

Educational Dilemmas in East Asia: The Impact of Confucianism in Modern Society

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Abstract: As education-related social issues in East Asia have become more prominent, there has been an increasing amount of discussion about education in East Asia. While the political and economic situations of East Asian countries are very different, there are many similarities in their educational issues, which are thought to be related to the influence of Confucianism on East Asian culture over the centuries. The importance of education and the pursuit of achievement in Confucianism has become part of East Asian culture, and this has become the cultural background of East Asian education issues. This article analyzes three of the more prominent social problems related to education issues in East Asian countries, namely, education fever, the general shortcomings of East Asian students, and the low level of happiness in East Asian societies. The article concludes with a discussion of the issues that governments in East Asian countries need to focus on in solving East Asian education problems.

Keywords: East Asian culture, Confucianism, education fever, educational system

1. Introduction

Education in East Asia is attracting more and more attention internationally. Education about East Asian education is paradoxical; on the one hand, the excellent performance of East Asian students has made East Asia a source of educational inspiration. East Asian countries and cities - namely Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Macau, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan - dominate the highest PISA rankings in the last three rounds of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). As a result, considerable media and academic attention has been given to their success stories [1]. On the other hand, the shortcomings of East Asian education cannot be ignored; a social culture that places a high value on education has led students to study under enormous pressure for years, and an education system characterized by high-stakes testing has led students to engage in factual recall and rote memorization. As a result, even though they achieve good written grades, they are always perceived as lacking creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. This paradoxical situation is inextricably linked to Confucianism.

Confucianism, which promotes the pursuit of knowledge as a method to acquire social status and financial wealth, has long had an impact on education in East Asia [2]. The educational system in

the area has been significantly impacted by this cultural perspective, which has also given rise to a number of social problems.

Throughout history, Confucian culture has played an important role in shaping the values and beliefs of East Asian societies. With roots dating back to ancient times, the notion that education is the key to success and social mobility has been deeply rooted in the region's collective mindset. The pursuit of academic achievement, rigorous learning, and high academic qualifications were highly regarded as a means of securing a prosperous future and achieving a respectable social status [2].

However, while this culture of educational emphasis has undoubtedly fostered high levels of academic achievement and enabled East Asian students to achieve unquestioned excellence in international tests, it has also given rise to a series of social problems commonly referred to as "education fever". This feverish pursuit of educational success often comes at the expense of students' well-being, mental health, and overall personal development.

The influence of Confucian culture on education in East Asia transcends individual aspirations and has a broader social impact. The prevalence of educational fever has led to a number of problems, including high rates of student suicide, an overemphasis on rote memorization rather than critical thinking, and a lack of attention to a holistic education that fosters creativity and practical skills.

It is important to understand the influence of traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, on education in East Asia. By examining the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the region's educational systems, people can gain insight into the challenges and opportunities for future development.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of Confucianism on education in East Asia and to shed light on the social issues that have arisen as a result. By delving into the historical and cultural contexts of the region's educational systems, relevant educational programs can be better developed to improve educational issues in East Asia. This study aims to provide policy makers and educators with references and resources to guide them in creating a more balanced and nurturing educational environment in East Asia.

2. Education Fever and Its Related Social Problems

A problem that is now common in East Asia is education fever. The term "education fever" describes a situation in which people have an obsession with learning, particularly when it comes to parents' ardent support of and urgent desire for their children's scholastic success. While most parents around the world acknowledge the value of education for their children and are prepared to invest in it in some way, parents in East Asia seem to be particularly fixated on and enthusiastic about their children's academic success [3].

This phenomenon is often thought to be related to the continuing influence of traditional Confucianism on East Asia, although not all educational fever can be directly attributed to Confucianism. However, Confucianism provides a broad context for certain educational values and practices in East Asian societies and gives depth to the emphasis on the importance of education in Confucian values.

The ultimate realization of a person's value and the responsibility of a young person to his or her parents, according to the Confucian value system, is self-formation via learning, which is viewed as an act of filial piety [4]. Thus, for most people, this is the greatest aspiration. Although in the original Confucianism, devotion to society and inner personal cultivation were considered more important, in the highly competitive system of modern society, Confucianism has become more focused on instrumental rewards. Instead of self-cultivation, the importance of education is seen increasingly as the greatest route to acquire high social standing and economic wealth [5].

