

GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Journal of East-West Thought devotes its Summer Issue to education, a time honored and an unavoidable topic of today, yesterday and probably forever. Six distinguished scholars from Canada, India, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States have participated in a discussion which helps bring into focus again what we really mean by education. The discussion fully reflects what this journal is all about – showcasing clashes of ideas and thoughts between two very different cultures. Only in this issue East meets West in the world of education.

Indeed education is an onerous topic, especially in a time of history when every possible force wants to have a say. Let us take a look at two nations, the United States and China, one from the West and the other from the East. In the United States, which is a superpower in education, many political and yet very powerful figures are trying to turn institutions of education, higher education in particular, into mills of skilled workers. As a result the gulf between the haves and have-nots is deepened when public universities, where first generation and low income family children congregate because of affordability, have to conform to the marching orders from governors and legislators to become apprenticeship shops and private colleges continue to jack up tuition so that they are further away from the reach of working families. In China, another powerhouse in education, schools have seen much better days in the past, because to schools on every level, from kindergarten to university, resource generating is of paramount consideration. From late 1990s going forward, most existing universities have grown more than 10 times in enrollment while new colleges and universities mushroom at an alarming pace. To be fair, universities have to find means to make ends meet when they are left to their own devices. The result, however, is that colleges and universities are turning themselves into nothing more than diploma mills. Educators become business people and students victims or worse still, hostages of commercialization.

When the editor came to the United States for his graduate studies in the 1980s a report entitled *A Nation at Risk*¹ was released. In it the author expressed a grave concern over the status of education in the United States, based on international comparisons of high school graduates which put US students among the worst underachievers. Over the last 36 years those concerns look pale against the current

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¹National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform. An Open Letter to the American People. A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education.* Washington, DC, 1983.

situation. In the view of the editor it is probably a good time for another report to be released. Except the title of this report should be appropriately called *A World at Risk!*

Some education leaders thought they found the remedy for today's problems in education, especially for other countries. For instance in 2010 Richard Levin, the then president of Yale University, criticized Asian education for its emphasizing rote memorization and for being narrowly specialized and unimaginative (Shun, 2016: 5-21). His advice, as can be expected, is learning from the West and following the practice in western universities. 97 years ago John Dewey, American philosopher and education reformer (1859 – 1952) had the similar idea. In 1919 during his sabbatical leave Dewey went to Asia, first to Japan and then to China where he stayed for two years. He felt that countries in the East needed help from the West to set their education on the right track (Keenan, 1977) . In China he delivered a series of lectures, which systemically introduced his ideas of education in four areas nicely summarized by Shufang Liang, in her paper "John Dewey: His Works and Influence on Education in Modern China," cited below:

- (1) The Nature of Experience. Dewey believed that experience is of and in nature. In other words, experience and nature are inseparable. Additionally, he insisted that nature includes not only physical entities but also relationships. His discussion of experience and nature can be found in works such as *Experience and Nature*, *Arts as Experience* and *Experience and Education*.
- (2) Instrumentalism. Dewey's attitude toward education is a practical one. He looked upon Ideas as "instruments" in solving human problems. More often than not, he liked the word "instrumentalism" in preference to "pragmatism" when he talked about his philosophy of education. In short, he regarded concrete methods as essential to solving real problems rather than abstract answers...In *How We Think* this view was clearly expounded upon.
- (3) Individuals vs. Society. Dewey believed that individuals and their social conditions were interrelated and interdependent. Without a democratic society there would never be free, humane and educative individuals. This idea is repeated in many of his books such as *Democracy and Education* and, *Individualism Old and New*.
- (4) Moral Development. Dewey held that in education each action should be judged good or bad in terms of its outcome. He believed that an individual's moral development is acquired through his or her active participation in the social group. In other words, an individual learns about morality not through books but through living and personal growth in society. In *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Moral Principles in Education* his views on morality were fully revealed. (Liang 1992: 396-406)

Granted Dewey's ideas represented important and very sound advice to an old civilization, the irony is that those ideas were not really new, as Confucius, China's very own sage of education, started to teach exactly along those lines some 2,500 years ago. In fact in the current issue Professor Shun Kwong-loi made the point that Confucius's view of adult learning as a process of intellectual and moral

transformation that involves the personalization of what has been learnt and the building of a broad world view (Shun, 2016: 5-21) was exactly what education is all about. Perhaps by such similarities in the views of education John Dewey was dubbed by Cai Yuanpei, President of National Peking University at Dewey's 60th birthday celebration, a "Yankee Confucius" (Liang, 1992: 396-406). By the time John Dewey finished his lecture tour two years later he not only taught in China but also learned a great deal about China. Because of his firsthand experience Dewey was able to reject the Western preoccupation with democracy in politics but instead embrace the idea of democracy as an all-encompassing culture.² In addition the efforts mounted by many Chinese educational practitioners, notably Dewey's former students such as Tao Xingzhi, largely failed to bear fruits as expected, which further demonstrated that any education theories from a foreign culture, no matter how sound they may seem, could not hope to be fully implemented on the local soil without incorporating local political, economic and cultural elements.

The six scholars in the issue approach education from very different planes. From Professor Shun's exposition of Confucius education philosophy through Professor Gibbs elucidation of the limitation of current education when developing skills or expediency is the main thrust through Professor Tiwari's argument that education should cultivate the skill belonging to three faculties – acquisition of knowledge, collection of information and understanding of cognition through Professor Suzuki's revelation that cross-culture literature reading plays an essential role in English teaching in Japan to Professors Briciu and Prompitak's demonstration that mindfulness and compassion improve the quality of massage while at the same time offering a path toward self-transformation, a theme presents itself, that is, education is life and life is education.

At the beginning of the foreword the editor paints a very gloomy picture for the education landscape. After some discussion one might ask if anything can be done. It is the belief of this editor that the need for "education" in not so distant past had to consist of two essential elements – custodianship and knowledge dissemination. When male adults were out hunting, and female busy with mountains of chores to attend to a place to keep children safe and entertained seemed quite necessary. Those two essential functions – custodianship and entertainment – evolve over thousands of years into what we call education today. Honestly even if one looks at today's school one can hardly argue it is not serving the same purposes, only the terms used may be different. In this sense we, as educators, probably can start by taking some baby steps. We probably can start by making sure that our students stay safe from political demagogues and making sure that their nature, their free spirits and creativity are encouraged or in other words, entertained. These baby steps are what these six scholars in one way or another in their theses call for, and if all educators are doing that they are really doing their job.

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