

## THE CRIBBING GAME

One day my class of 20 university students turned in 20 identical assignments. Anticipating 20 red faces the following week as I prepared to hand them back unmarked, I was floored totally by a sea of uncomprehending stares wilting beneath my rage. Some months later, during the final examinations, they were subjected to yet another fit of irrational pique. After disgorging crib sheets from every imaginable hiding place, I threw them in disgust on the invigilator's table and was met with yet another blank face. She had seen them, she explained calmly, but had interpreted them differently. This was not cheating, she reasoned, but moral support. "Your culture believes injustice," she said. "We believe in helping each other." And there she rested her case. She accused me of not caring for my students and I sat, thoughtful and chastened.

Individual responsibility, fairness and playing by the rules permeate my Western conscience, but it seems that another law is at work here. I have been forced to ask whether the communal approach to life has as much merit as my own individualistic morality, if not more. I long ago gave up testing students according to their individual knowledge, primarily because of the seriously deleterious effect on my own, and consequently their mental health. Attempts to encourage classroom competition have always degenerated rapidly into flurries of eager advice passed unashamedly between members of opposing teams. Weaker students are always a target of more assistance. Woe betide the class know-all who refuses to pass on vital information, even to the "enemy".

Co-operation and communality are the building blocks of Central Asian society. Family loyalties are prized above all others, earnings are pooled and elders consulted over every major decision. Young marrieds move into rooms or houses built for them, full of furniture bought for them, and wear clothes chosen for them. When a family decides it is time for their new bride to return to work, grandparents faithfully mind the children. Those children will, when their time comes, return all the favours owed, and complete the cycle of obligation around which this society revolves. Students recoil at my descriptions of our aggressive, acquisitive world, where family and friends take second place to career and individual aspirations, and think me heartless and cruel for leaving my own flesh and blood to their measly pensions and the whims of state in a faraway land. The 20 students were genuinely upset at my outburst that day. They had gathered for hours around the class swot, painstakingly copying her answers and memorising every sentence. As far as they

were concerned they had done the right thing. No one student outshone another and no one felt left out.

I would be more heartless and cruel than they had imagined if I quarrelled with the means, but as their teacher I am also responsible for the end. Whichever way you look at it, their method might have taught them how to live, but has it taught them anything else? Here it seems is where East meets West.

Source: *Guardian Weekly*