

Taiwan, or the civilized development

María Quintana ^{*1}

This article seeks to examine the cultural and societal values that explain the remarkable importance Taiwanese people give to self-fulfillment through education. It seeks to briefly analyze the socio-cultural reasons that contribute to a better understanding of why Taiwan places such great importance on education, arguing that Taiwan's phenomenal economic and technological success can be attributed, to a very large extent, to both the Taiwanese comprehensive educational system and to the underlying and omnipresent culture of Taiwanese society. The successful combination of these variables have allowed Taiwan to achieve a remarkably high literacy rate –98.04% in 2010– and to have very well educated citizens who, while eagerly grasping the benefits of cosmopolitanism, are also well equipped to face the challenges of globalization.

Led by the services sector and propelled by its electronics and machinery exports, Taiwan's economic indicators display its constant currency appreciation, its leadership in technology, its very mild inflation rate, its 4.29 % unemployment rate² and its almost inexistent budget deficit. Such economic structure –based on a scrupulous legal security– holds the services excellence (either public or private), justifies the political activity itself and guarantees free, periodic elections, the existence of different political parties and the endless number of labor, social and spiritual opportunities that the increasing freedom supports. For the past few decades, Taiwan has not only been characterized for having achieved economic development but also, and most notably, for having done so by successfully combining high-rate

¹ María Quintana is an Argentine journalist, former Professor and Director of the Department of Institutional Relations at the Catholic University of Salta, Argentina. She is currently the Editor of Latin American Issue at Mundo Gráfico Printing House.

She can be reached at: mariaquintana@mundograficosalta.com.ar

² Indicators published by the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C (Taiwan) <http://eng.dgbas.gov.tw/> (accessed August 19, 2011)

economic growth, a relatively equitable distribution of wealth and comparatively good quality of life for its citizens.

It was in this context that the international conference “The future of the Asia and Latin American Relationships” hosted by Chihlee Institute of Technology and perfectly organized by Dr. Antonio C. Hsiang took place in April this year. The Conference was an exhaustive analysis of the past and present experiences of the aforesaid countries: as it has been well pointed out by the Mexican Prof. Romer Cornejo during the key note speech he delivered at the Conference: “History is essential and central, not optional and incidental, to understand the present.”³

Besides, the participation in the seminary included the challenge of finding out how the legendary island of Formosa (from Latin through Portuguese, “*beautiful*”) had managed to respect and treasure its own Chinese culture among its wondrous economic success and the dangerous and barren uniformity of globalization.

The question was not trivial: the West has been and still is plenty of voices that claim the anguish provoked by the rising acculturation and dehumanization into the developed societies, denounced by writers, artists, thinkers and opportunist politicians... and, suddenly, Taiwan!

Cosmopolitanism blossomed in thousands of expressions. The Taipei Fine Arts Museum was displaying what few museums in the world can exhibit today: thirty-three of Claude Monet’s greatest paintings –almost all of them belonging to his last stage, those in which the French artist attempted to catch the unbounded variations of light, as slippery and changing as reality itself – something unlikely to be seen even in Europe. Simultaneously, the Kaohsiung Fine Arts Museum was presenting nine of the best Modigliani’s oil paintings and a large number of his sketches and drawings: his slanting eyes portraits seemed very happy for being been looked at by slanting eyes people. The imposing National Palace Museum was showing Marc Chagall’s one hundred and eighteen works that still amaze everyone by the naïve loving theme of his paintings, having lived –as he did– in between the vicissitudes of the Russian Revolution and two world wars.

