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It's True. Asians Can't Think

Until it abandons its twisted Confucianism, the region will trail the West

CAN ASIANS THINK? THAT'S NOT A RACIST SLUR, IT'S THE TITLE of a book by Singapore diplomat Kishore Mahbubani. While he offers no answer, the question he poses is excellent and long overdue.

The facts are not in dispute: 1,000 years ago China under the Song Dynasty was the world's most advanced nation. Even 300 years ago China under the Qing rulers was first among equals. Yet in the past 100 years, the West's superiority over Asia has widened exponentially over any advantage the East ever enjoyed. No civilization with such a commanding lead, not even classical Greece, has declined more dramatically. The issue is not about economic growth or engineering dexterity; Asia's record in these areas is indisputable. It's about originality of the mind and its resulting influence over how mankind shapes the world.

China may have mastered cutting-edge nuclear technology, by stealth or otherwise, and Japan may have the best-engineered semiconductors. But these developments are ultimately based on Newtonian physics and quantum mechanics, both purely Western paradigms. China justifies its political system by invoking Marx while trying to restructure its economy using the theories of Keynes and Friedman, even employing Goldman Sachs for financial advice. Taiwan is a democracy more informed by classical Greek philosophers than by Chinese. Japanese leaders wear Western formal dress with tails for signing ceremonies. And everybody loves an Ivy League degree.

Asia must not merely reflect on why Western thoughts shape the world we know, it must also ask why so many Asian minds flourish only after they have gone to the West. For evidence, just look at the many Nobel Prizes won by Asians living and working in America. Time and again, talented émigrés say they had to leave Asia because the intellectual atmosphere was stifling or because the established hierarchy respected seniority over brains.

Blaming Asian schools for focusing on memorization—as opposed to “thinking”—is too pat an excuse, as schools and universities reflect the basic values of a society. It is ingrained in the Asian psyche that “correct” answers always exist and are to be found in books or from authorities. Teachers dispense truth, parents are always right and political leaders know better. In executive-led societies such as China and Hong Kong, leaders act like philosopher-kings, often uttering unchallenged banalities. Senior officials sometimes resemble the powerful palace eunuchs of past dynasties: imperial, unaccountable, incompetent. Questioning authority, especially in public, is disrespectful, un-Asian, un-Confucian.

It is time to deconstruct Confucius. He said many things. Some emphasized order above all: on filial piety, never disobey. Others were democratic: without the trust of the people, no government can stand. Past emperors manipulated his work to justify a static order while they themselves rarely abided by the same rules. Japan became Asia's most advanced nation largely because it dared to change its own values during the Meiji Restoration in 1868 (though it now needs a similar impetus to regain its creative energy).

The conventional wisdom that Asians cherish learning is misleading. In the past, learning meant passing imperial exams that led to well-paid jobs in the civil service. It's not altogether different in modern Asia. Learning for its own sake is considered a luxury, if not a financial waste, unless it also leads to an attractive income stream.

The twisted Confucian philosophy passed on by generations has played a damnable role in denting Asian creative thinking. U.S.-trained physicist Woo Chia-wei, president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, believes the Confucian stress on order is a major obstacle to creative thinking that has sometimes affected even his own instincts. All important advances in knowledge involve substantial revision or rejection of an existing framework. Scientists call that a paradigm shift. Order for the sake

of order is the opposite of creative thinking.

Which Asian society, informed by home-grown precepts, is most likely to nurture and keep at home a future generation able to write better software than Microsoft, find a cure for cancer and replace quantum mechanics with a Theory of Everything, now the Holy Grail of physics? The odds are not good, but the best bet is Taiwan. Alone among Asian societies it possesses the right combination of institutions that allow talent to blossom. Institutionalized disputes and a respect for opposing viewpoints, publicly aired, are not just about political democracy, they are fundamental to creative thinking. They act as a filter so that a rare gem may be found among the intellectual garbage. It takes only a few powerful ideas to change the world.

If Japan, China and the rest of Asia—perhaps even India—ever manage to cast aside mind-numbing communist, Confucian and caste values, then the region's talents could one day dominate the Nobel Prize lists, enriching the world through intellectual property, not property development. And they will be doing their creative thinking right here in Asia. Eventually, someone might even ask, “Can Westerners think?” ■

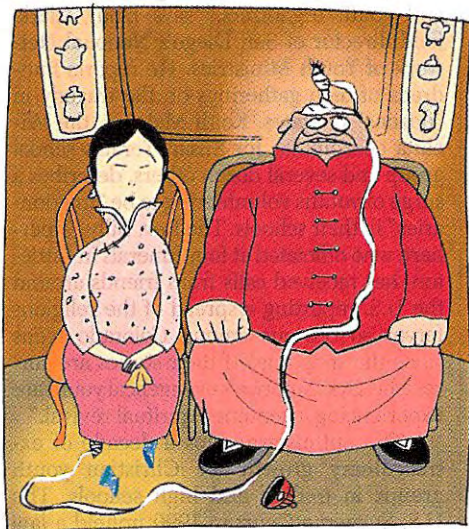


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