Laurence Kohlberg on moral reasoning, are familiar to those with a grounding in psychology (see Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith & Bem, 1990, Chapter 3).

Humans experience rapid growth from birth through puberty and the teen-years, a period that requires favourable social conditions in order for the many changes which are taking place to blossom and mature. For example, children are born with what Noam Chomsky (1972) called the language acquisition device (LAD), lasting the first three years. During that period, the child soaks up whatever languages are used within the immediate social environment. Though people can and do learn languages throughout their lives, LAD is an innate process especially designed to help babies, who at that stage lack developed learning skills, to acquire linguistic acuity quickly. We know that language usage within the social environment influences children's linguistic, cognitive and emotional development, and that youngsters can be sadly shortchanged by untoward family conditions which provide meagre and unsavoury surroundings for language growth and more. As youngsters mature towards and into the teens, the brain and central nervous system provide increasing cognitive capability, which receives, digests, and remembers ideas and learnings from home, neighbourhood, and school environments. This is clearly a period when the proclivity and opportunity to embrace lifelong learning is pivotal.

In the United States, adolescence is often a trying, even volatile experience for youth and families as the child matures physiologically towards young adulthood. Although Asians and Europeans pass through the same biological changes, adolescence has not been as troublesome for them as in the U.S. This contrast no doubt comes from sociocultural differences, understanding of which points out the inseparable, complex relationship of nature and nurture as already implied with LAD. Although less obviously than children and adolescents, adults also develop and change significantly. In effect, humans are individuals with biological and personal differences as well as members of sociocultural groups. Outcomes from this psychological and sociocultural complex produce the vast family of mankind and both affect the potential and propensity for lifelong learning.

**ERIK ERIKSON'S STAGES OF LIFE**

In order to help understand how the human complex develops in a comprehensive, systematic way, Erikson's (1963) developmental theory identifies eight major psychosocial crises that all individuals pass through. The theory argues that how these crises are resolved, or not, largely determines the quality of people's lives. The following paragraphs in this section focus on three of these stages.

### Table 1: Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Psychosocial Crises</th>
<th>Social Unit of Importance</th>
<th>Favorable Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. First year of life</td>
<td>Trust vs. mistrust</td>
<td>parents</td>
<td>Trust &amp; optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Second year</td>
<td>Autonomy vs. doubt</td>
<td>family members</td>
<td>Sense of control &amp; adequacy</td>
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<td>3. Third – fifth year</td>
<td>Initiative vs. guilt</td>
<td>family &amp; relatives</td>
<td>Purpose &amp; direction; ability to initiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sixth year to puberty</td>
<td>Industry vs. inferiority</td>
<td>neighborhood &amp; school</td>
<td>Competence in social, intellectual &amp; physical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Adolescence</td>
<td>Identity vs. role confusion</td>
<td>peer groups</td>
<td>Integrated self-image as a unique &amp; worthy person; social roles in formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Early adulthood</td>
<td>Intimacy vs. isolation</td>
<td>family &amp; friends</td>
<td>Ability to form close, lasting relationships; to make career commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Middle adulthood</td>
<td>Generativity vs. self-absorption</td>
<td>interest &amp; work group &amp; family network</td>
<td>Concern for family, society &amp; future generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The Aging years</td>
<td>Integrity vs. despair</td>
<td>Family network &amp; community</td>
<td>A sense of fulfillment &amp; satisfaction with one's life; willingness to face death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*adapted from Erikson (1963, pp. 222-247)
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Table 1 shows that the first psychosocial crisis involves learning Mistrust close ones and the immediate environment. Through the social atmosphere created by family affection, parental discipline, and peer companionship, children learn to trust or mistrust life and others. When babies are handled gently, fed and cleansed regularly, and spoken to in a loving and soothing tone, they develop a sense of trust and security. When children are permitted to explore their world safely, they gain a sense of independence and self-reliance. However, for the most part, the universal cuteness of babies and their crying are handled with parental affection. Children need to be protected from harm and to know that their needs will be met. This helps them develop a sense of trust and security.

During stage five, adolescents struggle with the psychosocial crisis of Identity versus Role Confusion. This occurs in the teen years when questions such as, who am I, what am I going to be, and what is my role in life, become all important. In Hong Kong, and in many other societies, adolescents are encouraged to explore their interests and options, and to develop a sense of self-direction. In the United States, adolescents are given more freedom and flexibility as well as a broader range of options. However, adolescents in other societies must make decisions about their future and face the consequences of their choices. In Hong Kong, adolescents are expected to follow the traditional path of education, while in the United States, they are given more freedom to choose their own path.

