

## *The Real Secret of Asian Success*

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[Published as “Ancient Chinese Secret: The Real Reason Behind Asia’s Success” in *Dragonfire Magazine* January 2005. © 2005 Benjamin B. Olshin. This work may not be reproduced, republished, transmitted, or distributed, in print or electronically, in part or whole, without prior written permission of the author.]

Is it the cheap labor? Is it their apparent disregard for copyright and other rules of “fair play”? Is it their authoritarian way of life? Or is it just plain sneakiness? Why is it that countries such as Mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan are so successful? Looking at the media in the U.S., you’d think that the incredible economic success of these Asian countries comes from some kind of perverse combination of mind-numbing hard work and “inscrutable” deception.

But really it’s something much more subtle: it’s something the Chinese even have a word for: *shi ji* — best translated as “practicality” or “pragmatism”. Yet it’s a very special kind of practicality, and one that highlights, by contrast, the distinct *lack* of practicality in the U.S. It takes slightly different forms in China, Taiwan, Japan, and elsewhere in Asia, but the pragmatic approach to life there results not only in a very different way of living, but also to the remarkable success of Asians. This success, of course, is not just in Asia, but apparently follows wherever Asians go. In Brazil, the Japanese-Brazilians and Chinese-Brazilians, even in the third or fourth generation tend to be high achievers. In the U.S., Asians are often looked upon as model citizens.

What exactly is this “success”? It is the ability to move up in one generation from poor immigrant to well-paid professional, the ability to raise children who do well in school and are well-mannered and respectful, and the ability to preserve culture and values through the generations.

Of course, the “Asian success story” is in some ways a generalization. I have lived in Asia, and I saw dropouts in Taiwan, and ne’er-do-wells in Japan. Yes, they have spoiled kids, drugs, and prostitution. But it is all a question of degree, with crime rates there much lower than in the U.S. The standard of living in Japan is enviably high, and their life expectancy is beyond that of U.S. citizens for both men and women. You can walk the streets in any big city in Taiwan with no fear whatsoever.

“Asia” is a very broad term indeed, and I’m going to limit my discussion to particular examples from Japan and especially Taiwan, where I’ve spent the most time. Part of what I’m going to talk about has its roots in Confucianism, and that philosophy pervades life in places like Mainland China, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore. So, I believe that many of the points that I’m going to make can be applied to a number of countries in Asia. But I am getting ahead of myself...

The practical nature of life in Asia was all brought home to me recently when I returned from an impressive and eye-opening trip to Japan and Taiwan, seeing entrepreneurship and infrastructure development everywhere. I had lived in Japan before, working as a designer and builder for a small architecture firm in Tokyo. I had also lived in Taiwan, where I was an associate professor of fine arts and design at a university in Taipei. This trip was to see my in-laws (my wife is from Taiwan), friends, and former colleagues. The trip was kind of a “reality check” — were Japan and Taiwan as I remembered them? The answer was yes: modern, progressive societies, achieving economic success, with low crime rates, and strong social values.

The day after I flew back to the U.S., the headline news story there was yet another debate about “flag burning”. That’s when it hit me: it’s our obsession with this kind of absurd, abstract issue that’s allowing the Asians to get ahead — practical societies like theirs don’t waste time and energy on arguments about amendments concerning flag burning, gay marriage, and what I can only term *non-issues*. This article examines why we can’t seem to understand that, why Asian societies do, and why it means we’re headed for trouble.

Let’s start with politics. Politicians in every country can be obstacles to progress and economic growth, no doubt about it. But before I examine what’s going on in places like Taiwan, I want to pick up what I was saying about our wasted time in the U.S. In Asia, politicians focus on the economy and defense, and don’t fritter away time and taxpayer money endlessly debating social issues that simply don’t belong in the political arena — gay marriage, school prayer, abortion, and so on. That may be tough for people in the U.S. to accept, but it’s a fact: take a look in the newspaper or watch television, and you will see politicians of both parties, as well as lobbyists and spokespeople from every kind of group you can imagine, constantly weighing in on these issues. My wife finds it laughable; for her, it’s clear: moral issues are nobody’s business — it’s strictly a family matter. In Taiwan and Japan, do you think the subject of gay relationships even crosses anybody’s radar? Everybody in Taiwan and Japan knows there are gay citizens, and *nobody cares*. That’s because in Asia, the attitude is that it is *nobody’s business*, and that it has no *practical* importance in terms of the society as a whole. It is incredible that the existence of gay relationships has become such a divisive issue in the U.S., especially

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when there are so many enormous social and economic problems weighing down on the country.

