

Book Reviews

Yugui Guo, *Asia's Educational Edge: Current Achievements in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and India*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005. xxiv + 265 pages.

With a similar impetus as that behind Ezra Vogel's 1979 *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America*,¹ Yugui Guo has set out to provide a wake-up call to American educators and policymakers about the growth and encroaching strength of education and educational opportunities in Asia. His *Asia's Educational Edge: Current Achievements in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and India* was undertaken both to provide a comparative analysis of the educational systems—including K–12 education, higher education, and international education—of these five economies and to ask whether the United States will be prepared to train its own students in science and technology fields as more and more Asians seek tertiary education, terminal degrees, and, ultimately, careers in Asia. “It is no secret that the United States has long relied heavily on foreign-born scientists and engineers and increasingly so in the closing years of the twentieth century,” Guo writes (p. 1). He asks: “Who will fill the gap left by foreign scientists and engineers [in universities, industries, and research institutes in the United States] should they become less available some day in the future?” (p. 9). Armed with an impressive arsenal of statistics, presented intertextually as well as graphically (via 102 tables and 58 figures), Guo predicts that, as opportunities increase in Asia, a smaller proportion of Asians will train for advanced degrees in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields in the United States. Moreover, of those who do, an increasing portion may opt to return to their home countries instead of remaining in the United States. A crisis could be in the making.

Following a brief foreword by William K. Cummings (a well-known scholar of international education at George Washington University) and a contextualizing preface, Guo, an independent specialist in international and comparative education, explains in his introductory chapter that the five economies of his study were the leading home nations and economies for foreign students enrolled in American universities in the 2002–2003 academic year. Taken together, students from India, Mainland China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan comprised 45.1 percent of the entire foreign undergraduate and graduate student population in the United States. His

second chapter considers challenges facing U.S. education in light of shifting political, economic, and demographic trends. Somewhat disappointingly, however, his section on “quality issues” with respect to U.S. education is informed entirely by quantitative data on standards and results of international assessments. Throughout the work, in fact, Guo seems to conflate “quality of education,” especially elementary and secondary education, with performance on standardized tests. Admittedly, results of recent international mathematics and science proficiency exams place students from Asian countries—notably South Korea and Japan—far ahead of their counterparts in the United States. This fact alone should be a cause for concern among American educators and education policymakers. But “quality of education” cannot be addressed or assessed entirely via quantitative measures.² Moreover, Guo offers practically no information about the lived experiences of administrators, teachers (including training, qualifications, remuneration, expectations, work life), or students. Inclusion of even a limited amount of micro-level detail would greatly humanize the somewhat sterile, number-driven presentation.

In the five chapters that follow, one on each economy surveyed, Guo focuses on “the positive experience and practices in these foreign education systems in an attempt to convince the American people of the challenges posed by other nations and to provide implications for the United States in its reforms” (p. xxi). Each chapter opens with a useful “summary of findings” that highlights the history, administration, finance, and roles of the private sector and international education. Guo elaborates on these issues in the chapters themselves, wherein he also describes curricula and recent curricular changes, issues of access, and—in the case of China—projections on expansion through the year 2020. The uniformity of his presentation enables readers easily to compare the situation across countries, although, to minimize repetition, Guo occasionally does not comment on some features in subsequent chapters if they are similar to features described earlier (e.g., he describes entrance examinations and the non-formal education system for Japan in chapter 3 but not for South Korea in chapter 4). The author suggests that the recent successes South Korea and Taiwan have had in transforming “brain drain” into “brain gain,” especially with respect to scholars and practitioners in the various STEM fields, are bellwethers of a trend that will eventually be matched by China and India, which today have the world’s largest and second largest education systems, respectively.

Throughout the book, Guo demonstrates his belief that education is the key to economic development. He observes that “all of the five nations and economies view education as an integral part of their whole national development and assume great responsibility for the advancement of education” (pp. 229–30). His presentations suggest that investment in primary and sec-

ondary education can lead the economy, yet tertiary education, especially in resource-intensive STEM fields, follows the economy.

Across East Asia, Guo reveals remarkably similar approaches to education, underscored, perhaps, by a strong level of “cultural support” from Confucianism (p. 89): Respect is traditionally given to educators and educated individuals, the process of formal education itself is afforded enormous prestige, and students and parents alike have high expectations and are highly motivated. Guo later suggests that such internal motivation and high expectations for education are absent in the United States (pp. 244–45).

Across East Asia, the modern education systems have been highly centralized in terms of administration, finance, and curriculum, though a recent wave of decentralization has afforded more discretionary power to regional and local education boards. Schools are organized along a 6-3-3-4 track (primary school, junior high school, high school, and university), with various academic and vocational options along the way. Within the last twelve years, public schools in Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have shifted from six days of school per week to five-day school weeks; additional reforms have targeted the roles and relevance of entrance exams at various stages. In China, the role of adult education, where much recent growth has occurred, is undoubtedly playing a major role in the shift from elite to mass higher education.

Compared with the education systems of Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, the state of education in India is different yet also full of potential, according to Guo. The Indian system, which evolved structurally from the pre-independence British colonial model, involves a 10 + 2 system, with interstate variance regarding which years constitute primary, upper primary, and secondary stages. Indeed, the variations in structure, organization, and curricula among schools in different Indian states make generalizations difficult, even though the states share responsibility with the central government in providing free access to education to all. However, in his account of the Indian system, Guo’s presentation suffers from data that are admittedly “rather limited, fragmentary, and out-of-date” in comparison to those of the other economies portrayed in the book (p. 189). Guo explores the massive “brain drain” affecting India as well as the intriguing concept of an Indian “scientific diaspora” (pp. 222–25).

In a concluding chapter, Guo offers a summary of his comparative findings as well as some rather predictable implications for U.S. educators. He holds that the United States could benefit from expanding its non-formal and extracurricular education systems, intensifying the role of U.S. companies and industries in vocational and technical education, requiring foreign language training in elementary and secondary school curricula, and sending more U.S. students abroad for study. This last recommendation is particularly important because, as Guo notes, during the early 2000s, for every *one* U.S. student

studying in Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, or India, *thirty-one* students from those economies were studying in the United States!

Guo's book should provide a useful resource to scholars of Asia or international education. But, as is always the case when writing about contemporary issues, some of his information is already outdated. For example, the Japanese curricula Guo presents are from the early 1990s (before the elimination of Saturday schooling in 2002). Other developments have arisen since the publication of his book, such as the 2006 endowment of Vedanta University in the Indian state of Orissa.³ When it opens, this institution will negate Guo's statement about the absence of private universities in India (pp. 206–7). Also, maintaining internal consistency when writing about contemporary issues can be difficult. On p. 6, Guo states (correctly) that the United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1984, yet not until p. 34 does he inform the reader that the United States rejoined the organization in 2003. Including other "technical" information, such as dates for Japan's Meiji period (1868–1912) and India's independence (1947) would also help the general reader.⁴ Finally, several tables are difficult to read (see, e.g., pp. 39, 48, 77, 83, 121, 160, 171, 205, 215–16). These minor flaws aside, Guo's book presents a useful macro-level snapshot of the education systems in Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and India at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

¹Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

²With respect to the non-quantifiable dimension of primary and secondary education quality in China, see Yong Zhao, "China and the Whole Child," *Educational Leadership* 64, no. 8 (2007): 70–73.

³See Samantha Henig, "Indian Tycoon Makes Gift to Start University," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 28, 2006, p. A34.

⁴Guo eventually does provide the year of India's independence from Britain, but he waits until seven pages after initially mentioning the event.