**TIGER ASIANS: HOW THE EDUCATION STANDARDS IN ASIA ARE BOTH A SOURCE OF PRIDE AND A CAUSE OF CONCERN**

*A Research Paper presented by: Kim Ortiz, Ateneo de Manila University*

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Outside, he hears the sound of sirens and neighbors gathering. In the few minutes that the police had been there, his house had gone from being a normal home in Gwangjin, South Korea to a serious crime scene. Why he ever thought he could keep it hidden, he didn’t really know. He begins to wonder why he committed the crime in the first place when he knew that it would only make him a murderer. Regret starts to take over him, but then he suddenly remembers how terrifying she had been that night and tells himself that he had only killed her out of self-defense. It wasn’t unusual for her to scold and punish him whenever he didn’t get the best results; there were nights when she would even keep him from eating and sleeping, but out of all of those nights, that one had been the worst.

 He had placed 4,000th out of 700,000 in a nationwide mock college entrance exam – a feat that any parent should already be proud of; but, he felt that it was a number that still wouldn’t satisfy her, so he tampered with the score card and made his rank read 62. But even with such an impressive score, it still wasn’t enough for her. That night, she scolded him, took a baseball bat and a golf club, and brutally beat him. Frightened that she would find out about how he had forged his score the next day when she’d visit his school, he did the only thing he could think of at that moment – he grabbed a knife, went for her, and stabbed his own mother in the neck. Back then, killing her had only seemed like a simple solution to his problems. Unfortunately, he had not anticipated that doing so would only put him in an even bigger predicament.

He hears the police shout his name from outside and yet again, he feels trapped. This time, there doesn’t seem to be a “simple solution” anymore and it makes him wonder if he ever actually had a chance of being free. They break down the door. He listens as a herd of men enters the house and move from room to room. In one, they find the missing woman’s body, stained with blood that had dried in the eight months that she had been kept there. In another, they finally find the boy, the expression on his face unfathomable.

At 18 years old, the boy had become a murderer. At 18 years old, the boy had already taken both his mother’s life and his own all because he had not scored high enough in an exam. (InterAksyonTV5)

Sadly enough, this tragic story about a student who cracked under too much academic pressure is just one of the many that exist. All around the world, there are children who are forced to suffer daily because of society’s high academic expectations – there are children who stay up late, get scolded by their parents, and even fall into depression because they are heavily pressured to succeed. Although these problems are present in nearly every country, it can be said that the stress that students undergo is particularly the worst in Asia. This is because in most Asian countries, it is believed that success wholly depends on a good academic performance; unlike in the Western World, impressive grades and attending a prestigious university aren’t only levers for success, but are *absolutely* necessary.

For some time now, Asians have been stereotyped as “smart”, “talented”, “techy”, “nerdy”, “geeky”, and “hard-working”. They are seen this way because there are many Asians who have become extremely successful due to their hard work, talent, and exceptional intelligence. Asians who have helped give their race this image include Vanessa Mae, a former child prodigy and a violinist; Yiruma, a pianist and composer; Lea Salonga, a singer and an actress; and Amy Chua, a Yale professor and the author of the controversial “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” with their many accomplishments and achievements around the world.

This stereotype has also stuck with the help of media portraying Asians as bright and gifted such as in commercials, movies, and television series, where oftentimes, they are shown to be generally more intelligent than other races.