The fact that politics in places like Taiwan and Japan don't revolve around these clearly non-political issues, allow those societies to focus on important issues like jobs, education, healthcare, and so on. Do politicians in Taiwan and Japan waste time and money? Of course. But the system also gets things done, and the populace is not polarized into separate camps (remember the "red" and "blue" states in the U.S.?), and rendered so divided as to make the development of truly important legislation well-nigh impossible. Furthermore, the populace in both Taiwan and Japan puts enormous pressure on their leaders to address such practical issues as education reform and economic growth. During this last visit to Taiwan, there was a debate as to increasing income tax rates: when I turned on the television one evening, every single channel aired an expert panel discussion on the topic.

The U.S. has also wasted an enormous amount of time, money, and — most importantly — good will in its militaristic foreign ventures. Japan learned the hard way that such an approach is not going to lead to success of any kind; empires fall. More particularly, the U.S. has adopted the belief that military action is a way to build alliances, and create democratic societies overseas that will be future partners. In fact, this military adventurism has alienated countries in the Middle East, and disenchanted allies such as Germany and France. Moreover, military "solutions" are always both very expensive and short-term.

A good contrast here is Mainland China. Yes, they are building up their armed forces, but their success is not going to come from military conquest, and the Chinese are smart enough to know it. While the U.S. has been building bases overseas, the Chinese have been building businesses. China's approach is mercantile, not military. On a visit to Ghana last year, I noticed Chinese factories in that country; there are others elsewhere in Africa, as well as in Latin America. The Chinese realize that investing and setting up businesses in other countries earns good will, and creates lasting bonds between China and the outside world. It is also a solid, long-term way for China to gain influence — yet another example of Asian practicality.

Well, I've been hammering at some of the short-sightedness and misguided moralism of the conservative administration in the U.S., but the liberals have done their part, too. While I do not believe in the existence of a comprehensive "liberal agenda", there have been a number of misguided attempts to legislate certain liberal values. While I agree with those values, attempting to force them onto society through legislation has only caused yet more divisiveness in the society, especially among the liberals themselves. In

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Asia, a more practical approach has allowed certain progressive policies to come to the fore without such ham-handed legislation.

A classic example is the role of women in Taiwan. I noticed when I lived there that women participated in every field there: medicine, business, politics, and the arts. I worked with women professionals at the university where I taught, and at a design firm in Taipei. I asked a woman colleague about that, since Chinese society seemed so traditional to me. She answered, only half-jokingly, “You see, in Taiwan we are very practical. We realized that if we allowed women to work, too, we could double our productivity!” Women entered the workplace, with equal pay, through a natural and gradual process in Taiwan, one that fit perfectly with the history of that society. Men and women had for years worked side-by-side in small businesses and farms; my own in-laws had run their small ceramics factory in a town outside Taipei together, sharing all the duties of management and sales. It was perfectly natural for most Chinese to work equally; only the rich could have wives who didn’t work, and most people in Taiwan, throughout its history, were far from rich. The idea of a “stay-at-home mom” was strictly American. There was no women’s movement in Taiwan, no “feminist theory”. It simply wasn’t needed.

Asian society has also seen success because of some basic values that aren’t well-understood in the U.S. For example, Americans talk a lot about family values, but most of the forces in American society work against the family. Parents put in absurdly long days at the office. Families have to move to the “right” neighborhoods to find a good school. The divorce rate is sky-high. Drugs and low-quality pop culture compete for children’s attention.

And now I am going to sound like an arch-conservative here, but one has to admit that there is a certain sloppiness here, a lack of cohesiveness in the family. In Asia, the family is paramount, more important than the neighborhood, the local community, or the government. Parents place enormous value on their children’s education, discipline, and appropriate behavior. In the city of Taipei, you’re not going to see kids with tattoos or baggy pants hanging down below their waist. The only people with tattoos, in fact, are members of the Taiwanese mafia. Yes, there are drugs and other social problems there, but to a degree that is not even comparable to what is happening in the U.S.

