

# **Outdoor Adventure Education in East Asia: Interpreting Data From Outward Bound Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

Outdoor adventure education (OAE) is philosophically rooted in Western values, yet it has been implemented in non-Western cultures, such as East Asia. This paper examines how OAE functions in East Asia, through data from Hong Kong. Although some cultural differences are clear, there is no compelling evidence that OAE cannot provide benefits in Eastern contexts. The data in our example support the premise that OAE can be a viable and valuable medium for the development of social and intrapersonal skills and may serve as a complementary approach to traditional schooling in East Asia. Implications from this paper include better aligning OAE with schools and teachers, understanding the merits of relationships developed through OAE, and appreciating that some traditional OAE practices should be questioned when exported to different cultures.

**KEYWORDS:** cross-cultural differences; Eastern values; experiential learning

Outdoor adventure education (OAE) is generally considered a Western concept and is philosophically rooted in Western values. It has been argued that many types of OAE programs contain imperialistic traits, including the need to map, conquer, and control; a socializing approach to particular forms of ruggedness; and a spirit of character building (Payne & Wattchow, 2008). Elsewhere, Brookes (2002) suggested that the importation of outdoor education theories into other cultures may carry particular problems and inadequacies that are not yet fully resolved. This history and philosophy begets a critical question: How should an outdoor adventure-based approach to education best function in Eastern cultures and contexts? As OAE programming in Asia has increased, so has the dialogue on how best to implement programs in Asia (cf. Beames & Brown, 2005). However, empirical study of cultural integration and fit remains rare.

To address these questions, we assembled an international team to consider data from Outward Bound Hong Kong (OBHK). Although Outward Bound programs span the globe, they remain philosophically underpinned by Western perspectives, a reality that holds true in Eastern cultures, including Hong Kong (e.g., Freeman, 2011; James, 1957). Despite this origination, there is a general belief that Outward Bound programs are applicable in other cultures, countries, and contexts, yet limited research supports this sentiment (e.g., Gassner & Russell, 2008; Takano, 2010).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to inform dialogue about the form and function of OAE in East Asia. To address this purpose, we provide an overview of relevant literature and theory, consider data from OBHK, and propose a path forward to better understanding the role, benefits, and practices of OAE in East Asia. We acknowledge that East Asia is not a homogenous entity, and much like in Europe, each country has its own culture, language, and identity. We posit that the East Asian countries of Greater China, Korea, and Japan share Confucian philosophical roots.

## Literature Review

### Outdoor Adventure Education and Outward Bound in East Asia

OAE formally came to Asia alongside colonialism. Early outdoor education organizations in East Asia included Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and Sea Cadets (e.g., Beames & Brown, 2005). Outward Bound migrated to Hong Kong in 1970 with a largely British staff.

Emanating from the United Kingdom and rapidly expanding through English-speaking countries and Commonwealth realms after World War II, Outward Bound has strong Western cultural origins. Even the motto “to serve, to strive and not to yield,” adapted from Tennyson’s (1994) poem “Ulysses,” revisits a much older story of leadership in the Western world and acts as a metaphor for its Western cultural origins.

Each Outward Bound “school,” as each was originally known, has its own board of directors responsible for managing safety and curriculum (Outward Bound International, n.d.). By 1965, Outward Bound was operating in 11 countries, including the non-Western countries of Kenya, Malaya, Nigeria, South Rhodesia, and Zambia (Outward Bound, 1965). Today, Outward Bound has expanded to over 30 countries, half of which are non-Western; 36% of Outward Bound participants emanate from Asia and Africa (Outward Bound International, 2016). Although the field of OAE in East Asia is diverse, separate Outward Bound schools exist in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China/Hong Kong, and programming differs among these schools.

OBHK may be described as a Western-influenced model, with approximately 50% of instructors being international, with expeditionary (journey-based) programming and an average course length of 5 days. Since the 1970s, OBHK has emerged as a leading OAE organization in East Asia. As such, we feel it serves as a useful exemplar of much OAE programming in the region.