This, unlike most stereotypes, is arguably not a bad one at all as most may view it as a positive image. It can even be considered as an achievement of those who have worked hard to succeed in their academics and career who may view it as the fruits of their labor. This stereotype is something that Asians can actually be proud of for it was not merely created or formed out of assumptions or hasty generalizations, but are based on observations of the typical Asian’s abilities, and of their participation in different societies. In an article by Caroline Milburn in Australia’s The Age, it is revealed that in most of the country’s selective high schools, around 85% of the student population is made out of children from non-English speaking backgrounds, with majority of them being Asian. Another article also claims that Asian-Americans make up a big percentage of the student bodies in the top universities. (Milburn) According to Dr. Soo Kim Abboud and Jane Kim in the article “How Do Asian Students Get to the Top of the Class?”, the percentage of Asians belonging in the student body is estimated to be 24% in Stanford, 18% in Harvard, and 25% in both Cornell and Columbia, making it obvious why the world has stereotyped Asians in such a way, and why some people actually envy the Asian way of tackling education. (Abboud & Kim) Barack Obama and his Education Secretary, for example, have even spoken about their admiration towards the enthusiasm South Korean parents have for their children’s education, while showing discontent towards their own students’ value for education. It seems to them that while South Korean students have been working their way up for years, gaining themselves a good reputation, their own country’s students have fallen far behind and have given themselves a poor image. (Ripley)

There are infinitely many more articles out there that boast about the intellectual capability and achievement of Asians – there exists articles that share the news of them topping international exams and contests, articles that talk about how they possess more degrees than any other race, and them being the masterminds behind large business. With the knowledge of these things, one would think that the Asian education system isn’t bad at all. To some, the Asian way of educating students probably even seems extremely successful and ideal; however, we must remain skeptical and question whether these triumphs are not merely a façade or a diversion from the truth because there are also infinitely many articles that talk about how much of a difficult time Asian students have when it comes to their academics.

In 2006, a survey was conducted by Pew Research Center where the difference between the amount of pressure that American and Asian parents place on their children can be seen. The participants were adults from Japan, India, China, and America who were asked to decide whether their country’s parents were placing too little, too much, or just enough pressure on their students. The results were slightly shocking because it showed the vast difference between the opinions of the Asian adults and the American adults. The survey had found that:

“By a ratio of nearly four-to-one, adults in this country say that American parents are placing too little (56%) rather than too much (15%) pressure on students, with the remaining quarter (24%) saying that parents are exerting the right amount of pressure.”

The results in Asia, however, were a mirrored reflection of America’s as it was shown that majority of the participants felt that the pressure placed on their students is too much. In China, a shocking 63% percent of the survey’s participants believe that the amount of pressure parents place on students is too much, while only 20% believe that there is a right amount, and an even smaller 11% percent believe that it is not enough. The results in the other two Asian countries were similar, with 59% of Japan responding ‘too much’, 30% ‘just right’, and 9% ‘not enough’; while in India, the numbers were 61%, 15%, and 22% respectively. (Wike & Horowitz) With this information, we can conclude that while most Americans believe that American parents don’t put enough pressure on their children, most Asians think that students are put under *too* much pressure.

In most Asian countries, students are hounded to get perfect scores because education is not only a privilege or a right – it is pretty much the only key to a good future, making it compulsory for them to do their best. This approach to education has its benefits, but it is also very harmful to the originality and welfare of all parties involved – the students, the parents, the families, the schools, and even the country itself. Social Darwinism has long existed in the world, but it is very much present in Asia because their education system and standards advocate the belief that “only the fittest survive”. Ranking, for example is very much practiced and taken seriously within schools and outside of them as well. In order to push students to do better in their studies, classes are sometimes ranked based on the students’ grades. Teachers, professors, and educational institutions are also all ranked, formally or informally. Because of this academic hierarchy, parents also view their child’s performance as the family’s status symbol; if the child does exceptional, he has succeeded in preserving the family’s pride; however, if he does a mediocre job, the family has to suffer shame.

What is even more daunting for students is the *truth* that their future is almost solely based on his academic success – one must do brilliantly in primary and secondary school, and in university entrance exams as well. This is because companies prefer to hire graduates from the country’s top universities; putting more importance on an individual’s alma mater and overlooking his true competence and performance skills. The truth is, more often than not, the university an individual attends dictates his future job and salary, and sometimes, it also even dictates whom they will eventually marry. Sadly, societies in Asia very much believe that a person’s opportunities should be dependent on the university he attended.