The most obvious contemporary social problems associated with the education fever are low fertility and credentialism. Fertility rates in East Asia have seen a dramatic decline within the last four decades, and although Europe has also experienced a period of lowest regional fertility, the trough of fertility in Europe has passed from today's perspective. There is again moderate optimism about the future of fertility in Europe, as recent literature points to delayed childbearing as the culprit of the European fertility trough. In contrast to Europe, the fertility decline in East Asia has been difficult to recover from. In contrast to Europe, East Asia has more difficulty recovering from a drop in fertility. The problem of East Asia's low fertility includes the high expense of fertility brought on by the education fever [2].

In addition, the Confucian patriarchal and hierarchical social order that it advocates places females in an inferior position to their husbands [6]. The family system dominated by men and elders is increasingly mismatched with women's career pursuits in modern society as a result of the introduction of Western egalitarian ideas and the spread of education. This mismatch inevitably lowers women's motivation to marry and have children, which is also the reason for East Asia's low fertility rate. This is one of the key causes of East Asia's low fertility rate.

Another social phenomenon driven by education fever is credentialism, a deeply rooted reverence for academic achievement and credentials fostered by Confucian culture [4]. Credentialism is fervent in East Asia, where obtaining degrees and certificates from prestigious universities is highly valued and can greatly affect one's job prospects and social status.

Education fever has led to a highly competitive job market in East Asia, with large numbers of highly educated individuals competing for a limited number of jobs, a situation that has led employers to rely heavily on academic qualifications to screen and evaluate candidates, leading to a phenomenon known as credential inflation. In China, for example, the large number of people with bachelor's degrees may no longer provide a competitive advantage in some job markets, leading to a cycle of credentialism in which Chinese students are forced to pursue higher degrees in order to meet the market demand for them, and more and more people are earning degrees from prestigious institutions, leading to a decline in the value of these degrees.

The feedback loop between education fever and academicism has led to the intensification of these phenomena in East Asia and the neglect of other qualities and skills that are important for personal and professional success, such as creativity, critical thinking, and practical experience, which has also influenced educational philosophies and led to widespread international stereotyping of East Asian education and East Asian students.

3. Weaknesses of East Asian Students and the Drawbacks of Test-based Education

It is well known that the perception of East Asian education and students is always shaped by misconceptions that the focus of education in this region is on exams, and students' study under intense pressure while rote learning and solving problems to get good grades at the expense of the joy of learning. Additionally, it has resulted in a general lack of originality and critical thinking among East Asian students. Additionally, East Asian education is authoritarian, with instructors directing the classroom and the central government setting the curriculum [1].

Although education in East Asian countries differs in terms of educational structure, length of education, and admission procedures, all are characterized by intense competition, and students in East Asia face pressure from high-stakes testing. Tests with high stakes will determine the curriculum. Students are motivated to study the subjects thoroughly because they appreciate them. However, students are hesitant to devote a lot of time to learning things that are not assessed, regardless of how important they may be.

The genesis of East Asia's high stakes testing system can be traced back to the ancient Chinese imperial examination system. The imperial examination is an ancient Chinese system of selecting

officials by examination. The keju system lasted for about 1,300 years, during which time the keju became the centerpiece of the education system as a state-orchestrated, high-stakes employment test.

The Confucian idea of meritocracy provided the philosophical basis for the keju system and also became the principle of the examination, which began to serve as a means of social mobility. It allowed individuals from lower social classes to advance and gain access to official positions based on their intelligence and knowledge of Confucianism. This reinforced the notion that success in the examinations was the path to social advancement and honor. With the development of the centuries-long imperial examination system, the purpose of learning originally preached by Confucianism was diluted. The imperial examination system promoted the idea that the fever of education was not for the pure pleasure of learning, but for the potential economic and social rewards of success in the examination; and that education was merely the necessary preparation for this final examination [5].

