

Navigating postcolonial predicaments in/through comparative and international educational research: A reflection on Komatsu and Rappleye's interventions

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This paper begins by revisiting my earlier critical review of the international scholarship on Japanese schooling (Takayama, 2011). In this work, I critiqued three books on Japanese schooling, by Ryoko Tsuneyoshi (2001), Nancy Sato (2004), and Peter Cave (2007), along with other English-language scholarships on Japanese education. Drawing on a postcolonial critique of culture and difference, my work identified the underlying culturalist logic of the existing literature, where the cultural binary of Japan (East) vs West was unproblematically accepted and reinforced, the homogeneity of Japan was assumed, and culture was conceptualized as the predominant force shaping Japanese pedagogic practices. Erased from the discussion of Japanese education, it was suggested, were power and domination and the role of culture in perpetuating the ideology of cultural homogeneity and uneven relations in/through Japanese schooling. More than ten years later, this paper reassesses this critique in light of the emerging scholarship of Hikaru Komatsu and Jeremy Rappleye, who draw on a similar culturalist discourse of Japanese pedagogy and explicitly mobilize the 'Japanese difference' thus generated to peculiarize and parochialize the Western cultural premises of 'best practices' promoted by international organizations. Through critical engagement with their research, I identify five themes/challenges around which the broader implications of their research are explored, while demonstrating how doing so has also forced me to rethink my earlier critique.

Keywords: East and West ; culture ; ontology ; reductionism ; dichotomy ; politics of anti-essentialism ; comparative and international education

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My earlier critique

In 2011, I published an extended review essay titled *Other Japanese education and Japanese education otherwise* (Takayama, 2011). In this piece, I reviewed three English-language publications on Japanese schooling at the time, namely Ryoko Tsuneyoshi's *The Japanese model of schooling: Comparisons with the United States* (2001), Nancy Sato's *Inside Japanese classrooms: the heart of education* (2004), and Peter Cave's *Primary school in Japan: Self, individuality and learning in elementary education* (2007). My essay did not simply critique the three books under review, but raised critical questions about the broader international scholarship of Japanese education within which the three works were situated. Drawing on a postcolonial critique of culture and 'difference' (e.g., Said, 1977; Tai, 2003) and Foucaultian discursive theory (Rabinow, 1984), my work identified the underlying culturalist logic of the existing literature, where the cultural binary of Japan (East) vs West was unproblematically accepted, where the cultural homogeneity of Japan was assumed, and where culture was conceptualized as the predominant force shaping Japanese pedagogic practices. I argued that the three books under review largely accepted the same culturalist logic of a 'fundamental difference' between Japan and the West, and traced its 'origin' back to postwar Japanologist scholarship, including the anthropological and psychoanalytic studies of Ruth Benedict, Takeo Doi, Takie Sugiyama Lebra, and Chie Nakane.

Following the Japanologists' premise that the US and Japan, on many social dimensions, represent 'polar opposites,' the three books under review grounded their studies within the established contrast between Japanese and American pedagogic beliefs and practices. According to Tsuneyoshi (2001), for instance, Japanese and American parenting methods are in contrast: "the American stress on authority and reliance on rules, versus the Japanese reliance on empathy and interpersonal relationships" (p. 14). Likewise, Sato (2004) maintains that "as opposed to the Western conception of self as an individual independent of others, (Japanese) inter-personalism involves one's definition of self in terms of one's web of relationships with others" (p. 26). Hence, while in the West, cognitive, social, and affective spheres are isolated in separate categories, the holistic notion of intelligence in Japan considers them all as a whole (Sato 2004, p. 52; see also Cave 2007, p. 30–33 for a similar discussion). This explains, according to Sato (2004), the contrasting emphasis in American and Japanese pedagogy; while American education focuses on the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), Japanese education stresses the four Cs (community, connectedness, commitment, and caring). In Tsuneyoshi's (2001) words, "the guiding principle [of the Japanese school model] is to address the whole child with a strong emphasis on social skills as contrasted with the American emphasis on cognitive ability" (p. 32). Hence, Japan and the US have "contrasting cultural and historical traditions and populations" and "a contrasting notion of self, perhaps a contrasting notion of equity" (Sato, 2004, p. 21, 27).

