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Learning to Keep Learning

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I recently attended an Asia Society education seminar in Beijing, during which we heard Chinese educators talk about their “new national strategy.” It’s to make China an “innovation country” — with enough indigenous output to advance China “into the rank of innovation-oriented countries by 2020,” as Shang Yong, China’s vice minister of science and technology, put it.

I listened to this with mixed emotions. Part of me said: “Gosh, wouldn’t it be nice to have a government that was so focused on innovation — instead of one that is basically anti-science.” My other emotion was skepticism. Oh, you know the line: Great Britain dominated the 19th century, America dominated the 20th and now China is going to dominate the 21st. It’s game over.

Sorry, but I am not ready to cede the 21st century to China yet.

No question, China has been able to command an impressive effort to end illiteracy, greatly increasing its number of high school grads and new universities. But I still believe it is very hard to produce a culture of innovation in a country that censors Google — which for me is a proxy for curtailing people’s ability to imagine and try anything they want. You can command K-12 education. But you can’t command innovation. Rigor and competence, without freedom, will take China only so far. China will have to find a way to loosen up, without losing control, if it wants to be a truly innovative nation.

But while China can’t thrive without changing a lot more, neither can we. Ask yourself this: If the Iraq war had not dominated our politics, what would our last election have been about? It would have been about this question: Why should any employer anywhere in the world pay Americans to do highly skilled work — if other people, just as well educated, are available in less developed countries for half our wages?

If we can’t answer this question, in an age when more and more routine work can be digitized, automated or offshored, including white-collar work, “it is hard to see how, over time, we are going to be able to maintain our standard of living,” says Marc Tucker, who heads the National Center on Education and the Economy.

There is only one right answer to that question: In a globally integrated economy, our workers will get paid a premium only if they or their firms offer a uniquely innovative product or service, which demands a skilled and creative labor force to conceive, design, market and manufacture — and a labor force that is constantly able to keep learning. We can’t go on lagging other major economies in every math/science/reading test and every ranking of Internet penetration and think that we’re going to field a work force able to command premium wages. Freedom, without rigor and competence, will take us only so far.

Tomorrow, Mr. Tucker’s organization is coming out with a report titled “Tough Choices or Tough Times,” which proposes a radical overhaul of the U.S. education system, with one goal in mind: producing more workers — from the U.P.S. driver to the software engineer — who can think creatively.

“One thing we know about creativity is that it typically occurs when people who have mastered two or more quite different fields use the framework in one to think afresh about the other,” said Mr. Tucker. Thus, his report focuses on “how to make that kind of thinking integral to every level of education.”

That means, he adds, revamping an education system designed in the 1900s for people to do “routine work,” and refocusing it on producing people who can imagine things that have never been available before, who can create ingenious marketing and sales campaigns, write books, build furniture, make movies and design software “that will capture people’s imaginations and become indispensable for millions.”

That can’t be done without higher levels of reading, writing, speaking, math, science, literature and the arts. We have no choice, argues Mr. Tucker, because we have entered an era in which “comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the key to the good life” and in which the constant ability to learn how to learn will be the only security you have.

Economics is not like war. It can be win-win. We, China, India and Europe can all flourish. But the ones who flourish most will be those who develop the best broad-based education system, to have the most people doing and designing the most things we can’t even imagine today. China still has to make some very big changes to get there — but so do we.