And Never the Twain Shall Meet?

Book review: Jìng-Lì (2015) Kulturnye osnovy obucheniya. Vostok i Zapad [Cultural Foundations of Learning. East and West]

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Abstract. We fully support the researcher's conclusion that specific features of the mindset and learning attitudes of East Asia should be taken into account when organizing schooling in a multinational community. Meanwhile, we believe the study actually answers a narrower question than stated in the title: namely, it compares the cultural foundations of learning not between the East and the West, but between the traditional Confucian school and modern American school without regard to education content or curriculum. In the decades to come, we will witness the result of the competition between these two schooling models and learn whether Jìng-Lì was right with her underlying idea about the advantages of the Confucian approach and her scenario about the decreasing creative potential of Westerners and the atrophy of their research skills due to the attempts of schools to cultivate both.

Keywords: school education, national cultural and educational traditions, Confucianism, abilities, research, creative thinking, morality.

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The author of this book revealed her own culture through authentic sources in the middle of her life, when she had already adopted Western culture from authentic sources in a relevant scope. This process overlapped with a more recent one, associated with a personal teaching experience: while her Chinese peers had been diligent and assiduous in studying, her American school students were indifferent and lazy. At first she would impute this to her inefficiency as a teacher, but later discovered a much broader phenomenon behind this indifference and laziness. Parental instructions, like "Learn, and you will learn you are imperfect", were ringing in her ears. Those were the words of Confucius, as she later learned. Like any cultur-

al effects, they turned out to be more meaningful, powerful, and long-lasting than the influence of political systems and eventually short-lived ideologies.

The Chinese intellectual tradition spread out before Jìng-Lì in the following way: "1. Learning is the most important thing in life; in fact, it is the meaning of life. 2. Learning makes people better, not only smarter. The ultimate objective of learning is self-perfection and assistance to others. 3. Learning is a lifelong process... 4. The knowledge that differentiates one person from another does not come as it is. It has to be searched for. Searching for knowledge requires a person to be self-determined, assiduous, hard-working, persistent, concentrated, and humble. A human being should have what the Chinese call a 'heart and mind open for learning', meaning a passion for learning. 5. Learning is neither a privilege nor discrimination. Everybody is capable of searching and acquiring knowledge, whatever their innate abilities or social status. 6. The learning process begins with receiving specific instructions from others. However, as people grow older, they begin contributing to the learning and self-improvement of others, thus building harmony with the world." By comparison, school walls in China featured only one quote from Mao: "Learn well and progress every day." This was consistent with the powerful tradition, while the rest of the depreciating context was concealed from children.

This culture is confronted by the so-called Faustian culture of the Western world: "1. Cognition is inspired by human curiosity about the structure of the outside world. 2. Knowledge is procured by the tireless spirit of exploring the Universe. 3. Reason is the highest human ability that makes such exploration possible. 4. Reason (not heart) is responsible for perceiving the world around us. 5. Education is a privilege for those with the highest abilities. 6. The individual is the only reality for research, discoveries, and the ultimate triumph." It seems that the sixth item sets reality equal to the subject to eliminate discrepancies in understanding the whole set of points. Otherwise, there would be no talking about the outer Universe or a contradiction between this world and the Confucian commitment to the inner world. It should be noted that Jìng-Lì was trying to make her points sound unbiased, but did not really succeed. Unlike the items describing the Western approach to culture and education, those about China contain no negative phrasing like the one that excludes heart from the cognition process. Thus, the Chinese tradition is presented as superior.

We can omit analyzing the Western philosophical and educational tradition with its "miracles of mind" reiteration, based primarily on Russelian ideas. Most probably, this is by far not the most fruitful approach, but going into it would take us too far away. More importantly, the researcher argues that the Western tradition is focused on educating children to the prejudice of a number of student-related aspects. She identifies four main characteristics of such an education: inherently different levels of intelligence, which is to be developed; curios-

ity (also innate but subject to cultivation); exploration of the outside world ("open-mindedness and the spirit of free exploration"); and the understanding of and control over the world as the ultimate goal of education. At the same time, Jìng-Lì notes that Likurgian educational conceptions reproduced by Plutarch have had a great impact on the European tradition with its rigid discipline (perhaps, ignoring the fact that the "Spartan" concept is in a striking contradiction with her own Western school experience; we will come back to Spartans at the end of this review). However, the level of rigidness has differed from era to era in Europe: Greece was more rigid than Rome, and England is more rigid than the continent.