Japan, Korea, and Vietnam borrowed from the ancient Chinese imperial examination system at different times in ancient times, and although these East Asian countries adapted and modified the Chinese examination system to their specific needs and cultural backgrounds, the Chinese imperial examination system became the foundational model for the development of the examination system in these countries, and the influence of the imperial examination system extended throughout East Asia and continues to this day.

On the other hand, Confucian culture stresses hierarchy, order, discipline, and obedience as the primary justifications for the more authoritarian classrooms in East Asia [7]. It is a unique idea in Confucianism that the connection between a teacher and student is equivalent to that of a father and son. The Confucian culture places a strong emphasis on respect for teachers, and the saying “one day as a teacher, one lifetime as a father” is profoundly ingrained in people’s thoughts. Because of the Confucian ideals of respect for authority and submission, it is uncommon for students to challenge the teacher’s viewpoints. Instead, they are expected to comprehend and retain the teacher’s views, which prohibits them from engaging in independent thought or asking challenging questions. Although the majority of Chinese students and instructors are aware of their current educational challenges, due to the effect of obsessive credentialism, teachers and students are forced to accept the negative aspects of test-based education.

4. Low Happiness Situation in East Asia

The happiness status of people in East Asia also raises some concerns, with most East Asian countries scoring low in happiness surveys, especially those with Confucian cultures. Researchers have talked about the effect of Confucian culture on economic growth as a result of the recent strong economic boom in East Asia. The happiness gap in East Asia, however, and its potential connection to Confucian culture have received little attention [8].

Under the influence of Confucianism, a culture of intense competition prevails in East Asia, and while this drives social production, it has an impact on individual happiness. Compared to other Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist ideologies that place a greater focus on the virtue of contentment, Confucianism sits a greater emphasis on the virtue of the pursuit of success and achievement [8]. This is reflected in the early education of children, where the conventional wisdom in East Asian nations, particularly in China, is that learning is the road to success and that students should invest effort and perseverance in learning rather than “enjoying” it, in contrast to the joyful learning that is frequently promoted in the West. This idea impairs students’ wellbeing by increasing pressure and anxiety during the learning process. East Asian students make an effort to appreciate or find pleasure in their studies. This is a different type of pleasure, though—one that results from working hard and acquiring material thoroughly, as opposed to the kind that comes from a relaxing undemanding learning process. East Asians strive to a deeper level of happiness or pleasure. However, achieving the level of profound contentment or happiness indicated above is difficult,

especially for young pupils [8]. Second, Confucian culture emphasizes consistency, order, and the collective good, which has an impact on individualism, freedom, and happiness. Societal expectations and pressures on individuals make it difficult for individuals to express and pursue their interests and passions.

In summary, low happiness in East Asia is associated with competitive thinking, collectivist culture, and traditional Confucian values in the education system. The over-emphasis on competition, the pursuit of achievement and the overall good, and the lack of space for free individual development all negatively affect happiness in East Asia.

5. Suggestion

There is no doubt that the governments of East Asian countries have long attached great importance to the issue of education and are aware of the educational problems in their countries, and hope to implement some measures to deal with the current educational dilemma and the social problems arising from it.

In response to the education fever, both Korea and China have implemented “reduction” policies to reduce the burden on students by restricting shadow education and changing the curriculum. The education reforms in China and South Korea are very similar. First, they both share the same policy goal of reducing the burden of learning and out-of-school training. Second, the content of their reforms is very similar, with a strong crackdown on out-of-school training institutions. However, neither the Chinese nor the Korean reduction policy has had good results, as the Korean education reform was completely declared bankrupt in 2000, and the Chinese double reduction policy has been found to be less than satisfactory. The pressure on Chinese and Korean students comes from the education system itself [8]. There is a separation between regular high school and vocational high school in both the Chinese and Korean educational systems, which indicates differential treatment in terms of social prestige and post-employment income. A student must enroll in a regular high school if he plans to pursue further education. The baton effect of the entrance tests under the score-based system is the primary contributor to the unrelentingly high pressure in education in China and Korea.

