



## CREATIVITY AND CHINESE EDUCATION REFORM

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### Abstract

Although Chinese educational reform has focused on creativity and innovation for over a decade, the transfer of educational philosophy to practice has not yet occurred. Creative industries in China are still seen as imitative. The main barrier for Chinese students becoming more creative and innovative may be the culture itself, which is modeled after Confucian philosophy and does not allow secondary students to act divergently or question any authority. In spite of sparse success in transforming education to focus on more student-centered approaches, the Chinese government still seeks to develop their creative industries through education reform away from test-focused, rote instruction to student-centered creative practices.

**Keywords:** education reform, Creativity, China

### INTRODUCTION

While the United States has been focusing on standards, standardized testing, and accountability, China, on the other hand, has been furiously promoting creativity as a vital component of its education system since 2000 (Preus, 2007; Sargent, 2009; Wang, 2010; Zhou, 2009). At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese educational leaders saw the lack of creativity as a barrier to being successful and globally competitive (Sargent, 2009). Chinese education reform at that time was designed to move from lecture and rote learning to student-centered teaching methods, including cooperative learning, discovery methods, and project-based learning activities (Wang, 2010).

At the core of the reforms, Chinese leaders saw and still see education as vital to China's development as a global and political power and feel that the social interactions in traditional Chinese classrooms before the reforms were not conducive to cultivating creativity and innovation (Sargeant, 2009). China's Eleventh Five-Year Plan of 2006 additionally placed fostering creativity as a priority for the country (Vong, 2008). To stimulate creativity, state and local governments and teachers were to be given more control over the development and selection of textbooks, as well as more of a voice in developing a flexible curriculum (Preus, 2007).

To reform education to the quality education model, the Chinese government looked to other leading Asian nations such as Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. Western influence is also apparent, particularly with interest in student-centered learning and learning by doing models (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). Quality education, which is the core of Chinese education reform, is seen as a holistic approach which focuses on the whole person and is a reaction against "examination-oriented" education that has existed in China for well over 1000 years, including imperial China, with rote memorization and recitation being the standard teaching methods (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Wang, 2006).

However, after over a decade of educational reforms that focused on evolving to a "quality-oriented" model from a test-driven one, there is no evidence that the reforms have had any significant positive impact on teaching and learning in China (Liu & Dunne, 2009). Researchers claim that all educational decisions and actions still focus on the Chinese examination system, which gives the purpose of learning as answering test questions successfully to get to the next



school level (Gu, 2010; Liu & Dunne, 2009). Additionally, an even greater disparity between the reform efforts and the results exists in rural China.

Many rural and remote regions of China are underserved by the Chinese government (Rong & Shi, 2001). This is due to numerous “ideological, philosophical, and strategic disagreements” (p. 107) among political leaders and educational experts. At the beginning of the new reform era, Rong and Shi (2001) found that making an assessment of China’s education system was difficult because of the lack of data on rural schools and because of the lack of reliability, validity and consistency of Chinese sources.

Wang’s (2010) case studies of rural classrooms, in fact, found that rural teachers did not adapt the 2001 education reforms, and students are still passive participants who sit quietly through reading and rote memorization. In rural schools, lecturing still takes up most of the class time. The researcher reports that for rural teachers, time is an issue in teaching a national curriculum and schedule with standards that are too high with a scheduled pace that is too fast. The researcher suggests that whole-class lecture gives teachers control of the pace and aids in the teachers being able to complete the textbooks much more quickly than a student-centered classroom would allow.

Rural schools may also be affected by funding and staffing inequities. There is a shortage of senior secondary teachers in rural areas, pushing class sizes to around 100, compared to urban and suburban class sizes of 50 (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). The large class sizes may be a further barrier to implementing the reforms.

In all areas of China, however, culture may be the biggest barrier in incorporating creativity to achieve the goals of “quality education.” Studies about teaching and learning in China completed by both Western and Eastern researchers have typically characterized the Chinese as less creative, due in large part to Confucian philosophy that values collectivism, hard work, and respect for authority (Burton, 2010). Ng (2001) describes this perceived creativity gap in his book *Why Asians are Less Creative than Westerners*.