In short, it was a close approach to multiculturalism at its best being offered the opportunity to see some of the most representative works of Western art next to the what it is considered to be the largest and most amazing Imperial Chinese Art Collection in the world –with its prodigious jadeite cabbage and its touching semi-translucent leaves; the rounded figures of the Han Dynasty epoch and the marvelous pillow in the shape of a recumbent child, maybe used by successive Sons

³ Romer Cornejo, “*Asia and Latin America in the International Community: Reality and Perspectives*,” keynote speech delivered at the “The future of the Asia and Latin American Relationships” International Conference organized by the Center for Latin American Trade and Economy Studies (CEECAL) at Chihlee Institute of Technology (CIT)–New Taipei City, April 13th, 2011.

of Heaven. Everything seemed to exalt the wise words of the American abstract expressionist painter Robert Motherwell which were highlighted on the walls of a public library: “Art is much less important than life, but what a poor life without it.”⁴

Taipei offers everything that money can buy. The most famous fashion designers display their creations in luxurious premises. The supermarkets offer the products and brands wished by any Western traveler as well as exotic Asian products, as exclusive as expensive. The five stars hotels rival one another in comfort and quality, offering the most refined and exquisite French cuisine, cooked by a French chef –such as the case of The Landis– or the equally refined and exquisite Cantonese food (as in the Sogo), without putting aside neither the American fast food restaurants or the Italian or Indian ones, nor the curiosities and innovations offered by the Taiwanese night markets or the delicious Chinese cuisine that, even in the food, combine the flavor, smell and textures that reflect the complementariness of Ying and Yang. The high-speed train gives the same excellent service than the Taipei Metro, considered the latter the most punctual all over the world –and, it should be added, also the cleanest. Until recently the world’s highest building, Taipei’s 101 Tower –an engineering prodigy calculated to sway in the wind– rises majestically above the city. In the words of the Roman lyric poet Horace, it does so “*simplex munditiis*” (“with the elegance of simplicity”):⁵ discreetly, without futile ostentation, usually veiled by the everlasting mist that can be considered the best symbol of the spiritual reserve that characterizes the Chinese people.

Their courtesy, politeness and discretion are not a vain ritual but rather a way of life that translates itself into small gestures that speak of spiritual greatness. Being in Taiwan can be said to reflect the notion of “culture” – generally understood as referring to the characteristic way of life of a certain human community or specific group of people and, in particular, to their beliefs, customs and material traits, manifested at a particular time– as the kind of “social property” referred to by G. Samuel.⁶ In order to illustrate this point, it should be mentioned that, in the crowded

⁴ A brief review of Motherwell’s career can be found at the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) website. See

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/robert-motherwell/about-robert-motherwell/665/> (accessed August 22, 2011).

⁵ Quintus Horatius Flaccus, “*Carmina – Odas*”, edición bilingüe (Madrid: Imprenta de Don Alejandro Gómez Fuentenebro, 1847): Oda 1.5.

See also the “Perseus Project–The Classics Archive” at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) www.classics.mit.edu/Horace/hor.carm.html (accessed August 20, 2011)

Also, the Perseus Digital Library at Tufts University (TU):

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0024%3Abook%3D1%3Apoem%3D5> (accessed August 22, 2011)

⁶ According to Geoffrey Samuel, the term “culture” could be identified with “society.” See G. Samuel, *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 29.

Taipei Main Station, a blind person is accompanied by a guard of the train to the carriage and another guard will wait for him in the respective station. A young man misses his train in order to pick up a wallet someone has just lost and return it to his owner. The customs officer calls to Argentina and solves the problem caused by a lost form, while offering some tea to the traveler. Everyone gives a present to the foreigner because to meet a person is cause for celebration. In the same temple, Buddhists and Taoists pray all together and Christians and Muslims are welcome to do the same, because, for the Chinese mindset, religion is not a dividing dogma but a spiritual dimension joining mankind. It does no matter the name given to the supreme, almighty Being; what matters is the divine “*halitus*” that the Chinese admit in every living being.

Such a dimension is respected even after death. For this reason, they venerate the dead and, by doing so, they honour Nature as well as the endless life chain, chain that everyone is obliged to protect and maintain.

