

Smile Economy and Smile Education

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Taiwan is now at a great watershed. Over the past decade, much of its industrial infrastructure, including production lines, business executives and production satellite systems, have relocated to China. Its economic prosperity currently faces its worst crisis since last 50 years. The idea of lagging behind Korea has turned from a bad dream into reality. Recently, many people agree with Acer Corporation chairman Stan Shih's (施振榮) advocacy of the theory of “smile curve”, which is regarded as a new blueprint for economic development. Also, the “smile competition” and “smile economic forum” have become increasingly popular.

Human resources are at a premium in creating a strong knowledge economy. One of the factors that created Taiwan's “economic miracle” was its educational system, which fed abundant qualified people into industry at many levels. If the “smile economy” is the new blueprint, then it is necessary to establish a “smile education” as well.

Taiwan's economy used to be a model of efficient mass production, its products ranging from shoes to integrated circuits. The manufacturing industry requires consistency in product quality and standardization. Other than the convenience that parts can be exchanged without problem, the most important feature is to have staff with uniform ability. Therefore, in school, the curriculum, textbooks, discipline management, school entrance examinations and teacher training were all standardized across the country. For elementary and secondary education, the mission was to establish broad-based and standardized education, which was done by emphasizing a standard learning process with uniform course materials and a intensive preparation of standard examinations (junior high school students on

average take 2,000 tests in their three-year school life), and the rigid disciplines (such as requiring students to turn their faces in the same direction when taking afternoon naps). Even corporal punishment in school was an acceptable routine effort to carry out preparing for the standardization of human resources in order to provide Taiwan's huge manufacturing industry with a uniform and disciplinary professional manpower as well as to ensure the quality of mass manufacturing. Mass manufacturing closely associated with the educational system is one of the core know-hows in the past 50 years of economic prosperity in Taiwan. Some nations are in the process of trying to copy from Taiwan's experience.

But Taiwanese companies are moving abroad. Taiwan used to be the world's largest manufacturer of notebook computers, but now more than four-fifths are manufactured abroad. One of the factors causing this industrial relocation was the high labor cost: the amount of salary paid for a Taiwanese blue- or white-collar worker can be used to hire three from China or five from India with the same skills as Taiwanese workers. Therefore, the new generation in Taiwan must acquire the unique and irreplaceable skills which are different from their parents acquired.

What skills must we acquire? There are two ends of the “smile curve:” one is innovation and development and the other is brand marketing. In order to achieve the former, developers do not solve problems based on well-set questions, but instead, they must have the self-motivation to explore new knowledge. As to the latter, workers must have an in-depth understanding and a good sense of taste in order to have the ability to differentiate the market niche, and then create their own brands. In other words, we need a kind of new “smile” educational system to cultivate people to be innovative and creative instead of being just the “Me Too” followers.

Each year, Taiwan's institutes of higher education produce tens of thousands of graduate and doctoral students. This number is regarded by the public as excessive. In contrast, shortage of talent is a common complaint in Taiwan's industry. This gap stems from Taiwan's cramming educational

system. Therefore, most students question that after reaching the goal of passing a school entrance examination, “what is the point of studying any further?” Such a myth only aggravates the problem of talent shortage in industry.

The “smile economy” is an economic system based on human capital. If Taiwanese people do not take the initiative to develop the two ends of the “smile curve,” they will lack the drive to seek development of needed human capital. This is similar to the impetus of economic development in capitalism society, which comes from people's willingness to seek the monetary capital.

Other than acquiring knowledge by studying, its flip side is school discipline. In order to train people to be active and innovative, “smile education” includes adjusting the school discipline to make students more self-motivated from inside rather than just imposing discipline on them by force from outside. Taiwan's society used to have a highly uniform value system and a static social structure (such as one knows all his neighbors), so the society could impose effective restraints on individuals. The school's disciplinarian system collaboratively turned out a workforce ideal for mass production. Further, in the world market of the post-world war II, it was able to generate substantial profits. But, in the “smile economy” and a pluralistic society, this educational system focusing on standardization does not work, for it fails to cultivate the pluralistic talent at the two ends of the “smile curve.” Therefore, schools must create an atmosphere of possible differentiation by refraining from exercising the collective discipline and by loosening up the unreasonable collective anxiety, and cultivate other means to stimulate students' innovation and motivation.

All in all, “smile education” is the foundation of a “smile economy.”