In a study examining the societal influence on how people evaluated creativity, Nui and Sternberg (2003) used a sample of Yale art students and art students from Beijing University and compared their works. The results of the study suggested that the difference between American and Chinese students’ creativity had more to do with environmental factors, like values and school environments, rather than ethnicity. The results further showed that educators in China have a tendency to overlook the practice of teaching creativity in place of “basic knowledge and analytical skills” (Nui & Sternberg, 2003, p. 108). Nui and Sternberg claim that Chinese artwork is considered to be less creative than American artwork by both American and Chinese judges because Chinese students exceed in the academic domains more so than the creative ones. The researchers believe that this is a result of American society embracing individualism while Chinese society preaches conformity.

In researching the perception of creativity among undergraduate students in the Chinese cities of Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Taipei, Rudowicz and Yue (2000) discovered that “humorous” and “artistic,” often identified as creative traits in Western culture (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2005), were missing from the Chinese students’ perceptions of creativity. In a similar study, Yue and Rudowicz (2002) asked undergraduate students from the same cities to identify the most creative Chinese people in history and in modern day China. Artists, musicians, and



business people were rarely cited. Politicians were perceived as the most creative, followed by scientists and inventors. The researchers linked these perceptions to strong utilitarian views of creativity.

In a study of 204 Hong Kong primary and secondary teachers, Chan and Chan (1999) found that Chinese teachers regarded some characteristics of creative students as socially undesirable, which is counter to the perceptions of teachers from the United States in similar studies. The researchers state that it is common in the Chinese culture for teachers to regard nonconformity as rebellious and expressive behavior as arrogant. However, the traits of being imaginative, artistic, and inquisitive were seen as positive creative traits in the Hong Kong study.

Ng (2001) views creativity as an individualized behavior in developing novel ideas in a specific domain. To Ng, culture heavily influences how a person acts in society, either engaging in creative and individuated behavior or going along with the majority and conforming. Consequently, in a culture dominated by Confucianism, individuality is not encouraged. In Confucianism, the teacher-student relationship is seen as all pervasive and strict, impeding free exchange between the two (Ho & Ho, 2008). Students are to be humble and obedient and not allowed to question authority. Ho & Ho characterize this relationship by identifying common patterns in Chinese students: fearful of teachers; maintaining respect, at least superficially, in front of teachers; criticizing teachers behind their backs; keeping affective distance from teachers; and adopting silence and passive resistance to deal with teachers' demands. Steers (2009) is critical of such a student-teacher relationship and states that a strong atmosphere of mutual trust between student and teacher must be in place for creativity to be allowed. There must be probing questioning on both sides with constructive and positive feedback to allow for risk-taking to take place and for creativity to be allowed to flourish. Therefore, the Confucian ideology runs contradictory to the 21<sup>st</sup> century realization of the need for creativity and innovation in today's global economy.

Asian nations have recognized this and have made creativity an essential component to educational reform. To change education, these countries are affecting cultural change or attempting to do so. Yao, Yang, Dong, and Wang (2010) see the cultural influence of *Zhong Dong*, the Confucian doctrine that emphasizes taking a balanced approach to problems in order to find harmony, as hindering the translation of creative ideas to innovative products in the Asian workplace post high school and university study.

Not all researchers, however, find rote practices as negative. Watkins (2000) argues that Chinese teaching practices are misunderstood by Western educators. The researcher feels that the use of memorization is not just limited to rote learning but is also used dually to apply to meaning for a stronger understanding. Additionally, Watkins finds that Chinese teachers also incorporate questioning techniques; however, the emphasis on questioning does not appear during the process of learning, rather it comes after the students have learned independently. He warns that a number of basic concepts of Western education need to be reconsidered in comparing it strictly with the Chinese classroom because of major cultural differences in teaching approaches.