The Confucian tradition has influenced education in Hong Kong. Confucius believed that education was the key to personal and social development. He emphasized the importance of learning and the development of moral character. Confucius believed that education should be lifelong, and that learning should be approached with dedication and discipline. However, there is an important distinction to be made. Unlike Confucianism, modern education in the United States is more focused on individual achievement and self-expression. Therefore, the key to lifelong learning in Hong Kong is the development of moral character, while in the United States, the key is the development of individuality.

In Hong Kong, education is seen as a means of social mobility, while in the United States, it is seen as a means of personal fulfillment. Therefore, the key to lifelong learning in Hong Kong is the development of moral character, while in the United States, the key is the development of individuality.
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The Family in Hong Kong Today

The Confucian values still influence Hong Kong families, most notably in terms of parental concerns for their children's education. Despite Hong Kong's cosmopolitan East-West mix of values, the people remain quite conservative in terms of social attitudes and values. Confucian values have undergone some changes over time, and remain the dominant behavioral influence. Compared to Western countries, Hong Kong families are more traditional, as the divorce rate is still very low, despite increases in recent years. Attempts to influence community values are met with suspicion, while the government has made efforts to influence community values through education and homogenization. Demands for greater services for the elderly are met with public rejection of the government's policies. Moreover, the best examples of Confucianism's influence on the Hong Kong people come from the life and the strong filial observance of young people to their parents despite Hong Kong's urbanization.

Confucius also valued the extended family, which provided a sense of security in an uncertain world. The Confucian value of filial piety emphasized broad educational values, including an emphasis on virtue and study. Thus, Confucian values still have a significant impact on Hong Kong society, even in the face of increasing Western influences.

Although those ideals have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish at the national level, success has been achieved within the family, the most stable unit of society. This is perhaps the key to Hong Kong's success. The family remains the cornerstone of society, and Confucian values can be achieved and maintained even in the face of Western influences.

The future of Hong Kong's education system remains uncertain, as the government continues to struggle with the impact of globalization on traditional values. The question of how to balance these competing demands is at the heart of the debate over the future of Hong Kong's education system. Despite the challenges, there is hope that Confucian values will continue to influence Hong Kong society for many years to come.

While the family provides vital human functions for all peoples, none can rival the Chinese familial group in its comprehensive handling of human activities across the centuries. The Chinese family is perhaps the most self-reliant of world families, and its values have endured over time, even in the face of great changes.
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In terms of Erikson's Eight Stages of Life, therefore, the pragmatic, family-centred society. It is relevant to consider future events in the context of these beliefs.

The Chinese connect learning almost entirely with the status, position, and security they bring, that is to say the extrinsic worth, rather than the intrinsic importance of education. In Confucian societies, academic status and work merit have been and continue to be the most important criteria for determining employment and advancement. 

Assessing attitudes within Hong Kong towards 1997, Cheng (1992) reported that the number of those seeking to move has declined because of the sharp decline in law and medical school applications, especially by the better-off youth. In this climate, about 60,000 people have emigrated annually from Hong Kong since 1984 (Howlett, 1996, p. 396). The number would almost certainly have been higher, but has been buffered by the quotas imposed by Australia and other favoured "free" societies. Large numbers of the best candidates and success stories of lifelong learning have emigrated with their families. According to Yee (1992), Hong Kong has been the classic geographic stepping-stone from China to the United States, having become linked primarily to status and well-being.

The older generation of Hong Kong Chinese, those who lived through World War II, experienced very hard times during childhood and adolescence. Suffering from the loss of homes, family, and property, they had to work hard and suffer hardships and even famine. It is not surprising, therefore, that education for most of them was a luxury and often impossible to obtain. In fact, the Japanese occupying force within Hong Kong tried to reduce the territory's population as much as possible through a policy of forced sterilization, food and other essentials had to be rationed, and the harbour was closed throughout the war by U.S. submarines and airplanes. Except for a handful of primary schools which employed the Japanese language, all schools, including the University of Hong Kong, were closed.

Following World War II, the Chinese who survived harboured a burning desire for education through evening and weekend classes as well as on-the-job training.

Among this population, the drive for academic credentials, economic success, and self-improvement was striking and continues even today to be a hallmark of Hong Kong society. Through this behaviour it was clear that Confucian values were alive and well.

In Confucian societies, academic status and work merit have been and continue to be the most important criteria for determining employment and advancement. Not surprisingly, a survey of Hong Kong workers conducted in the mid-1990s found a strong correlation between educational attainment and occupational status (Mak, 1997).
Although Hong Kong's present circumstances are unique, the value and importance of lifelong learning is no less significant there than elsewhere, and may in fact be more potentious. For example, Hong Kong's future has clear implications for preparatory learning. Those who are unable to speak Mandarin Chinese should consider the study of China's national dialect, which differs greatly from Cantonese, the local Hong Kong dialect. Also, since Hong Kong has retained traditional characters in writing and printed matter, the simplified characters standardized by China will require study. At present, however, Hong Kong's situation has been trying, and much of the attention that would otherwise be directed towards lifelong learning is on hold.

