In Favor of Japanese-ness:
Future Directions for Educational Research

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This piece argues that the aversion of academic researchers to utilizing 'Japanese-ness' has become a major obstacle, restricting the potential contribution of Japan's educational research community to global debates. It argues that until research on Japan recognizes, embraces, and elaborates Japanese-ness it will lack originality and vitality. As consequence, it will not only continue to be irrelevant globally but also lose ground in the domestic political context. Yet, to argue in favor of Japanese-ness is not to claim something essential about the Japanese nor to understand the Japanese through Western categories, but precisely to perform the double task of rejecting both of these unsatisfying possibilities. Rather than mere recognition of diversity, the appeal is for a greater push to articulate difference, a move that works against the accelerating move towards spaces of global equivalency that thins Otherness and the (re)inscribing of essential differences *in domestic political discourses that run opposite to openness. The overarching aim of the piece is, however, less a definitive pronouncement on what Japanese-ness is or should be, more a self-consciously provocative attempt to catalyze deeper debate over the future direction of educational research on Japan.*

Keywords: nihonjinron; orientalism; convergence; decolonial

1. Introduction

In what follows, I argue that until education research on Japan recognizes, embraces, and elaborates 'Japanese-ness' it will lack originality and vitality, restricting the potential contribution of Japan's educational research community to global debates. Before attempting to defend an obviously risky and perhaps unpopular position analytically, however, I wish to illustrate with a personal story.

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In May 2017, I participated in the Goryo Festival, an annual *matsuri* in the small neighborhood where I had moved two years earlier, an area just north of the former Imperial Palace in central Kyoto. According to the pamphlets I helped translate to English for distribution to an increasing number of tourists and foreign residents now inhabiting the area, the festival traces its roots to 863CE. In that year, the Emperor purportedly initiated the construction of the Goryo Shrine to the spirits of those who had died violent deaths and from time to time awoke to wreak havoc on the new Heian capital in the form of epidemic diseases. The Goryo Shine - literally 'Shrine to Honor the Souls' - was constructed as a resting place and place of veneration to pacify them. Each year the local residents would load the pacified souls onto palanquins (*omikoshi*) and parade them around the entire district, believing that the spirits performed an alchemy of sorts: turning the evil spirits-turned-potential pathogens into gods that would protect the district in the hot summer months to come. Unique among the many festivals of Kyoto, the three palanquins of the Goryo Festival are allowed to enter the Imperial Palace precincts and pay tribute to the Emperor.

When I joined the group in August 2016, eight months before the actual festival and as one of the few foreigners ever to participate, a very brief, casual discussion of 'religion' ensued. The debate over barbeque, beers, and boisterous cicadas focused on the differences between a single omnipotent, vertical Christian God and the multiple, everywhere-except-up kind of gods (kami) of Shinto. But the discussion was then cut short with laughs and assurances that the Goryo Festival was, no matter what its origins, now about binding the local community together. This was *increasingly* important, I was told, given the replacement of multi-generational families with those new to Kyoto, the impingement of corporate 'chains' on the economic vitality of small shops in the covered market (*shotengai*), and the decline in opportunities to interact with neighbors in shared spaces. Institutions like schools and community centers did exist in the area, but these were run by the city government and, as I was told by the leader (*kaicho*) who was also our local barber and provided free haircuts before the festival, did not celebrate the traditions of the area. Instead, it was the Goryo Shine group that would play that role. I was surprised to subsequently learn that the festival had almost died out from a lack of participation in the very recent past: less than 15 years ago the group considered loading the palanquin onto a pick-up truck and driving it around the area because they didn't physically have enough people to shoulder the float, a load estimated at one ton (about 1000 kilograms). I was equally surprised that they would accept me, as a foreigner, into the group, but I was told that "this is about building a strong community", not about "dividing people or protecting privilege". We had a lot of time to talk about all this as the elders of the groups drove me all over Kyoto trying to find ritual socks (*tabi*) big enough for my *gaijin* feet.