Although scholars posit that OAE is a Western construct (Beames & Brown, 2005), and ask questions about its relevance in other cultures (Brookes, 2002; Purdie & Neill, 1999), research examining OAE in Asian contexts indicates positive gains and long-term participant benefits garnered through shared adventure and cultural bridging (Gassner & Russell, 2008; Norton & Hseih, 2011; Takano, 2010; Wang, Liu, & Kahlid, 2006). In Hong Kong specifically, OAE participation has helped individuals better understand the value of service learning (Ngai, 2006), promoted participants' self-efficacy and organizational commitment (Hui & Cheung, 2004), fostered spirituality (Cheung, 2011), increased self-efficacy regarding physical activity in cancer survivors (H. Li, Chung, Ho, Chiu, & Lopez, 2013), and improved the psychological well-being of primary school students (W. Li, Chung, & Ho, 2013).

## Confucian Educational Values in East Asia

Differences between Eastern and Western cultures in educational contexts are widely understood and typically involve juxtaposing Confucian values and traditional European educational models. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has schools that are largely structured in accord with British educational traditions (Tang & Bray, 2000), yet the societal context pulls heavily from Confucian doctrines. Many Confucian beliefs such as notions of collectivism, the importance of social status and prestige (i.e., face), and the duty to fulfill one's social expectations are apparent in Hong Kong's schooling traditions (Glenwright, 2010).

Like education in many countries, education in East Asia tends to wrestle with a dual mandate. While prizing academic achievement, schools are nonetheless tasked with developing character in their students (Biggs, 1998; Lee, 1996; J. Li, 2010). This has led to a system in Hong Kong that focuses on an amalgamation of academic examination performance alongside the development of intrapersonal skills such as authenticity, compassion, perseverance, and initiative taking (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005; J. Li, 2010). Confucian cultures recognize that social mobility is often realized through education (Lee, 1996), and the formal educational process enables individuals to acquire knowledge and skills, which they can ultimately use to establish economic independence, achieve social prominence, and become contributing members of society (J. Li, 2010).

Although students in Hong Kong perform well on international achievement measures (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2016), the education system is regularly criticized for being too focused on student examination (Biggs, 1998). Academic outcomes are commonly measured with exams, but other culturally valued outcomes such as initiative taking and perseverance are poorly captured through traditional academic testing. This begs the question of whether the formal schooling environment is the most appropriate place for Hong Kong students to learn and practice such skills.

Hong Kong classrooms, like those in other East Asian countries, tend to be teacher centered (Biggs, 1998; R. Chen, 2014). Consequently, teaching in Hong Kong is highly structured, employs lecture-style formats, and uses closely controlled student–teacher interactions (R. Chen, 2014; Leung, 2001). Previous research from the United States (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1997) and Hong Kong (J. Chen, 2005; H. Ma, Shek, Cheung, & Lam, 2000) found that positive student–teacher interactions facilitated students' engagement motivation, academic achievement, and positive psychological health, whereas negative interactions resulted in behavioral problems and adversely affected academic achievement. Likewise, positive connections with others help to foster engagement and increase effort to internalize the curriculum being taught and the practices being modeled (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Although the role of the social setting in Hong Kong classrooms may be valued and recognized as important, meeting social needs or building an equitable student–teacher relationship may be at odds with the culture's established hierarchical structure. Teachers are viewed as experts and entrusted with the responsibility of providing students with a solid knowledge base that will be

pertinent in future academic and professional endeavors (Hu, 2002), whereas students are enculturated to respect the wisdom possessed by teachers and willingly accept the knowledge being passed to them (Chan, 1999; Hu, 2002). The social pressure to live harmoniously and conform to the collective may preclude East Asian students from challenging the ideas of teachers and peers and engaging in bidirectional exchanges in classroom settings. Such processes are often viewed as essential to building equitable and reciprocal relationships.

## **Reconciling Outdoor Adventure With Formal Educational Values**

OAE and traditional Asian educational models are not entirely incongruent. At their core, they share common goals of educating students to perform well in a variety of settings. Although OAE does not target academic performance directly, it is thought to foster a variety of competencies that are valued in Eastern and Western cultures. Educational values such as resolve, diligence, enduring challenging circumstances, perseverance, and concentration (J. Li, 2010) are consistent with OAE. For example, Singapore's Ministry of Education has introduced socioemotional competencies into its goals for students (Ho, 2013), recognizing that interpersonal skills are increasingly critical in a globalized era.