The Confucian tradition is presented outside the history of its evolution. We would not welcome such an approach: the book is intended first of all for Western readers, who would do with a most concise description of their own tradition, while Confucianism is normally little known to them. The idea brought to the foreground is that "anyone can obtain education despite his or her social status and personal characteristics". Relationships with different people and "the associated social and moral implications" are what determine "our personal human goodness" (is she using the phrase to avoid saying *individual*?). This is the context where the idea of self-perfection is realized, while the Western individual is perceived in the context of their biological or legal nature. When Jìng-Lì wrote that Confucius had regarded people unable to build their family relationships as being equally unable to bear responsibility "in their community or society as a whole", I wonder if she knew that these were the ideas that inspired the Athenian Republic? And when she equated the ability to feel shame to having a nagging conscience (rather conflicting concepts in a European mind) when describing Confucian virtues and moral principles, did she notice that this synonymization took her beyond the pre-declared social context (because conscience means a private dialogue with oneself, at least to Europeans)?

Cultural barriers are particularly evident in attempts to reproduce Chinese wisdom in European languages. "Learning as a way to find wisdom means not just following some ethical principles, but developing something everyone has from their birth." A modern European would not see the contradiction here, considering *not just... but* as inappropriate even when they learned from the following paragraph that this was about conscience—"inherent moral knowledge". Reading excerpts like this can sometimes put the reader in despair: the difference between cultures is not so much in words, but rather in gaps between them, in inevitable extensive explanations for each concept, which automatically make any translation flat and turn texts that inspire civilizations into dull, dry prose. Let us not digress, however. Wisdom is obtained through the application of knowledge: this principle allows for surpassing social barriers and the existing level of education. The ultimate task of "taking the world upon oneself" means "maintaining the

ethical principles by individuals who resist doughtily to abuse political power and demand reforms from the leaders in their pursuit of *ren*[1]."

In Confucianism, education is not aimed at bringing personal satisfaction, self-fulfillment, or any practical benefits (however, we will find below that "lower-class people could get higher positions, at least in theory" and "it is impossible to overestimate the power of this incentive for some students"). The individual is the reference point on the path of education, which embraces ever wider and more universal spheres of life with time. The primary objective is cognizing things in the world, but this world is social, not physical.

Jing-Lì writes, "This unprecedented combination of moral achievements, academic wisdom, political power, and socioeconomic status has enabled education to take a dominating position in Chinese culture and be regarded as an undeniable and unquestionable value." Meanwhile, our perplexity is growing: if sincerity[2] is the primary learning value, followed mostly by different kinds of endurance and perseverance in various situations, then why is sincerity characterized by this episode: a student does not want to disturb his teacher and waits in the cold with his friend for the teacher to wake up. It is perfectly obvious that definitions have been shifted here. It is only later that we will be apophatically initiated into the meaning of sincerity for Chinese people: "words pronounced without intent to support them with deeds are insincere."[3] This is why the word has a dependent status in Chinese culture: "Speaking <…> tends to be based on moral intentions and overall judgments. An exemplary human being is thus slow in words but fast in deeds. When they speak, they do it with sincere intentions, choosing their words carefully." Can we say that the East confronts the West here? Obviously there is a serious challenge in it for the European culture. The Chinese would probably like the well-known anecdote about Spartans hearing a useful thought from an improper man in the popular assembly, making him sit down and asking a proper man to stand up and repeat the thought, but only if they admitted an improper man could he have a useful thought at all. However, doe not *Shaping the European Mind* say that the mouth speaks what the heart is full of and that a man brings forth the treasures of his heart through speaking? The requirement and the need to separate what is

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[1] "Ren was translated as "benevolence", "amiability", "human goodness", "large-heartedness"; "approved behavior" is a more recent version."

