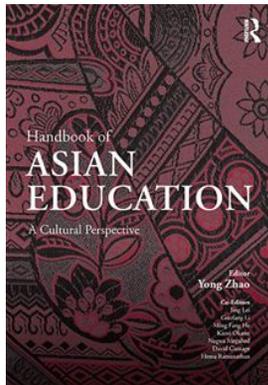


Professional Book Review

Zhao, Y. (Ed.). (2011). *Handbook of Asian Education: A Cultural Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 558pp., ISBN-978-0-8058-6444-1, \$ 106.24 (softcover)

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Armed with formidable knowledge of the Asian continent, primary editor Yong Zhao, along with the *Handbook of Asian Education's* contributors, provide readers a window into the diverse cultural and economic backgrounds that continue to exist and thrive throughout the region. The latest trends of global education and international educational policies have shaped the educational system in Asia. Recently, debates on Asian education and the Asian diaspora have taken several directions without a rigorous understanding of Asian culture and educational practices. In this context, the *Handbook* is a manual for the educators, policymakers, and students who are interested in exploring educational systems in Asian countries. The *Handbook* discusses and analyzes major Asian educational policies and practices including achievements in pre- and post-secondary education in Asia, with additional focus on the education of Asian immigrants in American schools.

To capture Asian diversity, the *Handbook* is organized into five major cultural perspectives: Sinic Education, Japanese Education, Islamic Education, Buddhist Education, and Hindu Education—a civilization-based cultural framework adopted from Samuel Huntington's (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations*. The *Handbook* was "written for outsiders—those who are not familiar with education within a particular region or nation in Asia" (p. ix) but is useful for anyone who is interested in issues of Asian education.

Part I focuses on the Sinic civilization and deals with the common culture of China and the six Sinic communities—China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, and Vietnam. With eight chapters in this section, the authors examine the purpose of Sinic education, shifts in educational reforms, the fusion and clash of different cultures, impacts of Confucianism, and obstacles and challenges to global education/Western education. The Sinic education encourages learners to "value their cultural and linguistic heritage, to respect and accept differences, to critically examine their position in societies, and to perceive themselves as agents of positive social and educational change" (p.5).

Authors in Part 1 examine the change in curriculum in post-1990s Sinic societies. For example, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore have reduced curricular load and introduced integrated activities in schools. China and Vietnam have adopted a new perspective to "think globally and act locally" (p.46) under the impact of Chinese Heritage Culture. The authors draw upon the similarities and differences in reform initiatives and outcomes in teacher education. As a

paradigm shift in teaching, the focus of the reform initiatives has been given to the learner-centered approach, although the teachers across the Sinic region have been facing "teacher stress, lack of respect from society, poor working conditions" (p.73). The purpose of learning has changed because of the historical changes such as feudalism, colonialism, capitalism, and globalization.

In Sinic countries, the *Handbook's* authors have identified social, cultural, political, and economical influences as major challenges in current educational trends and policies. Diverse and global education, student-access learning conditions, lifelong learning programs, distance and vocational education, and investment in learning technology are considered essential to meet the needs of current Sinic communities. The last chapter in Part 1 focuses on the education of immigrants from Sinic countries in the United States. Authors highlight the diverse achievement patterns, psychosocial adjustment risks, second-generation language loss, and social and cultural stereotypes of Asian immigrant students in the United States.

Part II explores the culture of Japan and her educational system. Authors discuss school and college management systems as they occurred in pre- and post-war Japan. They report that contemporary Japanese education is influenced by "neoliberal and neoconservative trends" (p.217). Because of value differences between young and old generations, there is controversy in assessment practice—high and low-stakes exams at schools and at colleges in Japan. Linguistic diversity exists in Japan because it has paid attention to foreign languages, especially English, and educators have argued that "the practice of English language teaching may continue to foster a citizen with the profile of an English-speaking samurai" (p. 227). The final chapter in Part II examines Japanese immigrant and transient students in the United States who have been encountering educational and socio-cultural problems due to their cross-cultural differences.

Part III, "The Islamic Civilization" covers the common educational features of Islamic communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Chapters in this section include discussion of culture and education in the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and Oman. The authors critically examine communities and conflicts in Omani educational systems, political and social changes as a process of global change, female education and participation in the workforce, and education of immigrant Muslim children in the United States. The final chapter deals with post 9/11 education in America and its effect on Muslim immigrants in US schools.

Part IV examines Buddhist culture, religion, and educational practices in Nepal, Thailand, Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. This section includes discussion of educational reforms, developments in higher education, and political changes in Buddhist communities. Thailand has reformed its educational practices by implementing the National Educational Act of 1999. Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bhutan have undergone similar reform. The establishment of the World Buddhist University in 1998 in Thailand resulted in the

reorganization, decentralization, and devolution of Buddhist educational practices and policies in Asia. Educational values and objectives of learning are based on "the influence of Buddhist values and cultures" (p. 446). The curriculum reforms are clearly structured from pre-school to university level. Key Learning-Area (KLA), an educational approach, focuses on learning English, Dzongkha, mathematics, and environmental science in schools. The last chapter considers issues related to immigrant children from Vietnam, Bhutan, Burma, and other Buddhist countries, focusing on differences in religious practice, language and adjustment, academic achievement, and peer and family relationships in the United States.

The last section of the *Handbook*, Part V, highlights issues related to the Hindu Civilization and discusses religious and cultural practices in education in the Indian sub-continent countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Modern Indian education felt the impact of British colonial administration. It is also shaped to a large extent by "European and Western perspectives on knowledge and learning" (p. 465) in India. The notions of *dharma* and *karma* and pursuit of ultimate knowledge are guided by the *Upanishad*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata* in Indian educational systems. Authors have critically examined modern Indian education through the lenses of psychology, sociology, economics, and the popular notion of education. The last chapter of Part V focuses on "experiences of second-generation Indian Americans" (p. 529) and factors affecting their identity development.

The *Handbook* successfully communicates and reveals the vast Asian culture and its educational practices at home and abroad. In each of its five sections, the authors have offered brilliant overviews of the history, philosophy, values, and recent educational reforms occurring throughout Asia. Each chapter represents a valuable contribution that includes both theory and the latest research on contemporary education, assessment policies, school governance, and local cultural expectations. The *Handbook's* breadth of scope is impressive, although it could benefit from additional chapters on Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu education. While including all five civilizations within one text allows for ease of comparison, reprinting in several volumes might be an alternative.

The Handbook of Asian Education is an essential contribution to literature in such fields as international, cross-cultural, and comparative education and is a valuable resource for researchers and educators alike.