Commonly understood outcomes of OAE such as leadership development, developing a sense of self, or increasing resilience may be interpreted differently across cultures. Although Chinese participants consistently prefer clear leaders who make decisions (Lo, Gidlow, & Cushman, 2014), Western participants may seek that style of leadership less frequently. Still, both cultures appreciate directed leadership; what varies is when or how frequently an authoritarian style should be employed. Likewise, the role of the self also differs across cultural contexts. As members of an individualistic culture, Westerners believe it is important to know themselves and have a strong self-concept. The self is important in Eastern cultures as well, but Westerners seek to develop the autonomous self, whereas Easterners are more inclined to develop the self for the benefit of the community (Shek & Yu, 2011). OAE is a space, for example, where Western participants may learn about their role within a community and how they might contribute to it (Purdie & Neill, 1999), whereas Eastern participants may develop their intrapersonal attributes such as self-esteem (Wang et al., 2006) and self-efficacy (Hui & Cheung, 2004). Resilience is another trait that is considered important in Eastern and Western contexts and one that is often thought to be taught in OAE. However, in Western cultures, resilience is often seen as something an individual develops for him- or herself, whereas in Singapore, for example, resilience is seen as something an individual develops for the benefit of the community (Martin & Ho, 2009).

In addition to culturally differentiated outcomes, the underlying processes of formal education and OAE are different. Although the importance of the social group and teacher-pupil relationship are understood in both contexts, these manifest differently across OAE and traditional schooling in Asia. OAE has often sought to utilize the small group and challenging environment as a way to teach students valued interpersonal skills. Collaborative work groups and opportunities for collaborative problem solving are hallmarks of OAE, but are less frequent in traditional schooling. The social system, including the students and instructors, is considered central to the OAE experience (e.g., Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014). Likewise, how students relate to their teachers or instructors is fundamentally different in OAE contexts and Asian schools.

Further, an educational model without clear answers contrasts with typical education in Hong Kong. The Western model of OAE encourages students to be vulnerable and risk putting forth wrong answers, reversing the so-called banking system of education (Freire, 1993) wherein the teacher has the knowledge that the student is meant to receive through lectures. Instead, students in OAE are presented with a problem that requires them to devise and implement possible solutions. There often is no right answer. Culturally speaking, East Asian participants may be less comfortable with the uncertainty that OAE embraces as a tool (Lo et al., 2014).

In summary, OAE and formal education in East Asia are not inherently at odds, but the two are also distinct and afford participants different opportunities. OAE's focus on intra- and interpersonal growth may supplement the academic intensity of formal schooling. Likewise, processes centralized on relationships and ill-defined problems are typical in OAE and may complement the more formal hierarchy and testing approaches common in schools. Despite these possibilities, some competencies commonly attributed to OAE programs, although generally valued, are interpreted differently in Eastern and Western cultures. Likewise, some educational processes prioritized in OAE, such as equitable and meaningful relationships among students and between students and teachers, are different from schooling processes in East Asia and may be uncomfortable for students. To further explore these themes and topics, we present data from OBHK.

## Method

As an example for further discussion, we proffer an empirical examination of OBHK's Performance Evaluation Questionnaire data. For this paper, we focused on the 2,292 OBHK participants who completed courses designed to serve secondary and university students between July 2015 and August 2016. OBHK students come from diverse backgrounds, and this sample included a wide range of socioeconomic statuses, from underprivileged students who tended to be ethnic Chinese to international school students from more affluent families. These courses are between 2 and 18 days in length and involve hiking, sea kayaking, and sailing. They are all journey based and thus include camping in relatively remote settings. The sample was 56% male and 44% female and ranged in age from ~12 to 52 ( $M = 17.5$ ,  $SD = 4.3$ ).