[2] It will be characterized in two ways below: sincerity/earnestness.

[3] Below we will find puzzling translations of Latin mottos. The University of Hong Kong chose Sapientia et virtus as its motto; we would perfectly do with the word-for-word translation "Wisdom and virtue", but the four obscure hieroglyphs passing through English sound as "Cultivating virtue and cognizing things" in Russian. Per ardua ad alta of the National University of Singapore—literally, "Through difficulties to the heights"—is translated as "Great things are achieved through hard labor".

said from who is saying it are both important and challenging for Europeans. Further on, we will read a good many times that abilities are the key to the Western educational tradition[4], while diligence is key to the East Asian tradition.

"The paradox of the Chinese learner" is that Westerners feel resentful about the authoritarian teaching practices of Asia, while at the same time admiring the outcomes. The academic performance of East Asian students is less affected by social factors: they are not susceptible to the specific barriers that poverty and wealth create for young Westerners. "Chinese students are convinced that they should apply efforts constantly in dealing with any sort of tasks." Parental expectations and parental control are also higher in East Asian families. Where British teachers are satisfied with their Chinese students, parents complain about low requirements and demand moral self-perfection from their children. "British students understand a good teacher as someone who can excite a student's curiosity, explain things clearly, use effective teaching methods, and organize the learning process efficiently. Their Chinese peers, however, believe a good teacher should have deep knowledge, be able to answer questions and serve as an ethical model." Comparative studies of attitudes of Australian and Hong Kong teachers show that the former do not consider it their duty to teach children ethics, leaving it to the family, while the latter spare neither time nor effort correcting inappropriate behavior and guiding their students to the right path. Rote memorization is used in China as the first step towards profound understanding, which is a long and labor-intensive process that has nothing to do with the "aha moment" of Western learners. Learning-related vocabulary is also indicative, as the fundamental concepts are dramatically different for Americans and Chinese people. Americans give preference to *learning* and *thinking*, while the main Chinese concepts include "continuing to learn as long as you live" and "read extensively". The speculative and mental processes of Americans stand in opposition to the strong emotions and arduous working of Chinese people. Humility plays an important role in the Chinese structure of values. Accepting one's own imperfection demonstrates personal power; "a person can always perfect themselves as long as they learn humbly and respectfully from others." Thus personal failures have less impact on Chinese learners and present less potential danger to them. Chinese educational values leave no place for self-expression and communication. Humility is also typical of the Russian educational tradition, or at least the Russian ideal of education.

The Western ideal of education with its focus on rationality, research, and abilities is described in quite a few details. We will come

[4] Reducing Western tradition to a cultivation of abilities also seems inappropriate, as such a powerful system as Jesuit education deliberately staked on average abilities.

back to it below in the analysis section. Now we will give a brief overview of the virtues of Confucian learning: apart from sincerity/earnestness, they include diligence/commitment, providing a specific procedure for learning new materials (familiarization, which often means memorization; practice; and skill perfection); endurance in the face of challenges; perseverance; and concentration. We will also focus on an important detail: as soon as Chinese children perceive learning as an "arduous personal endeavor" and "engage in it as in a severe test", the modern entertainment-based teaching methods do not resonate with them. This is a nice feature: there is no better proof of the existing crisis in education for the Western civilization.

Next, the author compares the emotions of Western and East Asian students associated with learning. The differences she discovers are quite consistent with the picture we have been receiving so far. An essential asset of East Asian learners is that they accept their failures as a motivation for working more and better, and the same should be true for their successes: there is no Chinese word for the English *pride* that does not have any negative connotations[5]. At the same time, the virtue of humility is valued extremely highly. Neither getting too upset about failures nor triumphing over successes is accepted here. Students prefer setting long-term goals, thus quenching the amplitude of their emotional response to events that have little significance within those terms. The author considers these qualities, particularly humility, to be the strong points of East Asian students that allow them to achieve higher outcomes.