The Asian family holds the society together, in true Confucian fashion. Instead of the government trying to legislate morality, it happens from the ground up. Values are taught at home. Moreover, although there is a social welfare system (and I’ll talk about that shortly), the family also provides a safety net. Any visitor coming from a big city in the U.S. to Taipei or Tokyo quickly notices the almost complete absence of homeless people.

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In my own city of Philadelphia, I walk to work, and not a day goes by that I don't get asked for spare change on my way to the office. Why doesn't this happen in Taiwan or Japan? There are a number of reasons, but the most fundamental is the fact that no family is going to let a relative end up on the streets. The family is where you go if you are in trouble, if you need money or a place to stay. When my mother-in-law, a devout Buddhist, visited us in Philadelphia, she was shocked by the number of homeless people. (She was also shocked that somehow Americans had simply become used to this phenomenon.) Her question to us was: "Where are these people's families?"

The U.S. family is hurt, too, by the crazed work ethic that has gripped the society — long hours in the office, and long, stressful commutes. All that was supposed to mean an increase in U.S. productivity, but we still find ourselves buying Chinese products in our stores. The Taiwanese, despite their well-deserved reputation for hard work, make sure that they go home for a family dinner at the end of the day. I was very surprised to see that the Taiwanese have been able to build a very productive and modern society, but still leave work at 5pm every day. Family time is essential. When I was working in Taiwan, I stayed late at the office one day, and the secretary asked me, "Isn't anyone waiting for you at home for dinner?"

In Taiwan, you also see a very different attitude towards children. The way children are raised there is another part of their recipe for success. Despite the stereotype, Chinese children are not all math geniuses and concert musicians. But there is great emphasis placed on schoolwork and respect for education. At the same time, children are also indulged, but in a very particular way. In the U.S., many parents, feeling guilty at not spending enough time with their children, shower them with material possessions, junk food, and lavish birthday parties. In Taiwan, there is a careful mix of discipline and indulgence. Parents realize that their children have to undergo rigorous exams and schooling, and so during their "off-time" they have a chance to relax with their friends. But this still takes place in a low-key, modest way. And discipline, especially self-discipline, again in the Confucian style, is the main factor here. Now I am going to get on my conservative horse again, and point out another aspect of Asian socialization: the children clean their own schools. A Japanese exchange student at a U.S. school where I used to teach was shocked when he saw janitors cleaning up after class one day. "We do that ourselves in Japan; why don't the students here do that?" What was I supposed to tell him?

In Asia, I saw a *real* love of children, because children need most this kind of self-discipline. Moreover, we lie when we say in the U.S. that we love our children; in actuality, we treat them either as a fertile market for yet more consumer products, or potential threats to our safety (in the U.S., there are actually discussions about the death

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penalty for young offenders). We say we value education, yet we tell our children that if their schools need funding they should have bake sales. Do you think that Chinese schools have bake sales to raise money? Now I sound like a liberal again, but yes, it's true: in Asia, the government throws its full support behind education and youth development, with full taxpayer support.

The success of places like Taiwan is due, then, to an odd combination of almost libertarian policies and basic socialist policies, with a touch of Confucianism thrown in. Income taxes are low, leading to extensive entrepreneurship and true free-market economics. At the same time, there is also socialized medicine and universal free, high quality primary and secondary school education, funded through consumption taxes. Because of the existence of the social “safety net”, self-employed small-business owners — the foundation of much of the Asian economic success story — don't have to worry about healthcare and education for their families, and they can focus on their businesses, and take the risks necessary for success. In the U.S., the lack of this social safety net is a huge disincentive to the risk-taking needed for entrepreneurship.

We need to discard our misguided notions of what is behind the success and relative stability of societies like Taiwan and Japan. Asians are not automata, and they don't “cheat” to beat us in manufacturing and trade any more or less than we do. The fundamental secret is a practical approach to life, and a focus on dignity, self-discipline, and social cohesion.

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