These courses targeted three primary character outcomes valued in Hong Kong: initiative taking (IT), self-confidence in overcoming hardships (SCH), and kindness to others (KTO). Each was measured by a self-report questionnaire before (pretest) and after (posttest) the course. We also collected self-report data on sense of belonging (SB) while on course and a measure of the teacher-student relationship (TSR), whereby the OBHK course instructors were the referent teachers postcourse.<sup>1</sup> All measures have been defined and validated over several years of work (see Sibthorp, 2015) and demonstrate reasonable validity and excellent internal consistency. In addition to questionnaire data, we analyzed basic descriptive data such as participant gender, age, and language of the course.<sup>2</sup>

For our analysis, we were mainly interested in exploring two relationships. First, we were interested in differences in outcomes by the course language. We hypothesized that language preference of participants might serve as a proxy for more Eastern (Cantonese) or Western (English) cultural views. Second, we were interested in how SB and TSR were related to outcomes. Although these variables are known to be important in educational contexts regardless of culture (Chen, 2005; Goodenow, 1993; H. Ma et al., 2000; Wentzel, 1997), they are more heavily emphasized in OAE than in traditional East Asian schooling. To inform these questions, we ran three hierarchical regression models in which we predicted posttest outcome scores, controlling for pretest scores, age, and gender and then determining the amount of remaining variance explained by language, SB, and TSR. Model 1 predicts posttest score using only pretest score. Model 2 expands this model to control for age and gender and adds language. Model 3 expands the second model by adding SB and TSR. Additional variance in the posttest scores explained by a subsequent model can be attributed to the variables added.

<sup>1</sup>The SB and TSR scales were adapted from Kunter et al., 2003.

<sup>2</sup>The official languages in Hong Kong are both Cantonese and English. While the lingua franca in Hong Kong is Cantonese, English is still widely spoken due to the legacy of the British colonial era, which ended in 1997 with the return of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China.

## Results

Each of the hierarchical regressions was significant, and the predictors explained between 53% and 60% of the variability in posttest scores (Table 1). Although there were small differences by outcome and predictor, our sample size was relatively large, and thus, statistical significance alone was not a good indicator of interpretability. After we controlled for pretest scores, the most meaningful predictors were SB and TSR, showing up in all three of the models and explaining between 23% and 27% of the variance when added to the models. Course language did not explain a meaningful amount of the variability in outcomes (Table 2). In addition to testing our research hypotheses, we examined pre–post course differences. Improvements for all three outcomes from pre- to posttest were significant ( $p < .001$ ) and relatively large based on Cohen's  $d$  (IT = .63, SCH = .77, KTO = .78).

**Table 1**  
*Hierarchical Regression Model Summaries*

Outcome	Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change	p
IT	1	.550	.302	.302	.302	815.228	< .001
IT	2	.553	.306	.304	.003	2.931	.032
IT	3	.733	.537	.536	.231	468.842	< .001
SCH	1	.508	.258	.257	.258	641.435	< .001
SCH	2	.512	.262	.261	.005	3.788	.010
SCH	3	.730	.533	.531	.271	534.049	< .001
KTO	1	.583	.339	.339	.339	961.032	< .001
KTO	2	.586	.344	.342	.005	4.312	.005
KTO	3	.772	.596	.594	.252	580.768	< .001

These results indicate that OAE in Hong Kong may be an effective medium for fostering participant growth. Further, SB and TSR seem to be important aspects of OBHK courses. Course language is a poor proxy for cultural differences, but these data provided no evidence that courses run in Cantonese differed from those run in English.

## Discussion

Understood through the combination of literature and our findings, OAE can offer benefits to Asian students, but aspects of practice warrant further study and consideration. The literature and extant research on the interface between OAE and Eastern educational values points not only to some areas of compatibility but also to some contrasting goals and approaches. Data from our example indicated that OAE can be beneficial and illustrate the importance of peer and social relationships in the OAE context, yet failed to show differences by course language, our proxy for cultural differences among participants.

Although the research evidence remains limited, OAE may function similarly in Asia as in other contexts, affording participants any number of learning outcomes crossing academic and nonacademic domains. The importance of OAE in intra- and interpersonal development that extends beyond traditional academic tests is well understood (e.g., Rickinson et al., 2004), and this strength may offer an important complement to the traditional hierarchical educational structures in many Asian countries.