What does this have to do with the larger argument? With reconceptualizing educational research in Japan? The Goryo Festival is a symbol of what I seek to argue in favor of here: preserving or resuscitating a space that is neither 'local' in the sense of inclusive of only those with credentials given by circumstances of birth nor 'universal' in the sense that the conditions for inclusion are either non-existent or else severed from relational valuation altogether. Further on in the piece, the meaning of this is clarified. Concretely, the Goryo Festival is a symbol of the sort of Japanese-ness I am arguing for in this piece. Articulated in terms of this symbolism, I want to make the case that contemporary thought and research about Japanese education is stretched between 'local' jeremiads and 'universal' intrusions

(see Takayama 2011), lacking precisely the space represented by the Goryo Festival. As such, the future of educational research in Japan looks limited to two unsatisfying possibilities: (i) a retreat to 'local' incommensurability or (ii) a continued slide to 'universal' irrelevance. I suggest that these two possibilities together produce a continued stand-off wherein domestic political forces eventually gain the upper hand, leaving both sides unsatisfied but unable to mount meaningful opposition. To avoid this, my argument here is that we need to resuscitate Japanese-ness, thereby making our intellectual work deeper, our political stance clearer, and our approach to research more festive, that is less objectively critical and more creative and participatory.

2. The Dangers of Japanese-ness

Although counterintuitive, it is useful to begin with an elaboration of the considerable dangers associated with resuscitating Japanese-ness, not least to assuage skeptics who imagine in Japanese-ness the mere rehash of *nihonjinron* theories and/or refurbishment of Orientalism.

Nihonjinron argues that the Japanese are inherently unique. Whispered in the 1950s, flourishing in the 1960s-1970s, and reaching a crescendo in the 1980s, theories of Japanese uniqueness were often legendary in excess (Dale 1986). At the most vulgar end of the scale, some argued that the Japanese had longer intestines given their long history of rice consumption and were inherently less aggressive than the descendants of hunters and nomads of Europe. Instead the Japanese were more communal, cooperative, and tolerant. A unique mix of monsoon climate, rich nature, and island environment (*shimaguni*) had supposedly made the Japanese much more attuned to the environment, both physical and man-made, in contrast to Europeans who relied on a more temperate climate to subdue nature and used their excess energies to kill and enslave hostile barbarians who threatened their man-made order.

These theories of endogenous uniqueness held that Japan was marked by blood purity and a single race, rather than marred by the mixed and ultimately divisive amalgamation of races that characterized Europe. Based on such differences, Japan could in turn lay legitimate claim to different social modalities, political formations, and a protection of the purity of these ideas, even if it implicitly (and paradoxically) entailed exclusion. Given that the core ideas of *nihonjinron* reach back to the prewar period in works such as *Nihon Fukeiron* (Shiga, 1894) and perhaps *Fudo* (Watsuji, 1935) and partially contributed to the excesses of the war itself, the postwar resurgences of similar discourses would inevitably look like the slide back to prewar myths. More immediately, policy appeals beginning with the popular invocation of '*ware-ware nihonjin*' were clearly being translated into education policy through organizations such as the Ohira Advisory and Research Council (*Ohira Seisaku Kenkyu Kai*) that issued a call for a 'new spiritual identity' distinct from the West in 1979 and the 1983-1984 Ad Hoc Council on Education (*Rinji Kyoiku Shingi Kai*) initiated under Prime Minister Nakasone that argued in its final report that "our education system must teach people love for the country and a firm sense of the uniqueness of Japanese culture" (AHCE 1987, 329). When Japanese-ness is understood as rooted in mistaken prewar myths that accelerated the march to imperialism and/or a thin cloak for postwar nationalism and social exclusion, it cannot help but look dangerous.

