Chinese Education:

The Journey from Confucianism to Adventure Learning

The journey from an educational system comprising the memorization of several books to an alternative involving physical challenges interspersed with meaningful dialogue is not as far out as it sounds.

It has happened in the Peoples' Republic of China as Simon Beames reports.

Today, education in China is undergoing a rapid metamorphosis. This transition is more evident in the urban sectors where educators and entrepreneurs are trying to respond to the need for exclusive private schools, and anyone capable of paying the tuition fees can send their child to a school with first class sports facilities, native English teachers, and well-balanced meals.

At one extreme of the educational spectrum there are vestiges of Confucianism, at the other extreme there is the appearance of an alternative type of learning that has gained acceptance in North America, Europe, Africa, and South-east Asia: adventure education.

These two ways of educating a person could not be more different in almost every way, except for one thing, which is congruent with the ideas presented by other philosophies: they offer a return to virtue. In Chinese this theme is called *jen*, a character symbolizing humanity and benevolence (deBarry 1960, p16). In the world of outdoor education, this concept might be referred to as, "learning how to work together as a team".

In this paper I will briefly outline the backgrounds of both Confucianism and adventure education. I will show how, though Confucianism flourished for centuries, many of its ideals were lost in a haze of rote learning which dominated a student's mind. Finally I will summarize the contributions adventure education can make, indeed *is* making, towards education in China.

If one word could characterize the Chinese way of life over the last two thousand years, it would be "Confucian". Where other trains of thought and philosophies have teetered in and out of popularity, Confucianism has remained a steadfast doctrine in China from its origins in the first century before Christ to present day. Even though many people have followed other doctrines such as Taoism or Buddhism they have continued to be Confucianists.

Confucius was born in 551 B.C. in Shantung Province. The life he led was not out of the ordinary. Though his ancestors may have been part of a lesser aristocracy he was born into poverty. At first he devoted his life to politics, but he ended up a failure. Subsequently he turned his attention to teaching and preparing young men to succeed in public life. As he grew older he concentrated entirely on editing texts of the *Confucian Classics*, and died in 479 B.C. (deBarry, p16)

Philosophically, Confucius espoused cultivating "the most fundamental virtue which a person is to cultivate". This virtue can be described as love, benevolence, and human-heartedness (Wu 1986, p16). Confucius contended that in order to be spared of the "evil, cruelty, and violence" that was ruining society, humans must embrace the ideal of *jen*. (deBarry, p16)

Confucius told his disciples that they must be prepared to live in poverty, as material gain often conflicted with the attainment of virtue. The core of Confucianism lay in having a "clear sense of moral values, expressed in his warm humanity, optimism, humility, and good sense". (deBarry, p18)

Though the teachings of Confucius weren't given much attention during his lifetime, they did gain popularity after his death as people lost faith in other doctrines that placed a greater importance on superstition. Confucianism went on to become the official creed of the nation in the second century B.C., and his texts *The Confucian Classics* became the main reference book of the scholars and statesmen.

It should be noted that this scholarly education was not available to girls, except for a tiny percentage from a very privileged background who were allowed to learn how to read.
For the most part, a girl's education centred on learning to play musical instruments, write in elegant calligraphy, and develop the etiquette and manner required to be a model subservient woman.

All of these teachings were to prepare the student for the state civil service examination. Passing these examinations could secure the future of any successful candidate. This system, which involved the complete memorization of at least nine books, lasted into the twentieth century. Since so much fate depended on the outcomes of the exams there was a lot of deceit and corruption involved, such as examiners being bribed or exams being written by paid scholars in disguise. The civil service examinations were the end of a long and arduous educational road which began almost at birth. (Cleaverly 1985, p16)

In fact the conditioning for these exams did not begin at birth: It began before that! Pregnant women were supposed to sit in special ways, avoid certain foods, and listen to the Classics read aloud. At a boy's birth coins were scattered signifying hopes of success in his studies.

Formal schooling began at age three. The mother would teach the boy the characters and then how to write them, as soon as the child was able to hold a brush. The characters that the youngsters would learn were from three books: Three Character Classic, Thousand Character Treatise, and The Hundred Family Names (Cleverley, p16). Studying these books had a dual purpose. First, it provided a reference from which to learn characters, and second, they taught the Confucian moral code (filial piety, diligence in studies). Children in rural areas would rarely go beyond this level. (Hu 1984, p10)

When a boy had learned his basic characters by about age seven, he was put in a tutorial group with other boys. Together they would memorize the Four Books and Five Classics. By age fifteen it was estimated these boys would have learned close to 400000 characters. (Cleverley, p17) As soon as a boy knew the text by heart he would begin work on the commentaries and finally try some of the specimen exam answers.

In the prefectural capital, up to 10000 examinees at a time sat in little cells awaiting their turns. After all of these years of devotion to these classics only one or two in a hundred would pass. If a man did, it was one of the biggest achievements of his life.