The contrasting representation of Japanese schooling is underpinned by the holistic notion of 'Japanese national culture' and the relatively uncomplicated view of the relationship between cultural socialization and schooling. These authors commonly conceive of Japanese schooling as the central institutional mechanism wherein children are systematically introduced into 'Japanese cultural patterns.' They all explain the instructional practices and underlying pedagogical assumptions among Japanese teachers in terms of this socializing function of Japanese schooling. Although their inclusion of discussions of gender (Cave), social class

(Sato), and ethnicity (Tsuneyoshi) somewhat complicates this culturalist framing, they tend to localize the discussion in certain sections of the books, leaving the rest of the pages dominated by the overall culturalist framing. By privileging culture as the primary independent ‘variable,’ they provide a rather ahistorical analysis of Japanese schooling, disconnected from the analysis of the shifting mode of production in the Japanese economy, the changing institutional mechanism of the state (of which public education is a part), and the corresponding changes in social conditions. This critique concluded with a call for a complete break with the culturalist logic of Japaneseness premised upon the Japan vs West dichotomy, urging future researchers to explore pedagogical practices, ideas and agents, both in the past and present, that disrupt the presumption of a ‘fundamental difference’ between Japan and the West.

In retrospect, it is clear that my attention at the time was directed to the internal politics of difference within Japan. I was concerned with how the over-privileging of ‘national culture’ as an explanatory factor for the distinctive features of Japanese pedagogy and schooling could obscure the fact that the same pedagogical practices, underpinned by Japanese cultural patterns, perpetuated the existing socio-economic, cultural and ‘racial’ hierarchies. Strongly influenced by the neo-Marxist analysis of power and culture, my critique was informed by a political reading of culture, or the view of culture as an expression of the dominant group’s hegemony. Here, culture, as embodied through schooling, is conceived as an arena of political struggle over consciousness and belonging, with dire consequences for economic redistribution and cultural recognition. The role of researchers, in this view, is to unpack what passes as ‘common sense’ and to demystify how uneven relations of power are exercised and reinforced through existing pedagogical practices. The critique was also driven by my concern that much of the international research on Japanese education had long bypassed the debates and research within Japan, where the analyses tended to focus on politics (gender, class and ethnicity), institutions and power over Japanese cultural ‘patterns.’

Undoubtedly, my critique was a product of the broader critical scholarship on cultural nationalism and cultural essentialism in social science at the time. The criticism of cultural essentialism was widely accepted both in social science as a whole and education, and any presumptive discussion of cultural essence, patterns and unity was to be rejected as an expression of cultural hegemony or cultural essentialism. Cultural hybridity, interface and heterogeneity were much celebrated, and critical education research was to unsettle any discursive construction of totality and unity, including the reification of differences, and to expose how uneven power relations discursively operated through such social constructions. When assessed from this social constructivist and pluralistic perspective, Tsuneyoshi’s, Sato’s, and Cave’s books did not seem to be doing enough to challenge the premise of the Japan vs West dichotomy, the presumption of nationally-based cultural ‘essences’ and ‘patterns,’ and the over-privileging of culture as the sole explanatory factor. Back then, I never anticipated that these studies could serve as much needed resources when countering the increasing international acceptance of ‘best practices’—as promoted through large-scale international assessments such as OECD’S PISA—which arguably embody Western cultural and pedagogical assumptions. This is the very point of which I was made acutely aware by the writings of Komatsu and Rappleye.

Komatsu and Rappleye's interventions

Several years after the publication of my critique, Hikaru Komatsu and Jeremy Rappleye began to publish numerous articles about Japanese pedagogy and schooling (see Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017a, 2017b, 2021a; Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021; Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017; Rappleye, Komatsu, Uchida, Krys and Markus, 2020). There are a few interrelated features of their research which distinguish it from the preceding international research of Japanese education which I critiqued earlier. First, their studies combine a philosophical discussion of Japanese culture and pedagogy with statistical analyses. They use, for instance, the TIMSS or PISA large-scale assessment data to test the hypotheses developed through their philosophically informed discussions of Japanese ontology and pedagogy. Second, they use the philosophically articulated notion of 'Japanese difference' as a form of cultural critique (Rappleye, 2020). That is, they identify the ontological dispositions promoted through Japanese culture and pedagogy and then deploy the Japanese 'difference' thus construed to peculiarize and parochialize what pass as 'best practices' in the international education policy discourse today.