Defending Japanese-ness arguably looks equally suspect when viewed from the outside looking in. That is, situated globally claims to Japanese-ness look dangerously close to a new form of Orientalism. Orientalism, characterized by the assumption that the Orient held some essential characteristics unique and distinct from the West, has been a key feature of Western discussions of the East over the past 500 years (Said 1978). Arising and flourishing in the wake of Western colonial expansion worldwide, Orientalism was predicated on the notion of essential differences. But within this master frame, these differences could alternately depict the 'East' in either a positive or negative light depending on the inclination of the observer. That is, a purportedly 'irrational East' could be either a place to refind what had been lost in the 'rational West' or a starting point for lifting the East out of its backwardness and depravity rooted in that lack of Reason. Regardless of the valuation, the excesses of Orientalism are now well documented: the idea that Easterners are more emotional than rational, Asians more spiritual than materialistic, etc.

On Japan specifically, the Orientalist excesses of past Western observers have now been recognized and well-documented (e.g., Littlewood, 1996). However, the continued refurbishing of such tropes arguably demands continued scholarly refutation. Take for example, a very recent OECD depiction of the roots of Japan's world-leading educational achievement: "A long history in such a challenging environment has had a profound effect on Japanese culture; people developed very strong co-operative ties as a collective survival mechanism…[resulting in] a shared belief that if the individual works tirelessly for the group, the group will reciprocate. But if one flouts the group, one can expect very little from society..." (OECD, 2012). Work to counter such essentialist claims has been vigorous in recent years in the field of education, taking direct aim at the idea of some essential Confucian roots (Takayama 2008), pointing out far less coherence across East Asian education than is commonly portrayed in the West (Yun 2016), and empirically refuting notions that East Asian schoolchildren lack creativity (Park 2013), a stereotype that too easily reinscribes the trope of the 'irrational East' (i.e., the rationality of the West is the wellspring of its purported creativity, reversed). The goal of this important work has been to free the research imagination from the Orientalist sediment accumulated from the past. What could look more dangerous then, than me - a white, male American working in Japan - arguing in favor of Japanese-ness?

3. What is the use of theory?

To understand how my argument in favor of Japanese-ness is neither *nihonjinron* nor Orientalism, a detour into the definitions and utility of theory is crucial. Often anthropologists, area studies specialists and historians seem adverse to theory in any form, whereas sociologists, political scientists, economists, and educational scholars view it as fundamental. But even the latter group seldom give much serious thought to defining precisely what they mean by theory: *What is it and why do we use it?* Perhaps one reason for this silence is because it already seems so obvious: for sociologists theory *is* the classical work of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Different academic traditions view theory differently as well: the long-standing affirmation of theory in Continental Europe arguably gives rise to its notably theoretical minds (recently Foucault, Bourdieu, Habermas) while, say, British and American empiricism lends itself to a second-order skepticism that arguably hinders theoretical elabora-

tion. Without first gaining clarity on the definition of theory, the space for Japanese-ness I am advocating for will slip too easily into either *nihonjinron* or orientalism, or perhaps simply be written off as irrelevant for those who see no utility in theory at all.

Reduced to its most basic components, theory is a mix of perceptual data and logical inference. In more simple terms: a mixing of empirical detail and logical extrapolation. But the relative proportions of this mix vary considerably depending on philosophical taste. For those whom the cocktail is mostly straight empirical detail with just a twist of logic added on top, the presumption is that the world exists largely independent of human perception. Thus, the reliance on theory inevitably performs a sort of 'violence' on the empirical object. Theory is suspect because it subsumes 'local' details into universal categories and, in doing so, deprives them of their specificity and complexity. The more one is wed to empirical detail, the more often theory becomes mere *conceptual summation*: an overview of the key themes emerging from the data. This conceptual theory, as I wish to call it here, often takes the form of a heuristic: something pointing out the 'emergent themes'; a device encouraging further learning and refinement based on further empirical experience. One example central to my own early research is the "Oxford Models" of education policy transfer (Rappleye, 2012; see also Phillips, 2004). The key point here is that this group, let us call them Empirical Theorists, seek first and foremost to capture the specific 'what' of the local context.

