



The Cultivation of Creativity in the Chinese Culture—Past, Present, and Future

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China is in a class of its own, with a population of 1.3 billion and an economy that, even in these difficult times, grew more than 9% in 2009. Roots of its rise to a place of leadership are founded in its mastery of imitative and incremental innovation. China, many believe, is held back by its inability to move forward in its practice of radical innovation. Numerous factors in its history have kept it from experiencing the openness, opportunity, and cooperation a culture needs to release the creativity that leads to innovation. What are the keys to capturing these seemingly illusive elements that will release China to become the innovative enterprise it needs to become in order to take the global lead in economics and entrepreneurship? Education, enterprise, and environment are key aspects. Outside of addressing millennia-old mindsets, China is destined to be the “also ran” of the global marketplace.

One author says, “Today’s Chinese culture is comprised of a bewildering array of traditions and innovations, complementary components and competing interests, major trends and significant sub-themes, official positions and popular deviations, all of which are in constant interaction, creating multiple shifting patterns that defy coherent description.”¹ These “multiple shifting patterns” reflect the ebb and flow of foundational beliefs and on-going battles to propel, *Zhongguo*—“the middle kingdom”—to the center of global commerce and corporations. China’s culture, past and present, has been compared to a kaleidoscope. There are aspects that have made it, depending on your perspective, a creative “hot pot” or “hopeless hole.” This has often been a result of the cultural climate and controlling power at any particular time in its history. The purpose of this article is to consider cultural philosophies and practices that have helped or hindered the development of creativity in China. It will be as China masters and moves beyond the long standing barriers that it will be able to take the lead in global enterprise.

Creativity: Its Meaning and Means

Creativity is “the ability to create inventions, produce works of art, or solve problems using an original, novel, or unconventional approach.”² It is the process of “producing through imaginative skills.”³ A person or organization uses their God-given imagination to come up with

new ideas or images that have never been seen or experienced. This can lead to innovation within cultures and companies.

There are certain perspectives and practices that can encourage the development of creativity. Whether in families or factories, “researchers have found environment to be more important than heredity in influencing creativity, and a child’s creativity can be either strongly encouraged or discouraged by early experiences at home and in school.”⁴ The cultivation of creativity starts early in a person’s life, and is a result, to a large extent, of the environment in which they grew up, their families, and schools. Beyond a person’s immediate surroundings is the greater world of their culture, of which one author writes:

Although people may vary in their native capacity for creativity, it is in the individual’s interaction with the macrocosm where creative expression can be found. Thus, a focus on enhancement of domain- and creativity-related skills is insufficient to enhance overall creativity if the cultural setting does not also accommodate creative growth and expression.⁵

Research has shown that openness,⁶ opportunity,⁷ and cooperation⁸ are key components in an environment that breeds creativity. Where have these components been made manifest in the past and present history of China?

China and Creativity

China has a long history of creative endeavors as evidenced by innovative pursuits and products. “China is not only a land rich in culture, history, art and beauty, it is a land rich with innovative inventions without which world history would have been drastically altered.”⁹

The four great inventions of ancient China—the compass, gunpowder, papermaking, and printing—are celebrated in Chinese culture for their historical significance and as signs of ancient China’s advanced science and technology. They represent just a small portion of the abundance of China’s innovative and inventive history. One author says, “As China grows into a modern day superpower, it is important to remember that China as a civilization has existed for more than six millennia and contributed countless inventions that shaped China’s evolution and amazingly continue to shape the modern world.”¹⁰ What was the climate that gave birth to and cultivated this creativity? Some have argued rather than as a result of an environment that encouraged and empowered the free flow of creative ideas, that “the glorious inventions of China’s past can be traced to fulfilling the needs of the bureaucratic establishments of the emperor at the time.”¹¹ Their suggestion is that these creative ideas grew out of the dictates and desires of the authoritarian rulers throughout China’s history. If this is the case, what are the foundational principles and practices that have kept China from moving out of the creativity doldrums? To get a clear view, it is important to go back to China’s roots.

Creativity and Confucianism

A fuller understanding of the historical roots of what has affected China's creative inventiveness is possible through a consideration of its philosophical and practical foundations. One of these is Confucianism which has been at the core of Chinese beliefs and lifestyle for millennia.

Confucianism was founded in the philosophical ideas of Kong Fuzi (551-479 BC), later called Confucius by the Jesuit monks. He was an intellectual and philosopher whose wit and wisdom were recorded by his disciples and since then have been implemented by various Chinese emperors and empires. In order to understand the past and present cultural characteristics of China, one must look at its underpinnings in Confucianism. These characteristics are founded in Confucianism's four major virtues: class system, obedience, doctrine of the mean, and *renqing*. The doctrine of the mean is the belief that all things should be pursued in moderation. The virtue of *renqing* refers to the need for moral virtue, including kindness, righteousness, and respect for the feelings of others. Chen and Chung summarize the principles of Confucianism as having four areas of emphasis: education, family system, hierarchical relationships, and benevolence.¹² Kyung Hee finds that as each of these principles is emphasized in a culture, they hinder the attitudes and practices needed to release creativity.¹³ This happens as a result of how each of these areas of emphasis is developed:

1. Emphasis on education—it promotes rote memory, competition, a clear division between work and play, and a diminishing of play.
2. Family system—it requires strict gender role expectations, strict gender roles, rigid family relationships, and a strong emphasis on obedience and filial loyalty and piety.
3. Hierarchical relationships—it requires a lack of equality in relationships, rigid social structures, expectations of gender roles, and authoritarian teacher-student relationships.
4. Benevolence—it requires suppressing of emotions, the silence ethic, and an extreme value of humility, conformity, and stigmatized eccentricity.

