



Ideals and Goals of Education in East Asia

Reproduction vs. Creation of Knowledge

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Knowledge: Memorized or Created?

In the past decades, East Asian Countries such as South Korea, Japan and the People's Republic of China have risen to score top results in international examination, which led to their systems of education being praised as highly efficient by foreign media. But an aspect often ignored by such praise is the difference between reproduced and created knowledge, or in other words, the question of whether one relies on pure memorization or on one's own creativity in order to acquire knowledge.

We wish to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the cultural backgrounds and motivations behind the ideals and methods of education?
- 2) What role did historical developments play in changing/shaping the way knowledge is conveyed?
- 3) What is the actual reception of the methods of conveying knowledge in the respective countries?

State of the Art

The key authors we based our research on are experts in the academic field of East Asia and education in East Asia. We are using works written at various points in time during the last hundred years. Some studies seem to contradict each other. Especially in studies focusing on Japan, results claiming homogeneity and lack of individuality or imagination in classrooms are in sharp contrast to claims of great creativity and personal initiative among the students (Satō 2004). Further, economic reforms that have been in operation for over 30 years, as well as the opening of the gates to the West have profoundly changed almost every aspect of Chinese society, including its value system. Japanese society was similarly affected by post war occupation. In China's case, society left behind the model of memorization, trying to adopt new creative concepts, though traditional learning methods are still dominant.

A common fallacy seems to be the assumption that the results and realities of the East Asian systems can be applied

and interpreted directly within the context of foreign education systems, such as the American or various European systems. Most experts on East Asian education seem to agree that this idea is incorrect and that the results of education are in fact inseparably connected to the ideology and culture within which they occur. Furthermore, some sources, such as the documentary “*Alphabet*” by Erwin Wagenhofer (2013), point out that a lack of creation of knowledge in classrooms can be seen as a global problem, rather than just an East Asian problem.

Methodology

The research strategies we have chosen are mostly qualitative strategies. We have interviewed Chinese, Korean and Japanese people and used these interviews as our primary source, analyzing the interviewee's point of view on education. Our research also relies on sources such as books, articles and journals. Many of these books contain accounts and studies regarding student and teaching experiences. We worked mostly with literature resources, such as textbooks, as well as articles in the public databases, which we compared and contrasted to the results of our interviews to gain insight into the way students are taught in the three countries we examined.

Knowledge Acquisition in China

China is still in a developing state. As a result its education system is constantly shifting. The Chinese system was shaped under the effects of Confucianism, therefore its traditional education system is based on memorization. For six centuries (A.D. 1313– 1905), the Analects of Confucius were used as the basis of civil service examination. Imperial system examination itself was abolished 1905, but its practices were always deeply rooted in the Chinese method of learning. Aged 3-7, children had to rewrite and memorize texts consisting of more than 3000 Chinese characters, show-casting the importance of reproduced knowledge (Yu 2012). The next shifts in the system were related to the overthrow of the monarchy in 1911 and the May fourth movement (1919), both of which could be considered to have brought

a “renaissance” to Chinese education, as there was intense focus on science and experimentation. The modernization process according to the Western model started after the Cultural Revolution (1976).

In the beginning of the new century, a new curriculum which stresses the actual process of learning was put into practice. This was done in order to alter the very discipline-focused structures within the old curriculum, leaving off old “rote and drill” practices and placing more emphasis on active learning and inquiry ability (Law 2013). This was met with criticism concerning the difficulty of applying these kinds of reforms to classrooms with fifty people. Another controversial point regarding the reforms was that this so-called student-oriented praxis could not easily be harmonized with the tradition of Confucianism, which supported a more teacher-oriented model (Yin 2012). The traditional way of obtaining knowledge via reproduction is deeply embedded in Chinese history, also showing up in the idea of an “ideal model city” in Chinese Architecture. Likewise, poems have ideal patterns, theatre has ideal forms (Olivova 2008, Tradiční čínská architektura). The idea seems to be that one must first follow the basic ideal ideas and patterns with obedience to later refine them with one's own creativity.

In our interviews, Chinese students critiqued the amount of homework that they experienced as useless. Many of them felt a lack of creativity in their education system. The traditional methods of learning were heavily discussed and there is a call for further reforms, which could encourage students to be more active and creative during class.