In contrast, others mix a cocktail that finds the empiricism a mere garnish on the undiluted spirit of historical-philosophical inquiry. For this group, let us call them herein the Philosophical Theorists, the presumption is that human perception always trumps a purportedly independent world. Although rarely denying an independent world entirely, Philosophical Theorists argue that frames of human perception are what bestow meaning on these empirical realities, i.e. empirical data only mean something when filtered through categories of human perception and this filtering is inescapable. As such, attempts by Empirical Theorists to provide objective accounts of empirical realities look ill-founded: be it in the initial act of selecting 'objects' or the labels of significance attached to them, the empirical data are always shot through with normative valuations. Here theory becomes a conversation with theorists of the past that open our eyes to the universal trends inhering in the human condition. This is why, say, sociologists reach back to classical theorists Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, why political theorists refer back to Locke, Burke, Mills, and De Tocqueville, why economists return again and again to read Adam Smith and Karl Marx. This engagement with a universal set of themes – liberal-democracy and capitalism, as well as its constituent puzzles of individualism, order, alienation, exploitation - show what are enduring tensions and what are new developments, and suggest possible future courses of action. Another variation of Philosophical Theoretical work is decidedly more active and unapologetic in bestowing significance on empirical realities, as when Critical Theorists actively interpret, say, realities in the classroom as a form of capitalist exploitation and false consciousness (e.g. McLaren 1989; Apple 2001). This spotlights one key aspect of the mind of Philosophical Theorists: they possess a belief that their perceptual categories and logical connections hold universally and can thus universally quench the thirst to understand social action/interaction.

But there is still another definition of theory, one distinct from both Empirical Theorists and Philosophical Theorists. This one is phenomenological and pragmatic, hovering between objective empirical detail and subjective universal categories of perception, but also rejecting both as absolute. Here we call this group Phenomenological Theorists, a group for whom the

relative proportions of the cocktail is far less important than *the effect it has on those gathered together to drink it*. Whereas Empirical Theorists evaluate theories based on which shows the most fidelity to empirical realities and Philosophical Theorists appraise theories according to which best captures universal wants and concerns (as shown to us historically), Phenomenological Theorists refuse to rank without reference to the effects a given theory has on those who imbibe it. This automatically implies starting with the traditional mix but experimenting repeatedly with something new. It requires actual practice, not solitary experimentation; ongoing, interactive trial-and-error, not a one-off discovery of the ideal formula. It demands continual change, reflecting different configurations of participants and their changing needs. In more rigorous terms: it understands empirical 'realities' as phenomenological entities, but refuses the universalism of categories, seeing these instead constituted and reconstituted through interactive practice in a collective setting. The collective setting is constituted through practice, while practice is not possible without the collective; valuations are constituted through shared experience, while shared experience begins with some initial valuation that eventually and inevitably changes.

How does rooting Japanese-ness in Phenomenological Theory rescue it from both *nihonjinron* and Orientalism? *Nihonjinron* is fundamentally an appeal to an unchangeable national character, the wellspring of a unique collective identity. As discussed above, the excesses of *Nihonjinron* emerge when that idea is explained through empirical realities. That is, excess emerges when the idea of difference gets passed off as derivative of physical or historical realities (e.g., shimaguni, rice cultivation, or racial purity). It becomes an essentialist claim. It becomes reified. It works its magic by arguing that only Japanese, in the sense of those possessing these physical characteristics by virtue of their birth (race) or full inculcation into a sublime and/or clearly-defined, unchanging cultural world, can understand. In order to be Japanese, one must be Japanese.