Because university is viewed as a necessary step for success, countries such as Singapore, China, Japan, South Korea, India, and Hong Kong begin preparing their students for the entrance exams as early as their grade school days. Cram schools/mass tutoring are educational institutions that students attend after their daytime classes, and are very popular, but also controversial in these countries. A study showed that in 2010, 74% of all students in South Korea partook in some kind of private after-school instruction. (Ripley) The reason for the popularity of these schools is because of their effectiveness in adding to the students’ knowledge and improving his test-taking skills. However, these schools are also controversial because of the negative effects they pose to the student’s welfare and the time big amount of time they subtract from what should be the students’ free time. In Korea and Shanghai, China, more than 45% of students spend up to four hours a week in after-school math lessons, while another 20% spend more than four hours. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Another study shows that the amount of time Asian students spend on their academics is almost twice as much as the amount of time adolescents in US and Europe do. Indian adolescents spend 33.6% of their time on schoolwork activities, while Japanese spend 34%, and Koreans spend 45%. Adolescents in US and Europe, on the other hand, only spend 20-30% of their on their schoolwork. (Larson, Sharma &Verma 504) Studying can be very rigorous and extreme in Asia, but truthfully, it’s just a small hurdle they have to overcome when compared to the mountain of a challenge they have to face later on.

Every year, millions and millions of Asian kids have to face one of the most important and intense periods of their lives – so intense for others that it can drive them to do terrible things, some of which we may not even be able to imagine. In South Korea, it’s called the CSAT, their version of the USA’s Standardized Achievement Test (SAT); but unlike the SAT, which only lasts for four to five hours, the CSAT lasts for nine. In countries such as India, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the entrance exam season lasts for around three months, and is made up of many different entrance exams – one for each university, lasting for about four to five hours each. These exams are what most Asians have had in mind since they were old enough to attend school because acceptance into the top universities is not actually just choice, but a *must.*

I myself, truly believe that the Asian way of bringing up their students really has the potential to be great; however, the with the way things are going now, the system and the pressure that families put on their children is only causing harm to everyone involved, especially the students. Years and years of studying only general knowledge has caused students to end up lacking in originality and creativity, which may be a disadvantage to the country’s economy due to the lack of innovation among its citizens. Some students have also failed to value their education and find schooling to be meaningless to their own development; when Japanese university drop-outs were asked why they had attended university in the first place, some said it was because they merely wanted to please their parents; others said it was because they wanted to stay in touch with their friends; while the rest said it was because there wasn’t anything for them to do at the time. (Eades, Goodman, & Hada) Students have also failed to pay attention in their daytime classes, their family relations, and their social skills. Living such a bleak life has caused many to suffer from low self-esteem and/or depression, and some are eventually lead to commit suicide or murder in an attempt to escape the stress.

Although having some good points, the strict education in Asian societies definitely poses a danger to the students’ character and welfare, and therefore, requires changes that will lessen the pressure put on students and improve the stressful atmosphere, while maintaining the value of education.Because of society’s obsession with scores and ranks, countries have failed to use what are essentially good ways of raising their students. Some of the methods that Asian families use to educate their children can actually be very beneficial and even ideal if executed properly. While Western parents often praise their children to be “talented” or “gifted”, Asian parents actually put more significance in hard work. This can be seen in Chinese Yale Professor, Amy Chua’s “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” where she talks about how she raised her daughters with the mindset that everything can be achieved with hard work. She enforces this idea by telling a story about how she had once made her daughter practice a piano piece for several hours, without letting her leave until she had perfected it, and only praising her afterwards for her hard work.

Carol Dweck, a Stanford psychologist conducted a research that showed the difference between how children react when being praised for their talent and when being praised for their diligence. When made to solve a set of difficult problems from an IQ test, some students were praised for their ability after solving them, while the others were praised for their effort. The results of the research showed that the kids who were complimented on their intelligence did not want to take on a new challenge because they did not want their talent to be questioned; however, the kids who were praised for their hard work, on the other hand, were eager to take on a new challenge. (Dweck)

“The Asian Way” can also be seen as beneficial for a student’s character because Asian kids are taught not to settle for mediocrity and to keep challenging themselves. In “A Nation of Wimps” by Hara Estroff Marano (2008), Marano believes that if children aren’t given enough chances to test their abilities, they grow up to be “emotionally brittle” and become more prone to anxiety and depression.