**Table 2**  
*Summary of Outcome Predictors*

Model	IT			SCH			KTO					
	B	Beta	t	p	B	Beta	t	p	B	Beta	t	p
<b>Model 1</b>												
Pretest	0.51	0.51	25.327	<.001	0.54	0.55	28.552	<.001	0.56	0.58	31.001	<.001
<b>Model 2</b>												
Pretest	0.50	0.50	24.678	<.001	0.54	0.55	28.476	<.001	0.56	0.58	30.773	<.001
Age	0.01	0.07	3.125	0.002	-0.01	-0.06	-2.899	0.004	0.01	0.07	3.457	0.001
Gender	-0.03	-0.01	-0.693	0.488	-0.01	-0.01	-0.243	0.808	-0.02	-0.01	-0.446	0.656
Language	-0.08	-0.03	-1.553	0.12	0.01	0.00	0.103	0.918	-0.07	-0.03	-1.469	0.142
<b>Model 3</b>												
Pretest	0.31	0.31	17.862	<.001	0.35	0.36	21.079	<.001	0.35	0.36	22.452	<.001
Age	0.01	0.05	3.073	0.002	-0.02	-0.10	-5.825	<.001	0.01	0.04	2.736	0.006
Gender	0.01	0.00	0.24	0.811	-0.01	-0.01	-0.444	0.657	0.03	0.02	1.207	0.228
Language	-0.05	-0.02	-1.145	0.252	0.05	0.02	1.268	0.205	-0.04	-0.02	-1.069	0.285
TSR	0.23	0.25	11.847	<.001	0.21	0.23	11.521	<.001	0.22	0.24	12.61	<.001
SB	0.31	0.36	16.93	<.001	0.28	0.34	16.126	<.001	0.30	0.36	18.5	<.001

Note. IT = initiative taking; SCH = self-confidence in overcoming hardships; KTO = kindness to others; TSR = teacher-student relationship; SB = sense of belonging.



Our data and the extant literature raise several possible caveats. First, it is unclear how students who experience more socially robust learning and more equitable student–teacher roles apply these experiences after their OAE course. Do they revert to their previous behavior patterns or work proactively within the traditional educational system to further seek a similar learning context? Does the contrast in approaches leave them appreciative or dissatisfied?

### **Implications for Practice**

Although this paper likely proffers more questions than answers, we do have a few suggestions for OAE practitioners in Asia. As in other cultural contexts and education systems, relationships matter in Asia. Students who are helped to feel that they are meaningful and appreciated group members—that they belong—report greater learning. Likewise, students who feel more access and connection to their instructors report learning more. This finding is consistent with the broader OAE (e.g., Sibthorp & Jostad, 2014), educational (e.g., Deci et al., 1991; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1997), and youth development (e.g., C. Ma & Shek, 2017; H. Ma et al., 2000) literatures. Adept OAE instructors should continue to leverage these programmatic aspects to make OAE most effective. This means sometimes deprioritizing technical skill development to attend to the social fabric of the student group and to build genuine rapport with students. Establishing group ground rules and norms helps students to adjust to group life. On shorter courses, this process needs to be intentional, as relationships that might organically blossom over time need to be actively cultivated via instructor actions.

Given OAE's inherent strength of fostering outcomes not directly targeted and measured by schools, such as initiative or perseverance, OAE should work to position itself as complementary to classroom education. This could be said in many contexts, but the less flexible and more hierarchical schooling model employed in many East Asian countries, coupled with a focus on test scores, may position OAE programs as excellent educational partners. Along with this process, teacher involvement could be encouraged in an effort to streamline the application of learning from OAE to the classroom.

Attention should be given to staff pairings and cultural understanding between instructors and students. At OBHK, for example, only about half of the instructors originate from Hong Kong. The remainder join the instructional team from across the globe and bring their own cultural views to the OAE experience. Although many come to understand Confucian cultural values over time, pairing staff in ways to maximize cultural literacy accompanied by training can accelerate their effectiveness in working within different cultural contexts.