In contrast, Japanese-ness rooted in Phenomenological Theory refuses from the outset the idea of essential physical realities that automatically translate into ascribed status. Instead, Japanese-ness becomes defined by the joining, acting, and interacting in that space itself. That is true in both senses: one becomes Japanese by joining, acting, and interacting, but Japanese-ness becomes defined and redefined by that very interaction. This is not tautology, but iterative co-creation. However, where there is undoubtedly commonality between Phenomenological Theory and *nihonjinron* is that this interactive space is labeled from the outset as something different, something non-universal. The reasons for insisting on difference are elaborated below.

Orientalism derives from the universalist categories of the West. The Orient, including Japan, is what the West is not. While it sometimes avoids the excesses of empirical reification, its implicit nominalism is still beholden to the universalist premises of Western thought: the Other can only be what one is not; the Other can only be understood in relation to a single normative valuation (i.e., the universal categories reversed). Yet Phenomenological Theory refuses these universal categories, thereby avoiding Orientalism. That is, it does not presuppose the range of possible ways of being in the East based on the West's own (implicit) categories. Instead, those categories can only emerge organically out of shared experience, rather than be imposed *a priori* from outside. Indeed, this is the key point: to claim Japanese-ness is not to claim something essential about the 'Japanese' nor to understand the 'Japanese' through Western categories, but precisely to perform the double task of rejecting both

of these possibilities. Here is where a major misunderstanding of Japanese-ness potentially arises: utilizing the term suggests that *all* Japanese share it, in contrast to all Western people sharing a quality in opposition. In fact, what Japanese-ness means is simply that its range of possibilities extends beyond what can be imagined as the opposite to the West. 'Japanese' signifies neither a status bestowed by birth nor characteristics universally diffused through all people living in Japan. That is, it is a label for those who participate in a space that is neither essentialist/local or universal/global and it is a relationally generated label, not an empirical claim. Some preliminary examples of how this might be done empirically can be found in some recent writings (Rappleye 2018; Komatsu & Rappleye 2017; Rappleye & Komatsu 2016).

4. The Wider Backdrop

The importance of Japanese-ness becomes more evident when viewed against current global trends in policy and scholarship. In the three decades following the end of the Cold War, worldwide convergence towards a single 'global standard' has been pronounced. The creation of unitary measures and metrics has unfolded in lockstep with an exponential increase in the amount of comparative data available. Two prominent examples in the field of education are the OECD Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) and the Global Higher Education Rankings. The former ranks currently ranks 80 countries worldwide on a single metric in the subjects of mathematics, science, and reading. By 2030 the OECD plans to have all countries worldwide signed up to the triennial exam. The latter ranks universities worldwide according to a composite metric that includes teaching, research, citations, international outlook, and industry income.

This marked intensification of global measures has only become possible through the increasing 'thinning' of categories of comparison. These spaces of global equivalency presuppose the hiding of difference. That is, in order to make the vast differences that continue to exist 'below' amenable to global comparisons 'above', these must be flattened out, standardized, and thus understood against a single norm (often implicit). In fact, this is not a problem by itself: quantitative measures and global comparisons undoubtedly open up new perspectives. But the problem arises when this image constructed by unitary measures and metrics is (mis)taken for reality itself. That is, the problem emerges when we believe the thin metrics are actually encompassing the thick realities below. Yet this is precisely what is happening with increasing speed.

In relation to 'Japanese-ness', this means that Japan as a 'thick' object is being increasingly (mis)taken for the 'thin' object that shows up in global league tables. In stark contrast to the great ambiguity, complexity, and challenges that the Japanese context has presented to outside observers throughout its history (Bellah 2003), it is increasingly being understood all-too-easily as just another variation or variance within a single 'global standard' (normative scale). Sometimes it appears that scholars working in Japan are oblivious to this, most probably because they are still surrounded by thick realities. To insist on Japan-ness, then, is to speak out actively against the 'thinning' of Other-ness that is the consequence of surface convergence, but to do so in a way that stays within the realm of the intelligible. Without Japanese-ness as a potential space, one is forced into a false choice of either breaking away

completely from intensification of 'global standards' or trying to argue in general terms about mere 'diversity' within the standardized measures, rather than highlight the *difference* that lies between.

