

Why They Fail to Innovate: An Investigation of the Chinese Education System and Cultural Suppression of Creativity

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Abstract

The Chinese have been accused by international observers of lacking in the ability to innovate, a continually relevant issue in the US due to frequent accusations of American intellectual property theft. This is most commonly blamed on the education system. Certainly the education system is duly criticized, but limiting criticism to a singular institution blinds observers to the bigger picture, namely the deeply rooted cultural aspects that support and inform the errors in the education system. This study takes a closer look at the educational system, with a mind towards the broader Chinese culture, to explore the question of what causes the Chinese lack of innovation. To do so, I primarily applied psychological research and the Mill's Method to arrive at conclusions. The results of this study paint a grim picture of the status of creativity in China, which likely cannot be corrected with a simple policy change. It will require slow and careful changes to both the education system and the culture at large to bring a future generation of Chinese minds to bear on the creative world.

Despite world-leading performances on standardized tests and a massive population, modern China lacks comparable innovation. According to the most recent International Publishing Association and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reports, China produces and employs drastically fewer books (IPA, 2016) and researchers per million inhabitants (UNESCO, 2014 and 2015) when compared with the US, along with fewer total films and a current total of only 8 Nobel Prize laureates. As shown in Table 1 below, the causes of this difference in creative outcome between the US and China can be identified as a lack of divergent problem solving, a devaluing of converse thought, and a lack of

emphasis on intrinsic motivation by both the education system and the culture at large.

Table 1: US-China Comparisons

| Countries | Method of problem solving promoted: | Value of converse thought: | Emphasized types of motivation: |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| China | Convergent | Very low | Extrinsic |
| United States | Convergent and divergent | High | Extrinsic and Intrinsic |

The method of problem solving promoted by China's pedagogical practices is perhaps most important for their oft-accused lack of innovative entrepreneurs and proven lack of academic researchers. Convergent thinking can be defined as a "process of pulling together several pieces of information to draw a conclusion or solve a problem." (Ormrod, 2017). Conversely, the same text defines divergent thinking as the "process of mentally moving in a variety of directions from a single idea." Convergent thinking therefore only produces conclusions that are combinations of pre-existing knowledge. This is promoted by the strictly exam-centric Chinese education, where the vast majority of a Chinese student's workload relies exclusively on convergent thought. A lack of the narrative, artistic, or hands-on projects common in American schools limits the opportunity for students to exercise divergent thought, thus limiting creativity. Furthermore, those individuals who naturally excel at divergent thinking would not succeed in the exam-based Chinese system, limiting their access to the adult academic world.

While a drastic change to the policies surrounding education would be necessary to begin fostering innovative thinkers, it would not be sufficient alone; Chinese culture would also need to make a drastic shift in favor of promoting converse thought. Converse thinking refers to any contrarian, non-traditional, or otherwise unique thought. Showing students that creative and diverse thoughts and behaviors have value is a well-researched and nearly surefire way to promote creativity (Beghetto and Kaufmann, 2010). In the US, this is often done through class discussions, debates, argumentative essay-writing, and the perceptions of clashing beliefs brought on by our democratic system. Alternatively,

the modern Chinese context provides students with several examples of punished ideological dissenters, from the results of the Hundred Flowers Campaign under Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong to the current party purges under President Xi Jinping. Most of the culture throughout China's long history was dictated by rigid Confucian philosophy which defined the structure of society, social hierarchy, and governmental roles. Because of its inherent opposition to change, Chinese culture remained remarkably similar for most of its multi-millennium history. Although no longer Confucian today, the underlying values of order and aversion to change still have deep roots in the modern Chinese perception.

Another stifling force which ends up limiting the creative capabilities of Chinese students is the primary way they receive motivation. Psychologists divide motivators into two categories, either intrinsic or extrinsic. As the structure of the words suggest, intrinsic motivators come from within, and extrinsic are external. Intrinsic motivators are both more effective and promote creativity (Hennessee, 2010). While intrinsic motivators undeniably exist in Chinese students, they are rarely the driving force behind a student's efforts in school. Because of the great emphasis on exams, the external motivator of grades function as a great pressure on students. This is compounded by the role of the Chinese family in the wake of the era of the one-child policy, since students are forced to be under constant familial scrutiny. Parents have reported that they feel that their students' failure is their own failure, thus placing another powerful external motivator on test performance (Dreyer, 2008). This leaves students with little time to explore academia and foster intrinsic motivators.

Creativity is being quite thoroughly suppressed in China. The nature of the education system being dependent on rigorous exams limits the students' exposure to solely convergent problem solving. There is no value placed on contrarian thought, thus limiting a second major mode of cultivating creativity. Finally, the dependence on extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation forces students into

enormously stressful lives that leave no room for the development of creativity. Perhaps as time goes on, things in China will change in favor of a more effective education system and a culture that is more conducive for fostering creative minds. But as it stands currently, the Chinese system of education cannot possibly hope to produce the world's next generation of thinkers.

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