The tenets of Confucianism have had a strong counter-productive influence on the development of creativity in China. In the conclusion of his article, Kyung Hee says:

Although a person needs cognitive ability to be creative, if the culture either does not value or discourages creative growth and expression, then the person's creativity cannot flourish. In order to encourage creativity, we should remove cultural blocks that inhibit creativity.¹⁴

The cultural foundation of Confucianism has brought perspectives and their accompanying attitudes and practices into Chinese educational institutions and families that have deeply affected the development of creativity. The impact of Confucianism makes it clear that culture matters when it comes to the development and dissemination of creativity. These cultural limitations have hindered the openness, opportunity, and cooperation that is necessary to continue to release creativity in China.

Creativity and Collectivism

A further aspect of Chinese culture that has affected its creativity is collectivism. Collectivism is an important cultural dimension of China. It stems from Confucianism's emphasis on loyalty and creates, according to Hofstede, "a society in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty."¹⁵

The GLOBE study found that one characteristic of collectivistic cultures is a preference for uncertainty avoidance that "involves the extent to which ambiguous situations are threatening to individuals, to which rules and order are preferred, and to which uncertainty is tolerated in a society."¹⁶ High uncertainty avoidance makes it less likely that people will be willing to take the risks necessary to exercise creativity and initiate innovation. Research done by Shane¹⁷ "corroborate the argument that societies more tolerant of uncertainty, measured by Hofstede's UAI (uncertainty avoidance inventory), report higher rates of innovation than societies less tolerant of uncertainty."¹⁸

China's high uncertainty avoidance adds another cultural dimension that makes it unlikely its members will take the risks needed for the discovering and developing new creative ideas. This practice also fits the Chinese practice of *saving face*, not causing undue embarrassment to yourself or others. Being creative necessitates the willingness to fail and therefore *lose face*. It is also seen in the mindset that is reflected in the Asian saying, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down." Often the creative practice requires one to "stick up." Collectivism and its characteristic of uncertainty avoidance is another aspect of Chinese culture that hinders the development of creativity.

Creativity and Communism

An additional historic force that has influenced the development of creativity within China has been communism. On February 12th, 1912, Emperor P'u Yi stepped down from the Dragon throne of the Manchu's, ending the millennia-long dynasty rule of China. China passed from dynastic rule to a constitutional republic under the leadership of Sun Yatsen. A significant time of upheaval and uncertainty followed the passing of the last emperor. Finally on October 1st, 1949, China was officially established as the People's Republic of China and communism became its official political system.

The communist philosophy and its out-workings soon affected every detail of the Chinese culture. There were programs established that invited openness and new ideas, such as the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the slogan of which was, "Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land." These programs were limited in scope and duration. More common were its efforts to control and consolidate its rule. Accordingly, various programs were instituted by its leader Mao Zedong. Among these programs, two in particular, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, stifled rather than stimulated the advancement of China. As a result of the Great Leap Forward, millions starved to death as people were called on to abandon agricultural pursuits to concentrate on industrial production.

The consequent backlash of unrest was confronted in 1966 by a new movement, the Cultural Revolution. Its focus was on the abolition of the Four Olds: Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas. The accomplishing of this task lead to a process of purging, which was done through retribution towards and re-education of those who represented the Four Olds—the educated and elite. Educational institutions were shut down and teachers and administrators sent to re-education camps. These actions put an end to any institutions or individuals who might have contributed to the development of creativity and innovation within the Chinese culture. The land of China lay in ruins as a result of the persecution, purges, and plight brought on by the early policies and programs of the new Chinese communist government. The controlling and conforming ways of the communist government put any hope of creative activity and action out of reach.

Creativity and Capitalism

Even though he was twice purged during the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping was able to look beyond the failed attempts of Mao's rule. He was able to see the spark that was needed to start down the long road to helping communist controlled China become a global innovative force—capitalism. Deng finally emerged as the paramount leader of China in 1978. The following year, 1979, with his proclamation, "To be rich is glorious," he opened the doors for capitalism to become the country's key driving force for creativity and innovation. He had realized something needed to be done to reverse the economic decline brought on by the stifling monetary policies under Mao.

Deng launched his economic reform program. Initially, it was limited to agricultural reforms but it gradually spread to industry and commerce. The program's policies were in sharp contrast to those practiced under Mao. This contrast was reflected in favorite expressions of each leader. Deng said, "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white; what matters is how well it catches mice," whereas Mao said, "Better Red than expert." Mao's point was that, in practice, totally unqualified party ideologues were put in positions of leadership of projects that really needed technical expertise.¹⁹ Deng's position won out and with this shift came a new openness to the West, and Western investment became one of the causes of Chinas rapid economic growth. Other stimuli to this growth included the end of the commune system and the possibility of private business ownership.