Indeed, the recent resuscitation of the 'thick' Other can be read as one response to the accelerating intensification of 'global standards'. Building on the work of intellectuals working in post-colonializing contexts in the 1950s-1980s (Fanon, Said, Spivak), these de-colonial perspectives are gaining increasing momentum and much wider attention. A recent Special Issue of the Comparative Education Review (the flagship journal of North American comparative education) entitled *Contesting Coloniality* is representative (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017). The argument is that the social sciences generally, but educational research in particular, has long been beholden to Western policy problematiques, analytical models, and primary assumptions. De-colonial perspectives ask us to imagine what the world might look like if we grounded ourselves in non-Western concerns, frames of analysis, and epistemic and/or ontological starting points.

To insist on Japanese-ness in the manner defined above is to contribute to this general body of work. Given that this Japanese-ness extends beyond Western categories and yet does so without succumbing to exclusion or essentialism, it becomes a space where de-colonial perspectives are allowed to emerge. Put differently, so long as Japanese-ness is equated with essential, static qualities found only in Japan or rejected all-together in favor of a 'universal' category that is undistinguishable from those embedded in 'global standards', it does not partake in de-colonial work. While some would argue for joining and remaking those 'universal' categories, I argue that the label Japanese-ness ensures that readers remain reminded that it is something beyond the Western horizon; that they cannot simply 'sit at home' and reach alternatives *logically*. Actual experience and (inter)action are crucial, a point about process I return to in conclusion. But for now: the point is the process itself.

5. Why the reluctance to Japanese-ness?

Having outlined the arguments in favor of Japanese-ness it is also interesting to briefly consider the reasons behind contemporary reluctance to utilize the term. One of the most fascinating discoveries of my ten-years of research on Japanese education is that virtually no scholars use the category Japanese-ness. I have attended multiple international symposia where non-Japanese scholars have argued that, say, 'high-performance' cannot be understood outside the social and cultural context of Japan. To which the Japanese representatives have nothing to say, quickly shifting the discussion to structural characteristics or pedagogical techniques, inevitably all explained in the language of Western sociological and educational theory. To those like me listening, the silence is as deafening as it is disappointing: Japanese scholars seem to completely exclude *a priori* any discussion of social or cultural factors specific to Japan. What explains this reluctance?

The first hypothesis is that the aversion to discussing Japanese-ness is a historical product of the World War II era. As is widely documented, America's General Headquarters (GHQ) focused heavily on remaking Japanese education. It sought to root out prewar myths and remake educational research in service of the new Constitution and Fundamental Law of Education. The result was that education scholars, understandably traumatized by the war,

sought to eradicate the basis for difference, to rewrite the specificities of Japan in universal terms as a way for Japanese education to join the World and leave the war behind. Clearly the wider historical backdrop was the paradigm of Japanese university research initiated in the Meiji era, which had long sought to 'import' and introduce Western knowledge. Else-where I have written about this in greater detail (Rappleye 2018). Therein I quote one schol-ar who reaches the same conclusion about the entire social sciences in postwar Japan:

> Social science in the early postwar decades may be equated with what is known as modernism (*kindaishugi*), and with an assault on Japan's "negative distinctiveness" as a state and society. Its temporal starting point was defeat and occupation, its critical gene-sis a drive to expose the causes of Japan's disaster….As part of this effort, the task of the social science as a whole was for the first time seen as a critique of the past, and of the present to the extent that it perpetuated the past...The assault on the negative distinc-tiveness was itself a means to a positive end: the exploration and promotion, in the Jap-anese context, of new human possibilities that the bitter experience of repression, war, defeat, and occupation had revealed. To open up these possibilities and translate them to a needy populace was indeed an elitist project: Japan's people were now, finally, to be made fully modern (Barshay 2004, 62-64)

