

Chapter 1

Creativity: A Meeting Between the East and the West

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1. Introduction

Creativity: When East meets West.

But when?

And how?

In the meeting, cross-cultural comparisons are inevitable. And if made on equal grounds, such comparisons can ignite meaningful reflections and controversies.

With the passing away of Edward Said and the subsequent reports by Asian scholars in the media, more people have come to know of his works and writings. In brief, as in one of his earlier books entitled *Orientalism* (1978), Said puts forth his argument against the West's (in particular the United States') narrow and stereotyped view of the East (in particular the Middle East). His research has also aimed at raising Americans' awareness of the diversity, richness, and dynamic nature of the culture of Arabic nations. Said was born in Palestine, grew up in Egypt, and got his higher education in the United States. Like his background, his thinking and research cross both academic and cultural boundaries. As such, apart from arguing against the West's molded view of the Middle East, his work has also helped to alert Arabs of their

unique identity, and not to take up the West's view of themselves so readily.

To extrapolate from Said's thinking and research, we should also alert ourselves of similar pitfalls in the discussion of creativity between East and West.

In fact, in the cross-cultural discussion on almost any topic between East (mainly Chinese societies) and West (mainly the United States), several typical approaches or stance can be noted. First, the West usually adopts some dominant ideology (e.g., Confucianism) and concepts (e.g., collectivism) in describing Asian culture and in explaining Asians' behaviors. Second, as such, a list of as-a-matter-of-fact pre-concepts, beliefs, and assumptions often comes up (e.g., filial piety, authority-binding, conforming, group-oriented, face saving — all these and other traits are highlighted as being not beneficial to the cultivation of creativity). Third and more worth noting is that Asian researchers also adopt the Western viewpoints. Sometimes such adoption happens quite readily without any questioning even in light of weak or opposing evidences.

In contrast, we tend not to find a similar picture in Western research. For example, even though the United States is a predominantly protestant country, no dominant or any single ideological thought is used in theory building or in explaining Americans' behaviors and thinking. Research has in fact taken issue with the Western view of Asians. For example, studies have indicated that Asians (e.g., Chinese youths in Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Singapore are no less individualistic than their American peers in value orientation; Lau, 1992). They also place great importance on the value of being imaginative (Lau, 1992). On the purposes of education, results are mixed: American students believe that the school should teach them to think critically and to consider the family first, and Hong Kong students indicate that the school should teach them to respect authority *and* to face challenges creatively (Lau, Nicholls, Thorkildsen, & Patashnick, 2000). On the style of parenting, research has also shown that functional authoritative (in terms of providing guidelines) rather than controlling behavior is practiced by Chinese parents in Hong Kong (e.g., Lau & Cheung, 1987) and the United States (e.g., Chao & Sue, 1996).

In summary, all the above point to the issue that it is sometimes too easy to resort to simple concepts and presumptions in explaining Asians' behaviors and the comparison of differences between East and West. More often, such attributed presumptions are not based on actual measures. This has been raised previously (see *Introduction* in Lau, 1996) and by authors in this book (e.g., Cheng; Lubart & Georgsdottir; Runco). Apart from Confucianism, Cheng and other researchers (e.g., Lau, 1996) have suggested that other ways of thinking such as Taoism and Buddhism have immense influence in Chinese and Asian cultures. People in Western countries could be high on collectivism as in many social and political interactions. In fact, the reliance on building and maintaining good networks are important to attaining goals, be they personal or social in nature. Even in resorting to Confucianism, we should note that Confucius was a non-conformist as he refuted what were being practiced by different emperors. His teachings (as well as those of others like Laozi and Zhuangzi) were rejected by the emperors in his time.