The ancient Chinese features outlive the centuries keeping their cultural heritage in step with the amazing, faster and faster rhythm of development and science. They manage to do so by being perfectly aware of the importance of Education. Taiwan has nearly one hundred and sixty universities, colleges and institutes of high education. The main goal of Taiwanese educational policy is to bring education benefits within everybody’s reach. The success of such policies is reflected in the remarkable 98.04 % literacy rate that Taiwan reached in 2010.⁷ Almost all professors in Taiwanese universities and other educational institutions have doctoral degrees and their level is considered to be superior to other Asian colleagues. For instance, the aforementioned literacy rate places Taiwan above the ultra-competitive Hong Kong and Singapore, and below only to Japan and South Korea –which rates are 99%. According to the government, there will be over 1 million number of master’s and Ph.D. holders in Taiwan by the end of 2011.⁸ In addition to that, it should be mentioned that Taiwanese education also underlines the value of the international student exchanges, the study of foreign languages, scientific research and academic excellence.

This educational concern provides measurable results, not just economic but also spiritual ones. For instance, some students visiting the Monet’s exposition were asked how familiar they were with the French painter whose masterpieces they were contemplating. Almost all of them knew about Monet more than the average Latin American student, with some of them even being capable of giving a detailed account

⁷ “Taiwan’s literacy rate hits record high” – *Taiwan Heute* – February 2nd, 2011.

<http://taiwanheute.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xitem=152196&ctnode=321&mp=22>

⁸ Ibid.

of Monet's contribution to Fine Arts in particular and Arts in general. During one of the several visits to the libraries –where readers have direct access to the books– hundreds of students were studying and consulting books, even in Sundays.

And one cannot help remembering something that some Latin American government and people seem to have forgotten: the value of Education and what can educated people achieve. Because, as the British historian A. Toynbee once said, “a civilization is a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor”. And he added: “a civilization is the result of the responses that a people give to the social or natural challenges it confronts, and its success leads it on the further challenges.” Thus, the comparison is inevitable... after all, and forcing a little the sense of the words, it is quite probable that Confucius would have been in full agreement with what Plato said in his famous book *The Republic*: “Education is to give the body and the soul of Beauty and Perfection that they are capable, in order to discover and develop each individual's abilities and full moral excellence in order to better serve society”.

The initial question had been answered. Probably, it was not by chance the last contrasting image the trip offered: answering a call phone from a young lady (who apologized for not having had time to say goodbye at the airport because she had got “just” 96% -out of 100%– in an important school exam –“failure” that, according to her, could had quite negative implications for her career– in front of me crossed an old man. As his ancestors probably did centuries ago, he was moving forward loading a chicken cage; he was on the way to the cemetery, in order to venerate his dead, buried all of them in a way that their eyes look forever at the Mainland...

As Ying and Yang, the unbroken Chinese soul goes forward to the future with all its past, without faltering or diluting with globalization.

References

- Arnold J. Toynbee, “*A Study of History*” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947)
- Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C (Taiwan) <http://eng.dgbas.gov.tw/> (accessed August 29, 2011)
- Platón, “*La República*”. Versión de A. Gómez Robledo. *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Mexicana*. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2007.
- Quintus Horatius Flaccus, “*Carmina – Odae*”. Madrid: Imprenta de Don A. G. Fuentenebro, 1847.
- Romer Cornejo, “*Asia and Latin America in the International Community: Reality and Perspectives*,” keynote speech delivered at the “The future of the Asia and Latin American Relationships” International Conference organized by the Center for Latin American Trade and Economy Studies (CEECAL) at Chihlee Institute of Technology–New Taipei City, April 13th, 2011.
- Geoffrey Samuel, “*Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology and the Biological Interface*” Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) website www.pbs.org
- Taiwan Heute – “*Taiwan’s literacy rate hits record high*” (February 2nd, 2011) <http://taiwanheute.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xitem=152196&ctnode=321&mp=22>