The crucial Chapter 6 is entitled "Nerd's Hell and Nerd's Haven". Research shows that Western culture reserves an unenviable role for assiduous students, even less enviable than for capable ones who learn easily and without any effort. Teenagers want to be popular among their peers, which is only possible if you slack your work. "There is a powerful "peer culture" in the West (at least in public schools), where academic success is opposed to peer approval, meaning that you have to pay a high social price for high academic achievements." This is how the "tyranny of mediocrity" is established. Jìng-Lì points out spitefully that such behavior—like the bullying of nerds—is considered biologically universal by Western researchers, who find parallels in animal behavior, however the principle is not valid outside of Western civilization. Yet, neither is the trend ubiquitous in the West: the author was lucky enough to find a school where her nerd son was not bullied. She believes that this type of bullying is explained by the contradiction between the uniqueness of each personality—as it is perceived within Western culture—and assessment of academic performance by schools, which infringe and destroy this uniqueness.

[5] Unlike in other languages: French orgueil, Italian orgoglio and Spanich orgullo; Franco-Italian fierté-fierezza derives from the Latin ferus, or "wild".

A great role is also played by fierce competition (which sounds weird to us: good Soviet students were bullied too, but academic performance had little to do with success in life). The study the author relies upon shows that American children approach competition as a zero-sum game, whereas Japanese students see it as a common chance to progress, with Hungarians falling in between.

The next chapter uses discourse analysis models and numerous graphs to examine the role of parents, namely mothers, as transmitters of traditional educational values. There is a certain statistical discrepancy, but not that big: East Asian mothers and children discuss learning virtues much more often (especially in conversations on low performance). "Mother is not alone in the struggle for her child's understanding of learning: she is guided by ideological wealth, which is the cultural support that provides her with cognitive sources and resources." It is no news to us that Western mothers focus on mental aspects, while their Eastern European (Taiwanese in this case) counterparts pay more attention to virtues.

The researcher believes that "if we begin to compare, we will see the way mothers socialize their children, not very competent representatives of their culture, differs little from the method used by Socrates when he gave some geometric instructions to a slave and successfully expanded the horizons of a young but capable mind." It is difficult to agree with this point: the examples of mother-child conversations that she provides show the difference in the values and virtues between East Asian and Western mothers, but not in the ways they are translated.

The penultimate chapter sets Western speaking in opposition to Eastern reticence. The four values of Western rhetoric are: the maxim of quantity ("speak as much as needed, and no more"), the maxim of quality ("be truthful and avoid lying"), the maxim of relation ("say relevant things"), and the maxim of manner ("be clear and straightforward"). Short of Demostheneses and Ciceros and thus mistrustful to speaking, East Asian culture contraposes these Western maxims to its own: reticence ("speak less"), obscurity ("speak ambiguously"), equivocation ("speak friendly"), and listening ("first listen, then speak"). This results in interiorizing the educational process: to the casual observer, it might appear that nothing is going on.

The last chapter, entitled "Implications for the Changing Landscape of Learning", probably alludes to why the book was written: East Asian children are different and remain so even in alien environments, and there are no reasons for saying that Confucian learning orientations are worse than Socratic ones. East-Asian children suffer when schools apply the same requirements to them as to their European and American peers (however, they still show high levels of academic performance). Jìng-Lì even finds action-based negativity in attitude to such children, which is "poured onto them under a disguise of positive attitude by the loving and caring preparatory school", and which

had not been actually revealed until relevant studies were conducted. Meanwhile, Chinese teachers deny Western teaching methods involving research and creative thinking: there is no time for research when students need to prepare for examinations; moreover, the method does not provide sufficient teacher control to ensure "equal education for *each* child."[6] While the author defends the equality of Confucian and Socratic orientations at the level of assertions, implied preference for the former shows through the lines. However that may be, the call for taking into account specific features of the East Asian mindset and learning attitudes of East Asian children totally deserves sympathy, just as we cannot accept persecution of such children by their European American, Latin American, and African American peers.