Let us take Chinese people as one Asian group as an example: before using the cultural label to explain the phenomenon of creativity in the Chinese, Chang (2000) critically pointed out six wrong places in search of the ethno-indigenous psychology of the Chinese. In the first approach, the objective demographic variable — ethnic Chinese — is taken for granted as equivalent to the subjective aspect of culture — beliefs and values. In most of the cross-cultural studies on creativity and Chinese people, researchers conveniently equate ethnic Chinese with subjective or self-identified Chinese. In the second approach, similarities among Chinese and people from different cultures will be classified as universal elements among human individuals but when differences occur, it seems difficult to look for an explanation especially when non-average samples are used. Chang (2000) thus suggested that the everyday life of the average Chinese people should be examined.

In the third and fourth approaches, a standardized set of independent variables are used under the same experimental conditions to investigate how people from various cultures behave or react in the same or different ways. Chang further questioned the generalizability of behaviors observed in laboratory situations to a normal life of the individuals. She also queried about the similarity in perception of stimulus or instruments in

various cultures. She recommended that observations should be made in the daily life of the Chinese and culturally based measurement should be developed. In the fifth approach, culture is interpreted as a causal factor of certain behaviors. It, however, does not attempt to investigate which particular cultural belief or value is contributing to the similarity or difference as very often theories seldom include cultural variables. It tells little about how culture plays a role in human behavior (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993). Any operational definition of a psychological construct should be contextualized in the specific culture.

2. Focus and Structure

The focus of this volume is three-fold. First, it aims to reexamine and question commonly held conceptions of the nature of creativity, especially in the context of culture. Second, it aims to stimulate new thinking on the cultivation of creativity, again in the context of culture. Incompatible findings and controversies are put forth, and new hypotheses are proposed to accommodate opposing facts and beliefs. Third, in the present decade of globalization, some new issues and problems happening in the East and the West are also brought forward.

Creativity is of great interest to psychologists, educators, and policy makers. The present volume is significant in reviewing and extending our current knowledge of its nature and development. In recent decades, both Eastern and Western scholars are becoming increasingly aware of the need for cross-cultural research. In such research, comparisons are inevitable, and readers will be aware of the various compatible or incompatible interpretations of the differences found. Authors in this volume have tried their best to bring together the current cross-cultural research done on creativity and the conceptual issues and controversies involved.

The structure of the volume consists of three parts. As the present volume is on creativity in the East and the West, almost all chapters touch upon the issue of culture and its influence, albeit to a different extent. Nonetheless, in the first part, the six chapters focus on the conception and influence of culture (Runco; Lubart & Georgsdottir; Rudowicz; Ng & Smith; Leung, Au & Leung; Cheng). Runco starts off

with a seemingly simple but important question on the conception of culture. Echoing this, Lubart, Georgsdottir and Rudowicz bring forth the understanding and misunderstanding of the Eastern culture and cultural difference in the conception of creativity. Ng and Smith show their support, which is based solely on Confucianism. In their chapter, Leung et al. alert readers to the fact that although the majority of research evidence on creativity is unfavorable to Asians, there are similarities and opposing findings found. Moreover, Cheng points to the fact that we should take other concepts and thinking such as Taoism and Buddhism in the study of Asian, in particular Chinese culture. In her chapter, Cheng is able to introduce to readers a rich source of research and literature published in Chinese that are less known to Western scholars.

In the second part, the four chapters focus on education and development (Wu; Hennessey; Lin; Soh). Wu highlights the blockage toward creativity among Chinese students and he proposes some passages. Hennessey indicates, in her studies including Arabic children, that creativity can be enhanced when motivation and development are also considered. Both Lin and Soh show that children's drawing can be a meaningful channel in the understanding of children's artistic creativity and appreciation. Like Runco, Soh also alerts us not to make any hasty judgement in the comparison between apples and oranges in cross-cultural studies on creativity. In their chapter in the first part, Lubart and Georgsdottir have provided a rich source of empirical evidence and ideas on education and development related to creativity.