While the deployment of 'Japanese difference' as a source of cultural critique has been practiced by earlier international scholars of Japanese education (e.g., Tobin, 2000), Komatsu and Rappleye push it a step further. The primary focus of much of the earlier research was placed upon understanding how Japanese schooling works through ethnographic thick descriptions (see Cave, 2007, 2016; Sato, 2004; Tsuneyoshi, 2001). By contrast, Komatsu and Rappleye deploy Japanese differences not only to denaturalize pedagogical practices and assumptions widely accepted as 'universal,' but to critique the 'best practices' promoted by international organizations such as the OECD. As they put it, their scholarship is motivated by the concerns that "the rise of PISA and the OECD's work now means that the homogenization is taking place at the global level" (Rappleye et al. 2020, p. 20-21). Hence, they 'weaponize' Japanese difference as a key resource with which to push back against the powerful international pressure towards educational convergence, where education is increasingly removed from any consideration of such idiosyncrasies as culture, history and tradition. Lastly, Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship attempts to delineate the 'Japanese difference' at a level of philosophy and ontology. This sets it apart from the earlier international research on Japanese schooling and pedagogy, where the Japanese difference was articulated largely at the level of culturally-informed pedagogic practices. Their research gets down to the level of ontology, the theory of being, upon which, they argue, concrete pedagogical practices are premised.

These distinguishing features of Komatsu and Rappleye's research are crystallized in their 2017 article titled *A PISA paradox?: An alternative theory of learning as a possible solution for variations in PISA scores*. In this paper, Komatsu and Rappleye (2017a) begin by presenting a contrastive representation of the Japanese tradition of pedagogical practice—Type II Learning—on the one hand and the Western tradition—Type I Learning—on the other. These two types of pedagogy are presented as 'ideal types' exhibiting "divergent conceptualizations of learning and self" (p. 274). The key to their argument is that the contrast between these types of learning is found not just at the pedagogic level but at the philosophical and ontological levels. What they mean by Type I learning is typically represented as constructivist, or learner-centered education, where learning is initiated by what children are

interested in. In this mode of learning, learning occurs only within the frame of understanding that a learner develops. This suggests that a learner's sense of self is likely to remain relatively stable, as the whole process of learning is spontaneous, initiated by the learner herself/himself, without being pushed to break away from the frame already embraced. Komatsu and Rappleye (2017a) argue that Type I learning aspires to be immediately fun and interesting for students and is considered to be complete once the existing frame is saturated with new knowledge. They trace the origin of Type I learning back to the Western Enlightenment view of humanity (e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau), which was then subsequently inherited by the progressive tradition of education in the USA (e.g., William Heard Kilpatrick).

By contrast, the process of learning in Type II is initiated by the teacher. Type II requires students to trust their teacher as the absolute source of wisdom and knowledge. Students are expected to obey the teacher's directions and work persistently at the tasks assigned by the teacher. In this process of learning, whether the content of learning is immediately relevant or pleasurable to the students is of less importance. Komatsu and Rappleye (2017a) go as far as to suggest that the pain and discomfort that the students experience are part of what makes Type II learning distinctively different and self-transformative:

Type II learning is possible when a student faces something that s/he finds neither understandable nor interesting and yet brackets her/his existing frame, while continuing to struggle, long enough until the frame itself changes. Type II learning thus requires enforcement and/or guidance—either explicit or implicit—by a teacher (or equivalent others) as an essential factor for making such learning possible (p. 276).

As suggested here, the ultimate objective of Type II learning is “continual self-overcoming” (p. 290); learners learn to overcome their frame of knowing in order to continuously mold and remold their way of seeing the world. The role of the teachers is to assist students to break away from the existing frame of knowing and learn to continuously question what they have come to know. In this mode of learning, therefore, learning never finishes, as the teacher continuously introduces new frames of knowing, and learners are encouraged to search for counter-examples that undermine the newly developed frame. Though Komatsu and Rappleye (2017a) do not limit the discussion of Type II learning to Japanese pedagogy, many of their references are drawn from Japanese examples.

