

Western Practicality Fused with Confucian Virtues: How far can it take East Asia's Higher Education?

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Higher education development has been achieving highly in most East Asian societies including China, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. The achievement becomes even more remarkable when compared with other non-Western societies. Throughout East Asia, a Western-styled modern higher education system has been well established, after absorbing Western knowledge for one and a half centuries. East Asia has now become the world's 3rd great zone of higher education, science and innovation, alongside North America and Western Europe/UK, with research powerhouses, and the fastest growth in scientific output. While Japan has been a powerhouse in world science and technology for some time, growth of research in China, Korea and Singapore is impressive, and Taiwan is not far behind. At institutional level, East Asian universities are rigorous in setting global research as their performance standard. The National University of Singapore, for example, is stronger than all of Australia's universities in both research paper quantity and citation impact. Some middle-sized East Asian universities of science and technology have higher citation rates than the Australian National University.

While East Asia's achievement in higher education has been widely agreed, assessment of its future development is not. To some, East Asian universities are poised at the most exciting phase of their development, leaping ahead to join the distinguished league of the world's leading universities. "Sun sets on Western dominance as East Asian Confucian model takes lead", and the "Confucian model" has put East Asia's universities at the cutting edge. To others, although East Asian universities have made tremendous strides in terms of the volume and quality of research output, they generally still lag behind the best universities in the West. The notion of 'world-class' status in East Asian societies has been largely imitative rather than creative. Financial and other resources combined with some innovation strategies can make progress only so far. A kind of "glass ceiling" is to be reached soon. While both views cite culture as the reason, neither of them is cultural enough. Although there is an evident pride of the idea that East Asian universities are not willing to assume that Western models define excellence, few in the region are able to theorize their differences from Western universities.

Building their own identity is doomed to be an arduous task for East Asian universities. What has been lacking is a cultural perspective that gives weight to the impact of traditional ways of cultural thinking on contemporary development. To East Asia, modern universities are foreign transplants. East Asia's strikingly different cultural roots and heritages have led to continuous conflicts between their indigenous and the imposed Western higher education values. East Asian universities have their institutional establishments based on Western values on one hand, and another system supported by traditional culture on the other. The two systems often do not support each other. Instead, constant tensions between them reduce the efficiency of university operation. Although there have been strong attempts to indigenize the Western idea of a university, little has been achieved. The Western concept of a university has been taken for its practicality. This explains why their achievement in science and technology is so much greater than that in the social science and humanities. This is precisely the bottleneck of East Asian

higher education development. We might need to ask whether or not there is a ‘middle-income range/trap’ in East Asian higher education development?

East Asia has much to learn from its own history. Unlike the existent literature on East Asian higher education development that has been overwhelmed by the powerful influence of economic and political realities, such learning demands an appropriate cultural perspective that integrates East Asian traditions with the Western. In history, only twice had foreign influences brought to East Asian culture such a great impact, fundamentally changing the culture. One was the introduction of Buddhism to East Asia, which took over a millennium for the East Asian to receive, respond to its challenges, and reshape East Asian mentalities at both the intellectual and the popular levels. The other, the intrusion of Western culture into East Asia since the nineteenth century, is still ongoing as the result of the large-scale Western expansion. The magnitude is far greater than that in the first case, at a time when the vitality of East Asian culture was just about to exhaust while the momentum of Western culture was at its zenith. The process is far from completed, and “pain” is felt constantly and regularly. Only when the aspects of East Asian and Western philosophical heritages are brought together successfully, can East Asian universities become truly internationally-leading. Universities have three layers: materials on the surface, social institutions in the middle, and values at the core. By far, East Asia’s import of the Western model has been centered mostly on the material level, with some touches on social institutions, while the core of the Western model has not been understood fully, let alone implemented. While there lacks clear signs of such combination, East Asia is best positioned to achieve this in comparison with any other parts of the non-Western world.

Note: This is based on a keynote speech at the Conference Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia in 2014 held during 7-10 July at the Hong Kong Baptist University.