On the plus side, the exams provided opportunities for social mobility, as a man from a poor background could move into a position of power and esteem. This also ensured that the power did not always rest in the hereditary aristocracy and clans, as it did in Europe. (Cleverley, p19)

On the negative side, this conditioning through a boy's life often left them incapable of adapting to a lifestyle that was rapidly losing any resemblance to that of his ancestors. It became increasingly difficult for the Chinese educated upper class to deal with the new issues, temptations, and distractions that emerged with the influx of Western ideals during the nineteenth century. Finally, in the early twentieth century, it was decided that the Four Books and Five Classics were no longer sufficient preparation for governors of twentieth century China. The civil service exams were abolished in 1905.

Even in the early twentieth century, technology, industry, and ways of life were in a constant state of flux. A life spent preparing a young person for the state exams was leaving them ill-prepared to face the challenges presented by living in rapidly developing modern world. Qing scholar statesman Zhang Zhongli explained: "The constant drilling in traditional Confucian moral principles and the writing of formalized essays kept the minds of the gentry so occupied that they had little time for independent thought and study" (Cleverley, p21). Another Chinese education scholar, Lynn Paine, does not agree with the teacher's role being the subject master who must cram the student's brain with as much information as possible. She writes about how educator must move away from an educational model which emphasizes teachers as virtuosos, who possess vast amounts of knowledge, and students as empty containers that must be filled with this knowledge. Paine advocates finding a balance between the teaching of books and educating the person (1990, p71).

Even though the exams were abolished in 1905, changes in the Chinese education system were spurred as far back as 1842 under the treaty of Nanjing. With this, The British ruled Hong Kong and five Chinese ports were open for trade. Through treaties like this one and others similar, western clergy and their converts gained the right to open schools in China and to take in Chinese students. (Cleverley, p29)

As the Confucianist influence began to subside, school curriculum started to resemble that in Western institutions: a more fragmented array of courses in Chinese language, physics, chemistry, biology, law, PE, English, and mathematics. Also, vocational and technical training schools began to offer training in agriculture and industrial technology. (World Book Encyclopedia) As this metamorphosis occurred in the P.R.C., some interesting educational movements were on the other side of the world.

In the early 1900s there were several writers with strong views of what education should be. Several of these authors were absolutely convinced of the necessity of concrete experience in education. Of these writers, John Dewey was arguably the strongest supporter. He wrote, "I assume that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (1938, p507). Of the small number of people who could be considered founders of experiential education, Dewey is certainly foremost. Dewey began writing in the late 1800's and published his classic *Experience and Education* in 1938. The Progressive Education movement tried to put Dewey's writing into practice, but prevailing conservative attitudes in post-WWII America restricted its growth to a few small pockets.

The first Experiential Education breakthrough may have been as early as 1920, when Kurt Hahn opened the Salem School in Germany . The school's purpose was, "to train citizens who would not shirk from leadership and who could, if called upon, make independent decisions, put right action before expediency and the common cause before personal ambition" (James 1986, p41).

Being Jewish and espousing ideologies contrary to those held by Hitler's regime, meant that Hahn's days in Germany were numbered. Hahn publicly stood to up Hitler and was exiled from Nazi Germany in 1933. He then went to England, and with the help of influential friends opened Gordonstoun School in Scotland in 1934. It had goals similar to the Salem School, but required all students to be part of the sea rescue, mountain rescue, or fire service. These services and challenges gave them "the opportunity to practice different leadership styles, learn about effective team work, how to plan and organize, and increase their sense of self-worth by successfully completing tasks that they didn't think they were capable of beforehand" (Beames 1995).

When the Second World War broke out, the British despaired that seamen left in lifeboats after their ships had been torpedoed were dying before being rescued. The intriguing point was that it was the strong young sailors who were dying and not the older sailors, who were less fit, but mentally hardened by a lifetime at sea. Experts attributed this to the young seamens' lack of character and mental strength. The question was, "How can one help young people strengthen their characters?".

Along with shipping magnate Laurence Holt, Kurt Hahn helped found Outward Bound in 1941, in Wales. Though it was meant as a training school for all young people, many of the early participants were seamen sponsored by Holt, in preparation for the hardships they would encounter on the seas during wartime. The movement soon gained popularity, and programs expanded. In 1962, after concerns were raised over the character of young Americans, Outward Bound was brought to the USA. The Outward Bound movement has continued to grow, and there are now over 60 schools world-wide catering to a variety of populations ranging from senior citizens to abused women to the physically handicapped.

Over the last quarter of a century several similar programs have grown considerably - the communications program Foxfire and the adventure learning program Project Adventure, to name two. As well, national organizations have emerged, such as the Association for Experiential Education. Today many western schools have some form of outdoor adventure programming for their student body.