Once the distinction is established between Type I (Western) and Type II (Japanese or Eastern), Komatsu and Rappleye (2017a) undertake the secondary analysis of the PISA data set to show that PISA is premised largely upon Type I learning. They demonstrate this by, for instance, showing how all the high-performing East Asian countries and cities were ranked low in enjoyment in learning. This data is generally interpreted as suggesting that East Asian students ‘suffer’ from academic pressure and didactic modes of teaching and that their achievement is driven by excessive pressure for academic credentials. Hence, East Asian learning is construed as a negative difference (or deficit) to be overcome through the introduction of child-centered curriculum and pedagogy.

It is here that Komatsu and Rappleye's (2017a) explicit articulation of the ontological premises of Type II learning becomes a powerful resource of cultural critique. As discussed earlier, Type II learning conceives of persistence as a key ingredient for self-overcoming, a process which is not always pleasant for learners. Hence, the fact that many East Asian students do not enjoy the process of learning does not necessarily point to the defect of East

Asian pedagogy implied by PISA; rather, it might actually prove that Type II learning is operating in the region. That is, the theory of Type II learning allows for the development of an alternative interpretation of the PISA data; East Asian students outperform not despite their lack of enjoyment in learning but partly because of it.

In a series of subsequent publications, Komatsu and Rappleye operationalize the typology of the Type I and II models of learning and the contrastive ontological dispositions—interdependent selfhood in Japan (or East Asia) and ontological individualism in ‘the West’—to extend their critical analysis to other international educational initiatives. In *How to make Lesson Study work in America and worldwide: A Japanese perspective on the onto-cultural basis of teacher education*, Rappleye and Komatsu (2017a) expand the Type I and II distinction into what they call System I (West) and System II (Japan, or East), which now covers not only ontological orientations but also associated epistemological orientations. The contrasting ‘grammars’ of these systems are identified and used to account for the challenges American educators have faced in undertaking the Japanese model of professional development, Lesson Study. In their view, much of the difficulty that American educators have encountered with Lesson Study has to do with the markedly different epistemological and ontological orientations—namely interdependent self, the context-dependent notion of ‘truth,’ and the collective notion of praxis in which Japanese teachers let go of their egos and engage in collaborative knowledge work—that underpin the very design of Japanese Lesson Study. Hence, they conclude: “To make Lesson Study work in America and worldwide, it would take a fundamental rethinking of ontology” (p. 423), that is, “to rework the cultural fabric of America through teacher professional development” (p. 422). The shift suggested here is radical and fundamental, and yet the authors attempt to escape culturally deterministic conclusions. They conclude by stressing that the ‘grammar’ of System I (e.g., American education) can be reconfigured over time, because “interdependent ontology can be primed” (p. 424).

In a subsequent article, *Better policies for better lives?: Constructive critique of the OECD’s (mis)measure of student well-being*, co-authored with three cultural psychologists, Komatsu and Rappleye draw on the same ontological distinction to critique the influential OECD wellbeing survey, arguing that the survey is premised upon the Western notion of self and its individualistic notion of happiness (Rappleye et al. 2020). They scrutinize the OECD’s conceptualization of wellbeing, its methodology and instruments, and the underpinning notion of ‘key competencies’ and expose the implicit Western cultural view of self, “an independent self—a separate, stable, autonomous, free entity” (Rappleye et al. 2020, p. 8). Here, wellbeing is defined in terms of individual life satisfaction irrespective of the wellbeing of those nearby. The authors contrast this with the interdependent notion of self and happiness widely shared in East Asia, wherein happiness is less to do with individual life satisfaction than with harmony maintained in the network of surrounding relationships. Drawing on this contrasting representation of wellbeing, they then account for the ‘paradox’ of East Asian PISA performance (low satisfaction and high academic performance) and conclude that the paradox was caused primarily by the cultural bias of the instrument itself. Of note here is that Rappleye et al (2020) draw on the same set of anthropological and ethnographic studies of Japanese society and schooling as critiqued in my earlier work (Takayama, 2011), including Lebra (2004), Tsuneyoshi (2001) and Cave (2016), to substantiate the claim that the Japanese pedagogy for interdependence is practiced “at virtually every level of the Japanese school system” (Rappleye et al. 2020, p. 18).