We have summarized as briefly and accurately as we could the ideas put forth in the study. Now we need to understand whether the book answers the question in its title. Let us try to put it into another perspective: can we possibly say anything about the relationship between Chinese and Western architecture through comparing the Forbidden City to La Grande Arche and Centre Georges Pompidou? Amid sophisticated sociological methods used to study how living school and university students think, to the front comes the ease of justifying the identity of both Chinese and Western schools throughout millennia[7]. We cannot say much about the Chinese one: China was a symbol of stillness for our compatriots of the 19th century, and they may have been right. However, the examples cited to illustrate the solidity of Western approaches prove nothing at all. We could provide a number of contrasting examples, no less numerous and convincing. Athenian loquacity neighbors Spartan laconism, and even more: Pythagorean students had to keep silence for five years, and that was one of the most powerful ancient schools of philosophy! If modesty is a strong point of East Asian children and teenagers, is not the famous quote by Archilochus "Keep some measure in the joy you take in luck, and the degree you give way to sorrow" one of the crucial self-characteristics of Elláda? As for inculcating creative thinking and research

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[6] This approach brings together the Chinese school and the Soviet universal education. Sergey Kara-Murza, a famous expert in historical falsifications, emphasized that the Soviet education model was widespread and popular in Asian countries. We assume speculations on this aspect may be fruitful, given what will be said below about the relationship of "us" vs. "them" enforced in East Asian schools and voluntarily accepted in the USSR.

[7] Interestingly, the bibliography begins with Aeschylus's Oresteia. Another curious thing is that a book devoted to children's learning attitudes contains no mention of corporal punishment. We have no possibility to find out whether the East Asian educational tradition ever involved such forms of punishment, and, if it has, how it affected the learning attitudes of children. However, we cannot ignore the differences in approaching corporal punishment between the present and the relatively recent past in Europe, let alone the two great branches of the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

culture in the manner Jìng-Lì saw it in American schools, this is a rather new trend, unusual for the traditional European school. Finally, the primacy of virtue over mind is a constant of Russian teaching thought, and there is no doubting it in the European character[8]. There is every indication that the European school taken in its whole evolution differs less (although still greatly) from the Chinese one than the present-day American (teaching system or European-American system, if you will). Besides, if we take into account the fact that innovations in education take some (often a long) time to produce palpable cultural effects, we will not be able to say that modern Western civilization has been created by the modern Western school, let alone make any judgment about the cultural landscape that will be shaped by the American school Jìng-Lì describes. Her Chinese colleagues were right in stressing the temporal factor: present-day children should have much more spare time to be able to use new-fashioned research methods. The old European school did not provide that opportunity. In this context, the scenario of decreasing the creative potential of Westerners and the atrophy of their research skills due to school attempts to cultivate both is just as possible as any other.

Another feature of Jìng-Lì's research approach is total neglect of the content aspect. Yet, hieroglyphic writing takes much more effort to be mastered, with serious implications for the required learning virtues and most dramatic ones for the potential relationship of "us" vs. "them" in the curriculum. Therefore, the book answers a question inferior to the one stated in its title, namely how the cultural foundations of learning differ between the traditional Confucian school and modern American school without regard to education content or curriculum. This is also relevant and very important though. Actually, by narrowing the question and thus losing the right to use Western technological superiority as a supporting point, we make the author's underlying idea about the advantages of the Confucian approach more fruitful[9]. We will have a chance to assess the effects of this competition more accurately in the decades to come.

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[8] Cf.: "All possible knowledge only makes the one who acquires it piteous, if it does not facilitate the path towards virtue for him. This is a simple truth, but it should be imprinted in the hearts of young lovers of wisdom." [Muravyev M. (1856) Sochineniya [Works], St. Petersburg, vol. II, pp. 329–330]

[9] It appears to us that linguistic research of the basic concepts (we have pointed to discrepancies in such concepts between the two traditions above) would be quite effective in studying the differences in cultural attitudes. As we mentioned, Chinese maxims may sound truly inspiring in Chinese language, but their Russian translations are cumbersome and hardly capable of inspiring anyone to make a learning effort.