It is this legacy that has lived on in Japanese social science research, leading to a situa-tion where Japanese-ness is automatically equated with negative distinctness, prewar myths, and an escape from the responsibility of making Japan "fully modern" (e.g. Maruyama 1963). That is, the lack of serious engagement with alternatives reflects the continued legacy of the postwar reformulation of educational research. History, then, is one explanation for the reluctance to explicitly challenge the move to a single standard, actively engaging with non-Western epistemic projects, and otherwise embracing Japanese-ness.

The second hypothesis is that the *nihonjinron* excesses of the 1980s and the current po-litical climate make it ill-advised to champion Japanese-ness. As opposed to those above who would see Japanese-ness as the problem, this group recognizes, at least in part, differences but is reluctant to argue in favor of Japanese-ness lest it become mistaken for the political project of Prime Minister Abe (like PMs Nakasone and Obuchi before him). That is, is it not all-too-easy for Japanese-ness to become mistaken for a similar rhetoric emerging from the Education Rebuilding Council (Rappleye 2012), the Japan Conference (McNeill 2015), and other similar groups? Although I was not in Japan in the 1980s, I have heard from sen-ior scholars, both foreign and Japanese, that the *nihonjinron* excesses combined with the rhetoric of Nakasone's Ad Hoc Council on Education (1984-1987) created a similar political climate in which Japanese-ness would have been an imprudent starting point for research. In this climate, discussions of Japanese-ness instead came to be dismissed as *bunkaron* (cultural reductionist theories), a deliberate refusal to engage with Japanese-ness that served the double function of (i) responding to new trends in scholarship seeking to break down reification and essentialism (e.g., post-modernism) and (ii) counteracting the shallowness of discourses ema-nating out of the political realm.

6. What are the stakes? Implications for educational research

But this is precisely what is at stake in resuscitating Japanese-ness: the meaning of what it means to be Japanese and its implications for schooling at this historical juncture. Prime Minister Abe, his Educational Rebuilding Council, and the Japan Conference (*Nippon Kaigi*) all seem increasingly intent on solidifying some unique, essential Japanese identity, an identity this group feels was heavily distorted by the postwar Occupation and is currently being rapidly eroded by globalization and the diversification of Japanese society. One telling revelation of how this group sees Japanese-ness came in a curious response to a *New York Times* article entitled 'Japan's Divided Education Strategy' (12 Oct 2014). The article argued that Japanese schooling was being remade along 'nationalist' lines. In an unprecedented move, MEXT promptly issued a critical response. Then Minister of Education Shimomura Hakubun argued the reforms were intended only to "teach Japan's traditions, culture, and history, which are the foundations of the Japanese identity" because young Japanese have a "weak sense of identity". Thus, "to nurture that identity, the learning of Japanese traditions, culture, and history – the elements that make up the Japanese identity – is essential." (Shimomura 2014). Here we see the move is back to the past, a retreat to local uniqueness, disengagement with difference, and a gesture towards the essential.

This logic stands in marked contrast to the alternative Japanese-ness sketched above: one predicated on openness, international interconnectivity, and ongoing learning-turned-transformation. The difference between these two versions of Japan is well captured by a leading foreign scholar who wrote, over two decades ago:

> the view that the formative patterns of the Japanese tradition were superimposed on a changing and heterogeneous background now seems more plausible than the notion of an underlying continuum from prehistorical to post-reform culture. To make that claim is not to deny the originality of Japanese civilization. The point is, rather, that this originality has often been misrepresented by its most militant advocates: it does not consist in the conservation of a primordial essence, but in the creation of new patterns from indigenous sources alongside – and in response to – the model derived from a more advanced civilization (Arnason 1997, 129)

Put simply, the originality of Japanese civilization is its continual ability to borrow and innovate, rather than preserve an essence. Thus, in contrast to the LDP's on-going project to construct a timeless, unchanging cultural essence, this alternative research agenda – *Japanese-ness* - supports the view that the only cultural 'essence' of Japan is the preservation of radical openness - non-essence.