In sum, characterized by a unique combination of philosophical exploration and quantitative social science methods, Komatsu and Rappleye's recent writings have taken international research on Japanese education to a new level. They have brought Japanese education to the center of the ongoing international debate on the expanding roles and influence of international organizations, including the OECD and the World Bank, in education policy making. They successfully position Japanese educational thoughts and practices as a wealth of intellectual and conceptual resources for broader research on education beyond Japan. They have shown us how the 'otherness' of Japan (or East Asia) can be mobilized to challenge the universalist premises of 'best practices' and international assessments and metrics, hence pushing back against the increasing global pressure towards acultural, ahistorical notions of education. All of this has been achieved through their engagement with the intellectual work produced in Japan, drawing on philosophical and, to a lesser extent, educational research in Japanese. This respect for domestic intellectual work is another feature of their work that sets it apart from the earlier generation of international scholars on Japanese education, though I will shortly problematize the extent to which their discussion is informed by the domestic educational debates and research in Japan.

Critical appraisals

Below, I critically assess Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship in light of my earlier critique of international research on Japanese education, as briefly discussed at the beginning of this paper. More specifically, my discussion centers around the following five themes/challenges under which the broader implications of their interventions are explored: 1) Embracing the dichotomy and its paradox; 2) Transcending ontological reductionism; 3) Countering the politics of anti-essentialism; 4) Learning from Japanese educational research; and 5) Making research relevant to both national and international debates. I have developed these themes/challenges by putting their interventions in dialogue with my earlier critique, as well as by situating their research within Japanese domestic research on education, international education research, and some of the emerging debates within the field of comparative and international education. The intention of this critical review is to identify the emerging issues and contradictions rendered visible by a critical reading of Komatsu and Rappleye's work, so that the key lessons drawn from their expansive research can be distilled. Having said that, I must admit that it is also a deeply reflective process for myself, because Komatsu and Rappleye's interventions have forced me to critically assess my one critique published a decade ago and to acknowledge its shortcomings. What follows, then, is a (hopefully) constructive critique and contextualization of their research as much as a documentation of the process of my own unlearning triggered by their interventions.

1) Embracing the dichotomy and its paradox

As should be clear from the above discussion, what characterizes Komatsu and Rappleye's interventions into the dominant international policy discourse is the binary construction of the Japanese (East Asian) and the Western, with the Type I and Type II model of learning (or System I and System II) most clearly representing this dichotomy. A cursory review of their recent writings suggests that they have been aware of the possible criticism directed at

their repeated uses of the Japan (or East Asia)-West dichotomy and addressed its limitations in various places. For instance, their articulation of the West-Japan dichotomy is often nuanced with an explicit acknowledgement of overlaps between the typologies and Western thinkers whose viewers are similar to the Japanese (East Asian) typology (see Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017a, Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017). Sometimes their binary representation is quickly followed by a statement such as: “We would not go so far as to say everyone in East Asia shares this view, but neither would we deny it is the major form of self-construal in East Asia” (Rappleye, et al. 2020, p. 14). Such qualifying sentences are inserted to preempt the criticism of overgeneralization and rigid dichotomy.

In addition, Komatsu and Rappleye make more proactive moves in addressing the concerns around the use of dichotomy. In preempting the criticism of cultural essentialism, for instance, they develop a measured discussion around the distinction between culture and ontology, and this is most clearly expressed in their elaboration of Type II learning in the ‘PISA paradox’ article. They define Type II learning as an ontological disposition “specific to certain cultural traditions in the sense that those places embed these dispositions within culture, largely through teaching.” However, they quickly stress that “anyone in any culture can adopt Type II learning if s/he arrives at a corresponding concept of self in some way” (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017a, p. 288). Hence, they explain that the interdependent ontological disposition is available to any cultural group, but that some cultures, including Japan and East Asia, are more primed for it because people in East Asia are surrounded by cultural artefacts—including language, literature and architecture—as well as being embedded within the institutional structures that are underpinned by this particular way of being.