### **Implications for Research**

OAE scholars and programmers know little of the long-term outcomes of participating in OAE programs in East Asia, and this area is certainly ripe for more research. However, in addition to traditional outcomes, the contrasting educational approaches could be further examined. How does working to solve ill-structured problems in a collaborative environment on an OAE course affect how students function when faced with problems or tests at school? How does experiencing more equitable student and teacher roles affect views of these roles in traditional schooling? How do certain mechanisms seen as inherent parts of the OAE process, such as intra-group conflict (cf. Tuckman, 1965), function in a culture that prioritizes harmony?

They also know little of how teachers and schools view OAE. Is it viewed as valuable? Compatible? Diversionary? If learning in OAE is truly intended to complement school-based learning, then teachers would need to be more involved. Would teachers support such efforts, or do teachers prefer the more traditional systems? Although some teachers accompany some groups on OAE courses, others likely fear losing “face” while trying novel and unfamiliar tasks. Most teachers prefer not to look incompetent in front of their students, and given Confucian



values, involving teachers in the actual student journeys may be additionally challenging in Asia and might be best approached as preparation for and application of learning that can occur before and after the OAE experience.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of how OAE functions across cultures, researchers need to modify or develop more sophisticated measures that assess cultural differences. The diversity in Asian cultures suggests that Pan-Asian comparisons, for example, comparing OBHK outcomes to Outward Bound Malaysia outcomes, should be encouraged. Also, it may be of interest to investigate cross-cultural outcomes of OAE participation, for example, comparing groups across continents or examining experiences of participants from Asia on OAE courses in Western locales, such as the United States or United Kingdom, and vice versa.

## Limitations

Although not intended to be a robust empirical study, our example data are rife with limitations. OBHK is a distinct program, and the measures employed in our analysis were self-reports designed for program accountability and improvement. In addition, Asia is culturally and ethnically diverse, and Hong Kong is not representative of Asia as a whole. It is not our intent to generalize from our data to other Outward Bound programs in Asia or other OAE programs in Hong Kong. Our analyses are correlational in nature and cannot address causality.

The variable most directly intended to tap cultural differences and language was inadequate. Previous studies have shown that language influences people's thought processes (Whorf, 1956) and that cognition is fundamentally cultural (Bender & Beller, 2013). When this study was designed, we speculated that participants speaking different languages, in this instance Cantonese or English, would come to OAE with different cultural frameworks, which ultimately might influence the study's outcomes. The data indicated that language was not a good predictor of course outcomes, and this may have occurred because language is not a suitable proxy for culture. That is, in a bilingual culture, OBHK students may operate comfortably in Cantonese and English. Therefore, determining cultural differences and, more important, understanding how those cultural differences affect OAE participation outcomes may not have been possible using the language variable. Even if adequate measures of cultural difference are available, culture remains a complex concept and is oversimplified through solely quantitative approaches. Qualitative or mixed-methods approaches would add richness that our data lack.

## Conclusion

If our goal was to offer definitive answers, we have fallen short. However, unpacking cultural difference, practices, and philosophical contrasts is inherently messy, and we have more modest aspirations: to invigorate discussion and dialogue on how OAE should function in East Asia and Eastern cultural contexts. If OAE had not been brought to Hong Kong during colonization, it would be interesting to speculate what components and processes would be utilized in an organically grown OAE program. Locally, dragon boating is an annual traditional competitive gathering, daily tai chi is commonly practiced by retirees in public spaces, and Buddhist monasteries dot the landscape. How might indigenous wisdom, ritual, and practice have shaped OAE in the absence of colonialism?

OAE, with its Western roots, remains built upon experiential pedagogical principles; it therefore tends to be student and group centered. This essential characteristic may make the practices somewhat self-correcting to group and cultural differences, as the instructors may mold the course to fit the needs of the group. If students want to define an outcome personally or prioritize different learning goals, many OAE instructors are flexible and will work to adapt courses to meet these needs. Perhaps this is one possible explanation for the successful exportation of OAE across the globe. This inherent self-correcting philosophy creates a flexible educational model that can fluidly adapt across cultures and contexts.

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