Knowledge Acquisition in South Korea

The Korean education system, just like the Japanese, has frequently been altered by the influence of foreign cultures. This has left a great impact on the way Korean students are taught. Over the last century, there have been three significant periods that influenced Korea. In the late Choson Kingdom (1880-1910, Traditional Period) education was influenced by Protestant ideals and morals. In many missionary schools of this time memorization-focused methods were dominant in the curricula.

The missionaries' educational activities reached a great number of students, introducing them to ideas that were entirely new to them, such as western political ideas and ideologies. The study of the Ideals of Christian religion and the Bible was considered essential.

During the Japanese Colonial Rule (1910-1945, Modern Period) education was pro-Japanese, which meant that ideals and goals were based on Shintō beliefs. Thousands of schools aimed to teach Koreans the Japanese language were opened. Additionally, most classes were held in Japanese during the late period of Japanese rule in Korea, including all-Japanese teaching materials. The Japanese Government used this as a strategy of assimilation of the Koreans and their culture. After the end of the Japanese Colonial Rule, in the years of 1945-1948, a change was made towards democratization and Americanization. From 1945, American ideas such as egalitarian educational ideology, educational pragmatism and behavioral sciences started to influence education in South Korea. Today, Confucianism, Shintō-Confucianism, and American ideas influence the process of education in modern Republic of Korea. These philosophical systems influence not just the education system, but also the pupils' view of the world and their relations with their peers and teachers.

Our Korean Interviewees seemed split on how much traditional value is still represented in their curriculum. They had positive sentiments towards new technologies, which could bring more room for interactivity and creativity in learning.

Knowledge Acquisition in Japan

Japanese education was strongly influenced by external sources from the very beginning, starting with an adaptation of Chinese learning at the Yamato court as early as the sixth to ninth century. Later, Christian missionaries opened their own religious schools during the 16th century, bringing European-style education into Japan. In the Meiji Period (1868-1912) Japan went through a period of reforms, greatly modernizing, while also placing great emphasis on the importance of

loyalty to the state, hierarchical structures and Shintoist and Confucianist values.

Education went through another radical change after the end of WWII. This period's efforts to democratize Japan also led to higher learning becoming less elitist and open to the broader population. A strong societal pressure to graduate from university developed during this time, which gave birth to the “*kyōiku mama*” (“education mom”) phenomenon of housewives placing high expectations on their children's academic success to secure their future careers, causing them to pressure these students to study and acquire new skills neigh-constantly in a highly competitive manner. This resulted in the Japanese education being lauded internationally for its great efficiency, while in Japan itself, little pride was felt for the achievements (Kōsaka 1969). Commonly criticized points are the high pressure learning of the so-called “Examination Hell” before University entry, as well as the “*juku*”, the Japanese type of cram-schools (Stephens 1991). Critical voices inside Japan were worried about the sustainability of the highly performance-oriented system (Suzuki 1973, “The Pathology of Japanese Education”). This finally led to further reforms in the 1980s, which are still ongoing. In recent times, a strong focus has been put on “involving one's whole body and self” in the process of learning, while the strong student-teacher dichotomy that has its roots in older hierarchical structures has been retained. Strict by-the-book memorization seems to be mostly practiced in the *juku* nowadays, attendance of which remains widespread, while in actual classroom situations, student input has become highly appreciated (Satō 2004). By now, the country has been overtaken by China and South Korea in international exam results.

Our Japanese interviewees were the only group in which not a single person claimed creativity was irrelevant to the learning process. Our interviewed Japanese students also seemed to have a high opinion of how cooperation and life in the group is conveyed in their education system, while Universities were criticized for not motivating students enough to think for themselves.

Our Results

In all three countries, we learned that the high performance rates observed in international examinations were actually born of a combination of important international ideals of competition in combination with Confucian discipline. However, the reasons for manifestations of these ideals in the system mainly differed due to how and when these countries were influenced by each other and the West. Influence by the west, however, didn't generally correlate with more creativity, but more competitiveness, which mingled badly with Confucianist ideals.

In our interviews, only the Chinese students seemed more or less unified in thinking that their institution of education was influenced by traditionalist mind sets, even quoting Confucian texts while explaining why they believed so, while Korean and Japanese students almost collectively answered that there was no such influence in the schools they attended. The sole exception was one Korean student.

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