THE UNITED STATES AND COMPARISONS WITH HONG KONG

Education in the United States differs greatly from that in Hong Kong, and most of the world, as the focus in the United States is predominately on the individual, not the family, and schools bear much more, if not all, of the educational burden. Though families in the United States vary, most play a more benign role overall than is the case in Hong Kong and other societies. In the United States, the traditional two-parent family is in decline, and more and more children are being raised in single-parent families and in poor homes, often verging on or actually in poverty. Budgetary and other institutional challenges faced by the U.S. public school systems are resulting in reduced educational expenditures, and a proposed system of school vouchers will allow more — usually the brighter and richer — students to attend private schools of their choice.

A national survey of 1,514 United States adults conducted towards the end of 1995 by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard University, and The Washington Post (Morin & Balz, 1996) found that a majority of those surveyed have lost trust in human nature, the government, institutions in general, and each other. Besides widespread cynicism among adults in the United States, including the belief that life for their children will be worse than for themselves, the survey found that knowledge of basic civics and history was often misinformed and faulty. All of this and more indicates that the United States population may be suffering greater "isolation," "self-absorption," and "despair" in terms of Erikson's Stages 6 through 8 — alarming phenomena if verified through further studies. Whatever fears may be associated with 1997 in Hong Kong, cynicism is not one of them. This difference between the United States and Hong Kong may be linked to stronger family and group ties.

The present climate for financial commitments to education in the United States is not strong. Also, prevailing attitudes towards individual freedom and self-expression appear to be gaining strength, yet these do not materially enhance lifelong learning. There is overwhelming reliance on television for news and entertainment, and naïve, uninformed answers to basic questions regarding the United States Government and society generally (for example, most respondents believed that the United States spends more on foreign aid than does most countries and most could not name their House representative) suggest that lifelong learning carries low priority among the general population.

Students in the United States are faced with a multitude of choices and options. Secondary schools, community colleges and universities provide a plethora of courses and discipline options for the large number of students who have not yet decided what to do with their lives. Parents now indicate that they place less pressure on their children than in the past in so far as commitments to career planning and educational programming are concerned. Thus, student underpreparedness and opportunities to choose courses and change directions help to prolong adolescence in the United States, a luxury that other societies neither offer nor tolerate. While fewer than 5% of Hong Kong's university-age youth are admitted into higher education, more than 50% are accepted in the United States. Nearly all of those admitted into Hong Kong universities complete degrees in contrast to the assorted and individualized outcomes so common in the United States.

Also in contrast to the United States, very few secondary and university students in Hong Kong work part-time during the academic year. In Hong Kong, both parents of families with modest means will work long hours (14 hour workdays are common) so that their children can study full-time. Hong Kong university students can obtain incentive loans from the Government to cover modest living and tuition costs, while in the U.S., college and university students can also avail themselves of bank and government loans. However, interest rates for U.S. student loans are generally higher than they are in Hong Kong.

It is difficult to generalize with regard to the differences between education in Hong Kong and the United States, and more particularly with regard to lifelong learning, but several issues are clear. In Hong Kong, education is taken seriously and treated with sobriety and dedication because students and parents recognize that failure to be admitted into a university will result in limited career options, leading in turn to reduced family income and a less secure old age. Higher education admission is the summum bonum of all the drudgery and exam fervour suffered by most Hong Kong young people, and the academic track leading to the university is obvious even within the lower grades. For the vast majority of those who are not admitted into local universities, or who do not have the means to study abroad, the future is inextricably linked to lower-tier jobs.

FREEDOM AND FLEXIBILITY IN THE UNITED STATES

The individualized, indulgent (as compared to Hong Kong and other societies) nature of education in the United States creates many distinctions at every school level, perhaps the most important being students who sort themselves by, and perhaps for, academic achievement. For students seeking professional careers obtainable only through higher education, such as law and medicine, "identity" develops with little or no "role confusion". These students begin the process of meeting their reference group's expectations early. For example, secondary and university students associate with like-minded peers and take all or more than the required preparatory courses, and in turn their aptitude test scores tend to reflect greater motivation and readiness. For students in the United States who stretch out their search for "identity", high schools and community colleges accommodate needs and interests with the view that these students will make their own best career decisions over time. In other words, the United States system may seem inefficient and
lax compared to Hong Kong, but emphasis on individual preferences and providing varied and supportive curriculum menus are consistent with other values in the United States. In the end, this works well for many students. Interestingly, it could be argued that the Hong Kong system is inefficient, because the prevailing university track in secondary schools produces a failure rate of about 82% and there are few satisfactory alternate programs for those who fail to obtain university admission (Yee, 1994, pp. 48-50). Community colleges have not developed in Hong Kong, likely because the bachelor's degree is the basic career-entry card.