However, Finland’s reproductive strategy has clearly been effective when compared to East Asia. The Finnish government attempted a fundamental school reform following World War II in an effort to raise educational standards, suggesting that kids spend less time on homework and studying. Additionally, parents opposed it when it was originally put into place. The government made a strong plea to the entire community and the school system to collaborate in order to persuade parents that the choice made by the education sector was in their children’s best interests and that academic achievement was unrelated to the amount of time spent studying. Since the reform was put into place, kids have earned good academic outcomes despite having short school days and no tests. Finland’s educational system has always ranked among the best in the world. The equity of education and the educational system is the basis for Finland’s policy’s success. “Equal access to education” is seen as being of utmost importance in the Finnish school management system, and they continue to attain educational balance nationally with equal matching of educational resources and educational investments in both urban and rural areas [9].

Finland has almost no national entrance exams and they believe that quality is more important than quantity, good teachers and no exams and rankings and an effective education system allows them to achieve good academic results. It is believed that the Finnish “reduction” policy would hardly have a good effect if the examination culture were strongly promoted from top down [9]. In contrast, pupils are still compelled to take examinations and tests in China and Korea, despite the twofold reduction policy in China that forbids schools from disclosing test results in favor of grades. The harshest and most important examinations in their life are still the middle/high school entrance

exams. The centuries-old education fever was undoubtedly sparked by deeply ingrained Confucian ideals that stressed education as the best path to achieving high social status and economic prosperity. However, the gap in social and economic standing between the highly educated and the less educated in East Asian societies is the primary reason that countless East Asians have been forced to enroll in school in modern society, and low education is still regarded as a failure today [10]. If East Asian countries want to change the status quo of education fever, they cannot just do so by reducing the length of courses and limiting shadow education, etc. The governments of East Asian countries should think about - how to promote educational equality and social equity; how to change the unequal salary and social status that people with low education generally face; how to change the credentialism; how to change the social culture of credentialism; how to lead people to believe from their hearts that all professions are equal; and how to change people's excessive obsession with education. Although it is difficult, East Asian governments should try to weaken the influence of Confucianism in East Asia over the centuries and rethink the place of Confucian culture in modern society. Although Confucianism has become part of the core of national culture as a very important cultural content in East Asia, especially in China, this does not mean that the social problems brought by Confucianism can be ignored. In China's compulsory education, the negative effects of Confucianism are mostly related to the "three principles and five rules" and the "preservation of heavenly principles and extinction of human desires," which are undoubtedly contrary to modern social concepts, while the social problems caused by Confucianism, such as education fever and occupational discrimination, are not discussed. There is no elaboration on the social problems caused by Confucianism, such as education fever and occupational discrimination. The Chinese government has also been actively seeking solutions to these social problems in recent years, but this cannot be done by simply advocating and appealing to people to understand our social problems and the causes of these problems, and calling on society as a whole to change.

6. Conclusions

In summary, this article examined the influence of traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, on education in East Asia and the social problems it has caused. The study summarizes the root causes of the educational dilemma in East Asia, namely, the continuation of Confucianism's emphasis on education as the best way to achieve high social status and economic prosperity. The theoretical contribution of this current study is to explore the historical and cultural roots of education in East Asia, particularly the influence of Confucianism, and to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities for future development.

It is hoped that this article will provide a valuable reference and guide for educators and stakeholders in East Asia. Understanding the cultural underpinnings of education systems is critical to creating a more balanced and nurturing educational environment. By addressing the social issues associated with the education fever, such as student stress, low fertility rates, and credentialism, policymakers can work to promote a holistic education that values creativity, critical thinking, and practical skills.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The focus on Confucianism as the primary cultural influence on education in East Asia may overlook other factors. Furthermore, while the paper highlights the social issues associated with educational fever, further research is needed to explore the broader social implications and potential solutions.

For future research, it is recommended to investigate what can be done to change the impact of Confucianism on society and culture, and the key to solving the educational dilemma in East Asia lies in the ability to shift values. In addition, it would be valuable to explore the potential role of technology and innovative teaching methods in promoting a more balanced and student-centered educational system.

In conclusion, understanding the influence of traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, on East Asian education is critical to addressing the social issues it raises. By recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of the current system, policymakers and educators can work to create an educational environment that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and overall well-being. Adopting a more holistic approach to education will contribute to the long-term development and success of East Asian societies.

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