The field of adventure learning is one of the fastest growing fields within education. It is causing a ripple effect in response to society's desperate need to cultivate these important human interaction skills, for without these, young people today are left helpless in a fiercely competitive world. Perhaps this is one reason that "more children are becoming more violent at earlier ages" (Sautter 1995, pK5). It is not unrealistic to imagine how an angry youth without the skills to listen, give feedback, set-goals, and go through rational decision-making processes might get frustrated enough to hurt someone.

Another issue beyond the scope of this paper is the effect of the computers on the social skills of children, who spend several hours interacting with computers, and considerably less time interacting with their peers.

This imbalance in the development of our children is not a phenomena restricted to the West. The fear of educational systems producing children more akin to robots than humans is evident in research conducted by Lin and Chen (1995, p164) who described how Chinese parents and educators alike had voiced strong opinions regarding "the detrimental emphasis on academic achievement". The authors go on to state how "extreme pressure from family and the society will undoubtedly make students passive objects, which hamper their growth as an all-around person" (p166).

Today in North America, the United Kingdom, and Oceania, adventure learning is providing solid accessible education to its citizens. The field is also growing in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan. Perhaps now it is China's turn. Here the world's most populous nation is opening its doors to democracy and a market economy before our very eyes. Democracies and free markets are synonymous with choice and, in the educational field, that's exactly what China now has. From an educator's standpoint this is fascinating because privately run schools are opening and the breadth of curriculum is increasing. Gone are the days when all material to be learned was handed down from the state. With the growing number of Chinese inhabitants financially capable of paying for private schooling and the ever-increasing number of those who want their children to attend private schools, there are myriad opportunities for educational innovators and business people alike.

In 1994 the first signs of adventure learning programmes surfaced in the Peoples' Republic of China: Two different outdoor adventure-based education and training organizations, the *Hong Kong Outward Bound School* and *I Will Not Complain*, operated their first courses. Outward Bound ran courses in Guandong Province and IWNC opened up a base of operations beside the Great Wall. These courses were huge successes and have already carved what appears to be a permanent place in the training and education of the Chinese public.

It comes as no surprise that adventure learning is emerging in China. Adventure education has been growing steadily in the west over the last few decades, and it is only natural for the Chinese to take what they need from all western concepts, whether it's educational practices or flush toilets. Furthermore, adventure learning provides its students with everything that traditional Chinese education did not. Where traditional education focused on learning facts that cannot be applied to daily activities, adventure learning shuns memorization and centres on the development of the whole person's character. Ironically, the educational outcomes associated with adventure learning may be more congruent with Confucius' goals of education (humanity, benevolence) than those achieved by Chinese education itself, past or present.

There are two main factors that could hinder the successful widespread integration of adventure learning programmes in China. First, it is an Asian tendency to not give direct honest verbal feedback to peers, colleagues, and supervisors for fear of offending. Though adventure-based courses are very physical, they are also very cerebral. Much of the students' time is spent in post-activity review sessions, extracting learning points that can be later applied to daily-life situations. These sessions are most successful when the participants are completely unabashed and open in their dialogue. While I was instructing Outward Bound courses in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Japan, it became evident that the learning and self-awareness with which each individual leaves the course can be severely diminished if everyone does not adopt the attitude of being honest and up-front so that all may grow as individuals.

The second factor that may hinder the progress of adventure learning in China is that the whole concept of adventure is a novel one. In fact, Professor Wang Gungwu (1994), vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, stated that adventure-based programming will be a tough sell to Chinese markets as no character for adventure even exists! He explained that the Western bravado concept of adventure for adventure's sake was not in the Chinese mentality, and that any changes in this mentality would not happen overnight.

My feeling is that the liberal attitudes that are more common in China today will be more accepting of open and expressive dialogue and of new trends in education. Still, Western advocates of adventure learning like myself must remain conscious that much of Chinese culture is deeply rooted in centuries of Confucianist, exam-oriented education. We must avoid being dogmatic regarding a system of education and culture so different from our own.

Through this research, some questions have come to mind: One, to what extent will Chinese private schools include adventure education as part of a child's education? Two, will there come a time when public schools will adopt any of these practices? If they do, will the government go as far as creating governing bodies, teacher's colleges, and training schools to provide support, training, guidance for outdoor professionals? As we enter the third millenium, many eyes will be trained on China as it continues to develop at a phenomenal pace. Among these watchful eyes will be educators of all nationalities, whether traditional classroom teachers or adventure-based educators: Both are curious and both have knowledge to impart.

In China, an educational train-ride that began 25 centuries ago with a philosopher named Confucius has made it to a station called Adventure Education. Only time will tell us if the train will chug past the station without slowing down to investigate, or, as I would like to think, stay a while, taking all of the best from that stop, and then hitting the track again in a perpetually progressing, but never ending pilgrimage to the perfect education.

Horizons

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