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What Asia can learn from the US

By Holiday Dmitri

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As US Democratic presidential candidates and senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton broach the topic of education reform in the US and rail about the ills plaguing the country's public education system, living in Asia has taught me what the US is doing right.

I did time in the taxpayer-funded classrooms of Palm Beach County as a first-generation Taiwanese-American growing up in south Florida before entering two of Chicago's top private universities.

I received my first pedagogical taste of the East last fall when I returned to my ancestral homeland to study at National Taiwan Normal University. There, from my fellow students and city chums, I discovered the high cost of too much schooling.

Academia is big business in Taiwan, as it is in the rest of East Asia -- the mystifying reverence for education, so they say, extending from Confucian legacy. In my case, it also runs in the family. My mother and father are university professors in Taiwan, and my aunts, uncles, and cousins all belong to the blackboard-instructing rank and file. There are more than 100 institutions of higher learning in this country. That's not including the number of bushibans, which have mushroomed over the years. In 1996, there were 2,625 cram schools in the country. A decade later, 14,231 schools exist -- more than five-times as many.

Indicative of the nation's test-obsessed culture, my roommate in Taipei, a bright China Airlines flight attendant named Kaiyi, described to me how she enrolled in a bushiban to up her chances of getting into stewardess school.

So what if bushibans aren't compulsory? They might as well be.

For almost every profession in the country, mind-numbing, multiple-choice exams have to be passed, and to prepare the young for the rote learning ahead, exist these glorified institutions. Aspiring dentists, future diplomats, budding chefs and prospective law enforcement officers all have their bushibans in addition to their specialized training.

A fanatical emphasis is placed on uniformity in Asia. Educators want to appear objective, so creativity is choked in the pursuit of hard numbers and cold facts. Many students live in fear of the whip (more than half of Taiwanese students in a recent poll claim they've received some form of corporeal punishment -- though a recent bill has been drafted to ban it). By the end of grade school, children are drilled for examination hell like automatons, memorizing to the exclusion of all else -- in the classroom, in the

evenings, at home, at cram school and in private tutoring sessions. Such a system once produced literate, obedient workers, reliable managers for predictable times -- but those somnambulistic days, thankfully, are over.

Competition has gone global. Asia may still be No. 1 in math and science, but in order to compete in the new international market, her children need to be more than just ace test-takers. Mere acquisition and retention of information won't make the grade today. One vital skill in which teachers in the Far East aren't imparting on their pupils: critical thinking. Today brains aren't enough. Asia's antiquated scholastic model needs to exercise brawn -- that certain ruggedness their counterparts in the US know so well.

While in Taipei, I spoke with peers educated in both the East and West. The problem with the Taiwanese, acknowledged my friend Russell Hsiao, who had spent time in the US, was that they weren't expected to think, just perceive. Among the young, bright and the native, there didn't appear to be the same level of intellectual banter or ideological sparring I'd come to expect on a US campus.

In the early 1990s, national reforms were implemented in Taiwan to make education more "well rounded." Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities sounded like a good idea, unfortunately, it only doubled the academic stress load. In addition to the prerequisites, students were required to check off additional items -- art, music, sports -- from their "to do" list. Reflecting the mental strain, depression and suicide rates rose among the young. In 2003, 55 students committed suicide, two years later the number nearly doubled. Just this March, the Ministry of Education requested students make "I Won't Commit Suicide" vows.

Sadly, Taiwan hasn't learned its lesson. In the US, school isn't just an institution for higher learning; it is a place for personal growth. The US teaches her minors the method of not just obtaining data, but acquiring knowledge. It's a wonderful thing that students in the US question their instructors and refuse to treat their textbooks as sacred text.

The result is a tough crowd to please, a public that's quick thinking and hot-blooded, filled with visionaries drumming up novel ideas and ingenious solutions. Surely that's something the US is doing right.

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