There were new possibilities on the horizon for China, the door for creativity and innovation had been cracked open. The long history of philosophies and practices that hindered China from exploring its creativity was brought into a new light. That light was reflected in the pledge, made by China's President Hu Jintao in January 2006, that by 2020, China would be an "an innovation-oriented country." Innovation was made a priority, but how would it become a reality?

Capturing Creativity in China

The forces that have brought resistance to the cultivation of creativity in China over the millennia have been powerful and pervasive. Their remnants can be very clearly seen in institutions and industries, as well as at the fundamental levels of family and friendship. In the dawning of capitalism, there are fissures that are forming in the façade that has foiled the release and development of creativity in the Chinese world. What are the keys to capturing this seeming illusive element that will release China to become the innovative enterprise it needs to become in order to take the global lead in economics and entrepreneurship? Education, enterprise, and environment are key aspects.

The educational foundations of China need to be shaken and shifted if it is to become a society that generates creativity. The current educational philosophy is a millennia-old product of Confucianism. This system still requires rote memory and absolute submission to ruling authorities, teachers, and administrators. China needs to breakout of this traditional approach to education if it is to progress beyond incremental and imitative innovation to radical innovation. “In order to continue to be profitable and growth oriented . . . China’s educational system must move toward critical thinking educational practices.”²⁰ There are some difficulties and risks in doing so. “Even though there may be many problems associated with that stance for the Chinese Communist Government and teachers in general; this is necessary to continue on towards more profitable though higher risk innovations that underlie the economic growth of richer, knowledge based economies.”²¹ The consequence of staying the current course is to remain stranded as a second rate world power. “It will not be able to further continue its economic progress; and become a major player in the knowledge economy rather than basing its economic power in labor intensive sectors.”²² Educational evolution is essential for the development of a robust innovative future in China. One research article concluded, “While we argue that creative and critical learning are necessary skills for innovation, the process must be designed and developed for the unique Chinese environment.”²³ There are hopeful signs that this “sea change” has begun.²⁴ China must make the evolution of its education system a priority in order to become an innovation leader.

Another key to making China the innovative powerhouse it has the potential to become is enterprise. Chinese enterprise is showing encouraging signs of efforts that have favored and will continue to favor innovative growth. These signs include increasing research and development, improved technology, and growing global connections. There remain areas where Chinese enterprise needs to change, including “developing human resources for innovation; building innovative culture; strengthening intellectual property rights protection; building new incentive systems appropriate for innovation.”²⁵ These major endeavors require new approaches to strategies and structures. These are often long-term investments because “innovation is different from imitation, the former being time-consuming and requiring forward thinking.”²⁶ This is a mindset that has yet to become part of the mentality of Chinese enterprise. These are transitions that will not be easy for Chinese corporations and culture.

One other key to tapping China’s creative potential is environment. China needs to develop a cultural environment that celebrates and cultivates creativity. It needs to break loose of the philosophies and practices that perpetuate the same way of thinking and doing things. This may

become the most difficult but most dynamic force for unleashing the creative potential of China. One author in describing the cultural environment of China today says it is:

A strange hybrid. In many ways it resembles the United States. It has a continent-size domestic market that sets businesspeople worldwide salivating, a population of ambitious, risk-taking entrepreneurs who can use the country's massive domestic market to build world-class products and businesses, and, by virtue of its size and stature, can force others to deal with on terms it dictates. But, unlike the United States and almost all other nations that have become successful global commercial powers, China has an authoritarian and often paranoid political system that crushes dissent, controls information, and interjects itself into every facet of business.²⁷

These later characteristics are hardly the prescription the West would propose for the development of creativity. Yet they are a reminder of the difficult balance necessary to propel China into the lead in the future. This strange hybrid will have to determine if, when, and how it will adapt and adjust so it might move ahead in the global creative and innovative enterprise. Will it follow the path developed by the Western world or will it lead in new directions as it has with its China-ized brand of capitalism?

China is a thriving economic powerhouse with nuclear weapons and its own space program, destined to become one of the most powerful nations the world has ever seen. But the country is still struggling with the dilemma it faced in the last days of the imperial rule when foreign traders began forcing their way into China: how to adopt and adapt to the ways of the West and global commerce while maintaining the Chinese "essence."²⁸

In education, enterprise, and environment China needs to make strides forward to aggressively pursue and practice openness, opportunity, and cooperation if it is to become a global creative leader.

About the Author

Lorin Staats graduated from Regent University's Doctor of Strategic Leadership (DSL) program in May 2011. He has most recently served with non-profit organizations in China and Nepal. In addition to a wide range of other overseas leadership roles, he has served in various pastoral positions and is currently relocating to the United States. Correspondence regarding this article may be directed to the author at: *lorin.staats@gmail.com*; 262-271-2391; or 2906 N. 75th St., Milwaukee, WI 53210.

Endnotes

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