Learning to overturn the culture of conformity

AT FUJITSU High School in Nagano Prefecture, Japan, a debating team was so traumatised by the verbal brickbats exchanged during a heated debate that they wept when told that they had won.

"They cried when they won. They won and they said "I don't want to continue any more, I want to quit debating," recounts Ms Chin Kah Men, 18, a Malaysian exchange student, who spent a school year there and who helped to train the team.

To many, this anecdote sums up the pressure on Asians to embrace group-think, avoid conflict and conform to societal norms. Professor William Hamborg-er, director of the English language program at International Christian University (ICU), a liberal arts college in Tokyo, says that across East Asia, people feel great pressure to toe the line. This is reflected in a Japanese saying: "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down".

This tendency to seek safety in numbers runs counter to critical thinking, which demands daring to differ from the group and sticking out one's neck. Ms Chrystal Butler, a lecturer at Tokyo's ICU who specialises in linguistics, says Japanese culture does not encourage critical discussion as choosing a different viewpoint carries the risk of hurting another person's feelings.

One reason lies in Japan's history as an island nation with little outside contact from the 17th to 19th centuries. "It was harmony - became a key survival strategy. "If your survival depends on your group, you don't want to step on anyone's toes. No disagreements," Ms Butler says.

The rapid development of the four Asian Tigers - South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan - since the 1960s has been partly attributed to strong conformity-building "Asian values", which allowed these societies to grow decisively to victory in the same direction.

Ancient Chinese subscribed to a sense of "collective agency", said Richard Nisbett, a University of Michigan professor in his book The Geography of Thought. Any form of confrontation, such as debate, was discouraged. The political systems in some East Asian countries have also discouraged individuals from voicing their opinions.

After Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China in 1949, he set up a communist system that promoted collective thinking. Every citizen had to own, read and carry at all times The Little Red Book, a collection of Mao quotations. The 10-year Cultural Revolution, starting in 1966, was meant to purge China of "bourgeois influence. Millions, deemed to have deviated from communist ideals, faced manual labour or execution.

When Chinese student Li Kailin was in high school, she was afraid of saying the wrong things in class, for fear of looking foolish. Absorbing whatever the teacher said, "like a sponge" was easier than being placed in the spotlight.

Ms Li, now a postgraduate English student at ThSJttJ's Nankai University, says: "When we were young, if a hero appeared in the text, our teachers always told us: 'This is a hero, you should respect the hero and learn from him.'

But things have changed: "Nowadays the teachers always ask: 'Do you think he is a hero?' And the kids really have different opinions. They have their own ideas on what heroes or idols are."

According to Ms Julie Lindsay, an information technology and e-learning coordinator at Beijing International School, which encourages students to debate, teachers should "facilitate and encourage, but not dictate outcomes" in class.

"All students are capable of critical thinking if given a classroom or learning environment that provides freedom and a non-restrained approach," she says.

However, freedom must be balanced by responsibility - not just letting loose.

At the Singapore Management University (SMU), all first-year students have to participate in an analytical skills course, which aims to train them to evaluate arguments effectively and make their own.

Practice Associate Professor Tan Yoo Guan, associate dean of the School of Social Sciences, says teachers should first drill into students' basic concepts such as the language of reasoning. "You can't let them discuss right away, otherwise these bad habits come out - people are just voicing their opinions at a very shallow level."

Mr Daniel Leong, 24, a recent finance and accounting graduate, found there was a big jump from the culture of not speaking up in junior college, to SMU, where class participation counts for a significant proportion of the final grade.

"It's a very long learning process. A lot of the time people mistake class participation as competition for air-time. But the point is not whether you get a chance to speak, as participation is really about learning to listen before you speak." According to Ms Minako Tanabe, a 20-year-old student at ICU, having to speak in class has helped her to develop confidence in communicating with her peers and lecturers.

"If I had gone to a typical university in Japan, I would probably not have gotten opportunities to voice my opinions as much. But in my classes at the ICU, I am required to think and ask questions. I think it's beneficial for me."