For early- or late-blooming students, provisions for lifelong learning in the United States have been consistent with the philosophy of the worth and dignity of the individual. Whether professional studies, job training, craft and hobby interests, literature, creative arts, and so forth, lifelong learning courses and programs are readily available at publicly funded community colleges as well as through private institutions. Terrance Brown, Chief Executive Officer of the Community Colleges of Spokane in Washington State, reinforces much of this perspective as he welcomes students to the Spokane community colleges (Community Colleges of Spokane, 1995, p. 1).

Welcome to Community Colleges of Spokane. Our colleges offer a warm, friendly environment for you to pursue new career opportunities, activities and personal dreams. No matter where you are in life — whether you're a high school graduate, a displaced homemaker, a dislocated worker, a single parent, a professional/technical student or a college transfer student — our colleges can help you achieve your goals. Your success, of course, will depend on your own commitment to learning. The opportunities you'll find here are many, and the rewards are rich and fulfilling.

Recognizing that manual, unskilled jobs will soon be obsolete, the United States Government has worked to help the nation adjust to the challenges of the information age while at the same time improving overall educational quality. During the 1996 U.S. presidential campaign and in his February 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton urged the adoption of new programs to promote mass education through the 14th year (community college), and on to university for all who are eligible. However, unlike the centralized, government-controlled educational systems of Hong Kong, other Asian societies, and Europe, education in the United States is decentralized, controlled by the 50 states and local school boards. This difference makes for slower and differentiated change throughout the United States. In fact, President Clinton's proposals may not receive support in Congress. By way of contrast, the Hong Kong Education Department can respond quickly to new policies and programs, having done so quite often in the past. However, an important concern with regard to Hong Kong's well financed educational system is that quality is often questionable in general and especially when new curriculum and policies are introduced. (With respect to financing, US$4.57 billion was allocated for 1,296,519 students in 1995 — see Howlett, 1996, pp. 434 & 459.) Regardless, it is not to argue that a decentralized system as in the United States is superior, particularly in the face of efficient evidence from the centralized and coordinated systems of Germany, Switzerland and Singapore.

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Features of the Educational Systems in the U.S.A. and Hong Kong*</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>USA</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Main Purpose</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Mode and Style</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Curricular Orientation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal Secondary School Graduate</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Control and Administration</strong></td>
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*adapted from Yee (1989)
In Hong Kong, the family firmly socializes children and adolescents to accept education as an important and immediate goal. Individual life chances are obviously and inextricably linked to education, as are family benefits including social security. In addition, the Confucian orientation towards the duties, discipline and reflection associated with education and learning directly and indirectly promote participation through the lifespan. Is this enough to sow the seeds for effective lifelong learning? Perhaps not. Uncertainties associated with 1997, along with the emphasis on education for extrinsic rather than intrinsic values, may act as a brake to the broader acceptance of lifelong learning at a time when the need has never been greater.

Similarly, but in different ways, imbuing the concept of and support for lifelong learning in the United States is hindered by significant challenges. Most obvious is the issue that education is broadly, and perhaps increasingly, viewed only as an in-school activity, and in that context this paper has described decreasing direct support from the family for education, particularly when contrasted with Hong Kong. In many families within the United States, and in low income single-parent families in particular, there is little initiative to help children and adolescents see the value of education and lifelong learning in particular. In addition to this, a host of educational options, coupled with little reason to make lasting choices and the absence of economic imperatives such as those found in Hong Kong, may lead to what Erikson described as despair.

Lifelong learning is critically important to Hong Kong and the United States, and both societies would be substantially better off if their peoples were more strongly imbued with the educational tools, commitment and philosophical support for learning throughout the lifespan. Erikson's stages create an effective platform for understanding and evaluating needs and drives as these relate to lifelong learning. Hong Kong has the underlying family support and Confucian tradition, while the United States has an institutional mix that provides an incredibly wide range of lifelong learning opportunities.

Most important for policy makers is to recognize the import of lifelong learning, both for individuals and the society as a whole, and to put in place strategies and practices that will support the development of a lifelong learning ethic. In Hong Kong, stability, confidence and greater emphasis on intrinsic values are required. In the United States, more effective family support and broad values that favour decisions made in support of education and lifelong learning are required. Hong Kong and the United States represent two very different societies, yet both are in need of policy support for lifelong learning. Interestingly, many of the strengths in Hong Kong (and in Confucian societies in general) appear to be weaknesses in the United States, and similarly, many of the strengths in the United States appear to be weaknesses in Hong Kong. In any event, every person in both societies has reason to learn how to learn and to learn throughout the lifespan.

REFERENCES


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Michael J. Harton (Editor)

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