What is at stake here is, we should realize, not simply an analytical category or new research agenda, but the very future of Japanese schooling and society. Although I do not wish to overdramatize the current political moment, it seems clear that after a century of 'catch-up', Japan now faces the difficult decision of where it will go (Rappleye & Kariya 2011). Will it continue to follow the West, particularly the United States? Will it reject this and retreat 'back' to history and protection of identity? Or will it create social, education, and intellectual spaces that are open, even to the point of eluding the usual Western categories of thought? The election of Trump and his turn away from issues long-championed by Japan

(e.g. climate change, the 1992 Kyoto Protocol) combined with increasing distrust of Prime Minister Abe and the contradictions between his cultural and economic policies have created a certain momentum for a different direction, one that departs from modernization along Western lines, but also refuses to retreat into an essential Japanese identity. What is at stake in championing Japanese-ness is the articulation, elaboration, and support for that space. And here the implications for education are momentous.

7. Conclusion: shared commitment to a different future

Until research on education on Japan embraces and elaborates Japanese-ness – as a middle space between essentialism and universalism, as described above - it seems certain to lack originality, continuing to slide towards irrelevance globally and lose ground in domestic political debates. Although understandably repugnant if viewed as either *nihonjinron* refurbished or orientalism rearticulated, the sort of Japanese-ness advocated here is neither: based on a phenomenological and pragmatic definition of theory, its promise is to provide space that is *different,* not merely diverse (Bhabha, 1988).

Some might agree with the general direction, but still question the wisdom of insisting on the term 'Japanese-ness'. Is it not unnecessary to utilize this seemingly local label? Why not utilize something less constrained? More nuanced? Indeed, we find numerous examples of those arguing in favor of the *difference* of Japan who nonetheless prefer terms such as "intimacy" and "integrity" (Kasulis 2002), "axial" and "non-axial" (Eisenstadt 1995), and so on. In fact, together with close Japanese colleagues I have previously used "Type II" as shorthand for perspectives generated out of the Japanese space, i.e. Japanese-ness (Komatsu & Rappleye 2017). As discussed, the most obvious dangers of using "Japanese-ness" is that it too easily gets interpreted as something *all* Japanese share rather than correctly understood as demarcating *difference* from universality. So I partially agree: it might in some cases be unwise to use "Japanese-ness," which may unnecessarily limit the wider appeal of the ideas. Nonetheless, "Japanese-ness" still seems the most prudent for the time being: it directly challenges the essentialist versions found in domestic political debates and provides a pointer of where to look beyond universalism. Without explicitly contesting the mythic construction of an unchanging Japanese uniqueness, I fear this essential Japanese-ness may soon gain enough ground to foster incommensurability. Meanwhile, without an explicitly non-universalist label, universal assumptions are too easily reinscribed.

For readers who are now convinced, but remain skeptical that Japanese-ness could ever grow strong enough to gain a foothold between the local essentialism and universal convergence-turned-erasure, I appeal to the reality of the Goryo Festival: even in 'deep Kyoto' – purportedly the most conservative and adverse to outsiders - these sorts of spaces are *already* being created. The larger social and cultural shifts already underway in Japan and worldwide provide the primary momentum. As such, it may be less about creating these spaces than about collaborating and calling attention to them. When I told my academic colleagues I would need to miss a monthly faculty meeting to participate in the Goryo Festival, some looked at me with notable disdain that I would join "a celebration of Imperial Shinto" with the "local boys". It was a typically universalist misreading of local essentialism. What is missed without actually participating – *engaging in the process* - is the awareness of what

these new 'Japanese' spaces look like and what potential they hold for the future.

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