If creativity is perceived differently in the East, it is not a surprise that it is not valued in Chinese teacher training programs. In a study focusing on pre-service training of Chinese teachers, Campbell and Hu (2010) found that not much time is spent on creativity and innovation during teacher preparation. They found that very little had changed since the introduction of educational reform in China and see the practicum system as a passive process where the mentor teacher



serves as the model, which is likely to encourage the continuation of traditional practices rather than encouraging innovative teaching strategies. In another study, Lai (2011) found that teachers faced difficulties with implementing the reforms, that school-based professional development was top-down and not participatory, and that teacher trainers mainly instruct practical teaching techniques rather than encouraging teacher reflection.

The Chinese government, however, remains committed to reforming education to foster creativity & entrepreneurialism despite high scores on international exams, particularly in math (Zhao, 2012). In 2010, the Chinese government released a draft copy of “The National Guidelines for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development, 2010-2020 (Gu, 2010). In the document, innovation was the key focus in helping the country undergo a shift from a labor-intensive economy to a knowledge and technology-driven one. Gu (2010) believes that in implementing educational reforms, China has to work through numerous issues. The researcher cites that China has to overcome “antiquated educational ideas, outdated contents and methods, weak adaptability of school leavers, and a shortage of trained personnel who are innovative, practical or possessing multiple qualifications or skills (p. 307).” Additionally, part of the guidelines discuss reforming college entrance examinations and admission by recognizing the negative effects of testing from “letting the result of one round of exams decide the destiny of a student’s life” to allowing applicants to make multiple choices and establishing a National Education Examination Steering Committee (Gu, 2010, p. 301). The guidelines also promote the extension of international cooperation and exchanges.

In a speech by the People’s Republic of China’s president, Hu Jintao, made at the National Education Work Conference in Beijing five months after the release of the new guidelines, President Jintao championed the need for creativity and innovation. He spoke about teacher training and pedagogical strategies:

We must introduce an innovative model for training skilled personnel to meet the needs of national and social development; follow the laws of education and the laws governing the growth of talent; pay attention to combining learning with thinking, integrating knowledge with practice, teaching students according to their aptitude; adopt innovative education and teaching methods; promote heuristic, inquiry-oriented, discussion-based, and participatory teaching; arouse students’ curiosity; arouse students’ initiative; encourage students to think creatively; and change the method of education that is based solely on feeding information. (BBC, 2010, p.1).

These goals are not different from the blueprint set out a decade earlier. It remains to be seen whether the barriers of culture and tradition can be overcome to meet the vision the president outlined.

There are some signs of transformation for China to move to a concept-minded economy and mindset. Creative industries are quickly gaining momentum in China. Creative industries are sectors in which the product or service contains artistic and creative endeavors (Caves, 2000). In recent years, China has experienced more growth in the creative industries than other sectors in many regions, in both large and second-tier cities. In 2007, the general GDP growth in Beijing was 12.3 percent, as opposed to that of the creative industries in the city which reached 19.4 percent (Li, 2011). Li (2011) states that cultural creativity does not have to be exclusive to creative industries but to all industries, thereby increasing competitiveness with the rest of the world.



In his book *China's Creative Imperative*, Sinha (2008) recognizes that China's place as a creative center relies on a shift in mindset by businesses. He identifies and debunks several myths about the Chinese people in relation to creativity and strongly believes that the structure of "quality education" will help revolutionize the creative spirit of the Chinese.

On July 6, 2012, President Hu Jintao again reinforced China's need to be more innovative, emphasizing high quality education, the creation of social incentives for creativity, and for more of a mix in creative industries with Chinese and foreign businesses. According to the report from the Oxford Analytica (2012), the statement comes after several major internal reports that described China's technologies as imitative, not innovative.

Despite the reforms, Chinese education is still currently driven by the high-stakes college entrance examination, which Zhou (2009, 2012) finds to be harmful to individuals and the country. The objectives of more flexibility in curriculum, educating the whole child, cultivating a culture of independent thinking, and less testing have not yet been achieved.

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