 Knowing all of this, we can see that the education system in Asia actually has very great potential – the beliefs and principles behind it actually make good sense and may even be viewed as better than the ways of other countries; however, the way societies execute them is just terribly extreme. Asian countries do recognize this problem and have attempted to change their education system or what has pretty much become an *examination* system. While some of them have succeeded in lessening the extremity of the stress and pressure students’ undergo, some have terribly failed or have failed to address the real issues.

 In China, universities have started making new entrance exams to target students with “talents beyond book learning”. The government has also tried to make changes by ordering schools to close on weekends; however, parents protested and hired teachers to conduct lessons for their children. Crash courses on suicide prevention have been established as well; however, this does not address the root causes that lie within the educational system itself. (Professor Zhao)

 In Taiwan, officials recently announced that their high schools will no longer require kids to take high-school entrance exams.

 In Japan, the government has attempted to reduce student workload, but parents criticized this action because of their concern towards the country’s drop from first place in 2000 to fourth place in 2003 on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

 In Singapore, tuition hours for math is being reduced and more sport, art, drama, and music are being injected into the curriculum.

 Finally in South Korea, the government has tried simplifying the exams, capping their cram schools’ tuition, and even banning them in the 1980’s; however, nothing has changed. Teachers and principals from public schools now have to go through evaluations (opinion surveys by students, parents, and peer teachers) and are required to attend additional training if they score low in them. Corporal punishment is now being prohibited (although it still happens occasionally). Admission tests for prestigious, specialized, high schools have also been removed. In 2010, spending on private tutoring decreased by 3.5%, which is a good sign; however, Koreans still spent 2% of their GDP on cram schools, showing us that the country still has a lot to work on. (Ripley)

 Besides the attempts that these Asian countries have tried, there are other possible solutions. In Australia’s Melbourne High, for example, students must have been/must be involved in non-academic activities (i.e. sports, drama, choral singing, and community volunteer work) in order to graduate.

 If these Asian countries manage to continue working on improving their educational systems by reducing the stress that their students have to go through, I believe that they will someday be successful. The education methods of Asia have the potential to be amazing – societies just have to get rid of the Social Darwinism present within them and put more value in a person’s originality and skill, rather than just their academic performance and university. People need to realize that although it is important to do well in school; academic excellence will not necessarily bring them a great life. Education should be enjoyed and not feared – a truth that Asia must always remember.

 While my mom and dad aren’t really what you’d call “Tiger” or “Dragon” parents – they’ve never pushed me to become the top of my class, they’ve never forced me to go to tutoring school, and they didn’t even scold me when my grades for conduct had been badly affected because I vandalized something back in my grade school days – I’ve definitely witnessed the stress that most Asian students have to go through. Social Darwinism is really existent in Asian countries, so it’s usually only typical and automatic for parents to somehow end up having high expectations from their children that often puts children under more pressure than what it is necessary and healthy. Sometimes, I see these high expectations it in my parents’ disappointed reactions when I get satisfactory marks, and sometimes I see it in my friends who struggle with their academics, are never satisfied with their results, and don’t always even know why they strive so much to get high scores. Although most of them consider themselves lost and hardly motivated, these same friends are also some of the most diligent and persevering people I know, which really makes you wonder, is the “Asian Way” really all that bad? As of now, in my honest opinion, it is, but I believe that if we are able to reform this continent’s academic system and lessen society’s expectations, we will be able to create something that we can definitely be proud of.

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**APPENDIX A**

“How Much Pressure Are Parents Putting on Students?” Pewresearch.org < <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/55/parental-pressure-on-students-not-enough-in-america-too-much-in-asia>>

**APPENDIX B**

“Parental Pressure” Pewresearch.org < <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/55/parental-pressure-on-students-not-enough-in-america-too-much-in-asia>>.