

# The Asian Advantage

by Harold W. Stevenson

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American conceptions of Asia are often incorrect. It is important, therefore, to begin by clarifying some of these misconceptions.

## **Are Asians More Intelligent than Americans?**

In fact, while Japanese and Chinese children lead American children in academic achievement, there is no evidence that they are brighter. In one of our studies, we tested large samples of elementary school children on 10 tasks of the types found in intelligence tests. American children actually obtained higher scores than Chinese and Japanese children in kindergarten; by the fifth grade the overall scores of the three groups of children were equivalent.

## **Do Asian Children Get an Earlier Start?**

The assumption is sometimes made that higher achievement among Chinese and Japanese children is due to their receiving formal instruction earlier than American children. This is not the case. Japanese children may learn to play the violin early, but they receive little early instruction in mathematics. In over 300 hours of observation in kindergartens in Taipei, Sendai and Minneapolis, we found that the greatest percentage of time spent in direct teaching and structured experiences occurred in the American classrooms.

Thus, the superiority of Asian children in mathematics would not appear to result from early formal instruction. If anything, our data point to the possibility that young children may benefit more from informal learning situations than from more direct forms of teaching.

## **Are After-School Classes a Factor?**

Another popular explanation of the Asian advantages is that Chinese and Japanese children excel in academic subjects because they attend after-school classes in *buxiban* in Taiwan and in *juku* in Japan. *Juku* devoted to academic subjects play little significant role in the education of young children. The most popular subjects for elementary school children attending *juku*? Art, music, dancing, and calligraphy. According to our data, only 5% of the Japanese fifth graders were enrolled in after-school mathematics classes, compared to 3% of the American and 8% of the Chinese fifth graders.

## **The Influence of the Kyoiku Mama**

The maternal image often depicted in Western publications is that of a pushy, demanding, home-bound tutor. It is more appropriate to describe the Japanese mother as someone who seeks to provide a nurturant and protected atmosphere for learning. She is ready to assist her child in doing homework if she can, but her major goals are to promote the child's

interest and involvement in school and to make sure that the child is progressing appropriately.

### **But is it all Rote Learning?**

Rather than emphasizing rote learning in mathematics, Asian teachers utilize a variety of approaches that stress applications, problem solving, and abstract representations of problems. The consequences of these efforts are evident in the children's performance. Not only did we find that Chinese and Japanese children surpassed American children in tests of mathematical operations, but they also received significantly higher scores than American children in tests involving word problems, number concepts, graphs and tables, spatial relations, geometry, visualization, and estimation.

### **Does High Achievement Exact a Psychological Toll?**

A final common misconception about Asian children is that their high achievement is accomplished at great psychological cost. The high suicide rate of youth in Japan is often pointed out as evidence. It is true that Japan's youth suicide rate was nearly three times that of the United States during the 1950s, a time when Japanese youth were presumably depressed about their country's future following its defeat in World War II. Since then, however, the suicide rate in Japan has declined, so that the current rate is approximately the same in both Japan and the United States.

We must search for other explanations of the Asian advantage in mathematics.

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