

Asia has ignored the importance of creativity, and risks paying the price. It has much to learn from the West. BY SIN-MING SHAW

Values True and False

RONNIE CHAN, BILLIONAIRE CHAIRMAN OF THE ASIA SOCIETY in Hong Kong, minced no words at the World Bank meetings in September: "What does the East need of the West? We need its technology, its military umbrella, its capital and its market. What does the West need of us? Not much." At the end of a year in which the glaring flaws of some of Asia's financial institutions have been revealed, a year, yet again, when no Asia-educated scientist won a Nobel Prize, Chan's devastatingly frank analysis demands an answer. Asia needs to examine why it has found itself to be a supplicant to the West—both intellectually and materially.

Asia could once produce great empires, magnificent philosophers, cultures and scientific inventions. It was able to do so because it knew that true wealth comes from intellectual capital. Modern Asia has conspicuously little of it. From Japan to Singapore, Asian wealth creation is basically imitative. Few in Asia, especially among the loud West-bashing advocates of "Asian values," have had the honesty to admit that Asian modernity is largely a product of the Western mind.

Underneath the glittering façade of material wealth, Asia remains an intellectual colony. Take Japan. It may appear the ideal Asian society, having successfully combined the best of East and West. The country is wealthy and technologically advanced; it is clean, orderly and socially harmonious, with very little violent crime. But if Japan were the ideal, then Asia might well concede the war. For what is it about Japan that is not derivative, however first rate?

One telling example: in 1987 Susumu Tonegawa of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology won the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Japan was ecstatic; a native son had demolished the myth that Japanese had no originality. The euphoria only lasted a couple of days. Tonegawa said he would not have won the prize had he not gone abroad to a university that thrived on creativity. In Japan—where one must know one's academic rank and respect group harmony—original work would be discourteous if not offensive to his peers.

What about China, the cradle of an ancient civilization that reached its zenith in the Tang dynasty more than 1,000 years ago, while Europe was still in the Dark Ages? Chinese sciences, arts, philosophies, medicines were once unsurpassed elsewhere. Perhaps modern China can meet the challenge of the Western mind?

So far, not so good. After several futile attempts to reinvent herself in the early 20th century, the end result was communism, a product of the convoluted tradition of Kant and Hegel, not even central to the main currents of Western thought. Jiang's China may be headed toward capitalism. And yet China has still not un-

learned the wrong lessons from the West nor has she understood what gave the West the edge in the first place; her leaders still claim a mandate from Marx and Lenin, two failed European thinkers, and from Mao, a destroyer of Chinese culture. Chinese universities, underfunded and savagely treated in the past as hotbeds of potential troublemakers, are decades away from becoming the kind of forum for free inquiry needed to cultivate a creative and dynamic society. Despite economic reform, the country's leaders still distrust freewheeling thinkers. Naturally, most children of high party officials have gone or plan to go to the Stanfords of the world, where they can get the good education they are denied at home.

By their own actions, the members of the Asian elite acknowledge that there is something superior in a Western education. Yet they will not admit that its most distinctive feature is tolerance of a human being's individuality and the encouragement of an individual's potential to create. Respect for the individual mind is the key to creativity. For Asia to meet the Western challenge, it needs to rediscover what once made it creative—and then build on it. It must cease to be imitative.

The first step is easy. Asia needs to spend huge sums on schools and universities. The second step requires ending exclusive reliance on standardized entrance exams for universities. These examinations, like the old imperial ones, encourage the conventional and dull the mind. Asia needs to recognize that originality can only come from a celebration of free expression and the individual. Originality is often iconoclastic, unusual, controversial. It seeks to replace old paradigms with new ones. Unfortunately for Asia, its leaders have often damned such qualities as "Western"—destructive and unsuitable for Asia's penchant for harmony—and therefore not to be emulated. Filial loyalty and a social order based on moral equity between the ruler and the ruled—admirable elements of Confucian teaching—have been wrenched out of context by latter-day emperors. In their new authoritarian guise, the Confucian values are transmuted into submission to figures of authority, avoidance of conflicts and group cohesion—ironically, at any cost.

Without an intellectual renaissance, Asia will continue to lose its best talents to the West. Asia needs to find its own voice in the liberating aspect of its own traditions. (Confucius, if he were alive today, would have been jailed as a dissident.) Today's Asians, and tomorrow's, must reject the false prophets of "values," who stress blind deference to authority above all. Asia's true values are far more diverse than their usual modern interpretation. If Asia fails to rediscover its creativity, a century will pass before another Ronnie Chan asks his question again. The time to start finding answers is now.



Diligent, but not creative: Japanese businessmen