The last four chapters in the third part are related to creativity in practice (Tan; Adachi and Chino; Maker; Puccio and González). The focus is on introducing different approaches and models towards creativity enhancement. Tan starts off in describing the development of creativity research and education in Singapore, and she shows the construction of modules on creativity for teachers. Through different activities, Adachi and Chino demonstrate how people can come to be more creative in music making. In integrating creativity and intelligence, Maker introduces a problem-solving enhancement model, which has been practiced in different Asian countries. Puccio and González focus on enhancing creative problem solving, and their model has also been tried out in Asia. Through their on-site practice, both Maker and Puccio become more

aware of the eagerness and propensity in creativity development among Asian children and educators.

3. The Meeting of East and West: When and How?

In this volume, readers are introduced to creativity research done in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, the United States, and other Eastern and Western countries. Authors of this volume are in the forefront on creativity research, especially of the cross-cultural nature. In their chapters, their insights can be noted in the way they present theoretical concepts and research findings, identify controversies, and pinpoint overlooked and misunderstood areas.

In reading through this volume, readers may be aware of some shortcomings or dilemmas. First of all, it is impossible to cover all areas of research related to the conceptualization, development, and education of creativity in the East and West.

Second, either East or West is too broad a term. We need therefore to delimit them to just being generic in nature. In most chapters, East refers to Asian countries mainly of Chinese in origin, and West refers mainly to the United States. This is due to the fact that most published cross-cultural works in the West involve these two groups of people. Nonetheless, authors in this volume have tried their best to include other populations.

Third, readers may either agree or disagree with the contributors' interpretations of various cross-cultural differences on creativity. Authors may also challenge the explanations of results found in the studies done by different researchers. The precise intention of this volume is to bring up controversies for discussion and future research.

As on the meeting of East and West on creativity, it seems evident that the time is not right yet. There are at least two reasons. First, the theorization of creativity in the East is too lopsidedly dependent on Western concepts and theories (Lau, 2003). As mentioned before, even if attempting to include Eastern concept, the reliance on traditional ideological framework (such as Confucianism), Western prescribed landmark (such as individualism-collectivism) as well as the self-imposition of such thinking tend to hinder any breakthrough in theory building by scholars

in the East. Nonetheless, conceptually, we have seen some scholars in the East finding insights either from the arts and literature or a rough-attempt kind of psychological research (see Cheng's chapter). As an example, based on her analysis of Chinese art and painting, Li (1997) has put forth some interesting and innovative conceptualization of Chinese people's ways of creative thinking. (For a brief introduction of Li's study, readers may refer to the chapters by Lubart and Georgsdottir, Chapter 2; Ng and Smith, Chapter 4; and Leung et al., Chapter 5. Second, the assessment of creativity is also too dependent on Western measures. As remarked by Niu and Sternberg (2002), and restated in Leung et al.'s chapter, it could be to Asians' disadvantage when their creativity is measured by Western instruments. The comparison between East and West could be unfair and the former is very often found to score lower. Recently, some indigenous instruments have been developed. For example, based on very simple constructs, the one developed by Wu and his colleagues (吳靜吉, 陳甫彥, 郭俊賢, 林偉文, 劉士豪 & 陳玉樺, 1998) is widely used in Taiwan. It has also been used in Hong Kong, alongside with the Wallach-Kogan Creativity Tests, and found to be high in reliability and validity. However, its acceptance by Western (and to some extent Eastern) scholars has yet to be established as it has not been published in the literature. The measure developed by Cheung, Tse, and Tsang (2001) on creative writing is another successful attempt. As suggested by Leung et al., the employment of a two-group two-test design is ideal in establishing a wider acceptance of such new measures. With appropriate modification, such measures will be useful in future cross-cultural research.

In all, the present volume provides a meeting ground for the presentation of research on creativity done in the East and the West. With the development of more indigenous theorization and assessment tools in the East, a more fruitful and fairer meeting will be in the making as more Eastern scholars are becoming more aware of the needed elements for such a kind of meeting.

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