The distinction between culture and ontology is further elaborated upon in their subsequent discussion of the international borrowing of Japanese Lesson Study. Here they define culture as “an ontological manifestation (onto-culture) and an ontological disposition as something that can be taught (onto-pedagogy)” (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017, p. 422). Of note here is their characterization of ontology as something teachable, that is, not attributable to any specific ethnic or cultural group. They stress the significant role that institutions (e.g., schools) can play in promoting the particular ontological disposition needed for the successful implementation of Japanese Lesson Study. Hence, they argue that to make Lesson Study work in America requires a fundamental shift in the onto-cultural ‘grammar’ of American schooling and broader society, where a greater emphasis will have to be placed on “the way truth is a mutual construction, interdependence, and onto-pedagogies that reveal to students how the “I” is changeable” (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017, p. 422). The view that ontology can change and that the change can be achieved through pedagogic practices brings to the fore its dynamic nature, hence distancing their articulation of ‘difference’ from the static view of culture and ontology commonly associated with cultural essentialism. The aforementioned qualifying sentences as well as their measured discussion around culture and ontology are underpinned by Komatsu and Rappleye’s awareness of the reductive potentials often ascribed to the dichotomous representation of Japan (or East Asia) and the West, as problematized in my earlier critique (Takayama, 2011).

In some of their writings, however, Komatsu and Rappleye not only preempt possible criticism around the use of the Japan (East)-West binary but actively argue for it. In a lengthy footnote to their critique of the OECD’s wellbeing survey (Rappleye et al, 2020), they make the following counterargument to the criticism of cultural essentialism. It is worth

quoting at length:

We are well aware of the dangers inherent in drawing such a distinction and cognizant that it will provoke resistance among some. We are also aware of reviews such as Voronov and Singer (2002) who write: ‘When a whole culture or society is pigeonholed in dichotomous categories (e.g. masculine-feminine, active-passive, or loose-tight), subtle differences and qualitative nuances that are more characteristic of that social entity may be glossed over. Such descriptive labels evoke unduly fixed and caricaturelike mental impressions of cultures or societies rather than representative pictures of their complexities.’ Nonetheless, we feel that such sentiments are founded on an implicit methodological nationalism, i.e. that our role as researchers should be to nuance the homogenizing category of, say, ‘national’ identity. But the rise of PISA and the OECD’s work now means that the homogenization is taking place at the global level. To refuse to draw distinctions for fear of ‘pigeonholing’, differences that – we must remember – can be empirically substantiated in favour of a ‘diversity’ and ‘multiplicity’ argument is to give away the critical resources necessary to engage at the global level. It is also important to underscore that even Voronov and Singer admit that these distinctions do capture something important and therefore should not be discarded, but only further nuanced. Again, we recognize that not everyone in a given society shares these views but we believe that there are differences in means (relative distribution) and that highlighting those differences for pragmatic ends is important at this policy juncture. That said, one must be vigilant that these differences do not become reified (‘unduly fixed’) and function as easy substitutes for the effort of continuing to explore, engage, and elaborate these differences in worldview. (p. 20-21)

Of first note is their emphasis on the new politics of global homogenization in educational discourse. They suggest that researchers cannot afford to restrict their role to critiquing and unpacking homogenization at the national level, but must address the similar, equally coercive trend at the global level. Here it is worth noting, for later discussion, that they tend to prioritize the global over the national without hinting at the possibility of pursuing both or their intersectionality. Second, they stress the strategic nature of their deployment of dichotomy; binary representation can powerfully help us achieve “our pragmatic ends,” that is, pushing back against the global homogenization of educational discourse promoted by powerful international organizations and actors. To put it differently, they are of the view that we cannot afford to shy away from the use of binaries at this specific political juncture, even when we know they can be problematic; we just have to stay vigilant regarding their tendency for reification while carefully deploying them for “our pragmatic ends.” The third key feature of the above quote is their assertion of the empirical verifiability of difference between Japan (East Asia) and the West. While acknowledging that “not everyone in a given society shares these views,” they still insist upon the notion of “difference in mean (relative distribution)” between the East and the West. While the earlier cautionary discussion around the problem of reification and essentialism reflects their sensibilities toward the social construction of difference, the emphasis on “difference in mean” suggests that here they are basing their argument on empiricist—as opposed to social constructionist—grounds. From a strong social constructivist view, however, the statistical notion of ‘mean’ in and of itself is socially constructed, hence still susceptible to the social constructionist critique.

What emerges from the above review of Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship is their consistent struggle to deal with the paradoxes generated as a result of their strategic reliance on the Japan (East)-West dichotomy. They rightly identify as the most pressing challenge today the universalist promotion of Western onto-pedagogy, underpinned by ontological individualism, as the *de facto* global 'best practice.' They are consciously writing against the specific education policy juncture today in which history, language and culture are rapidly dismissed as meaningful contexts for education policy making. Furthermore, their work also reflects a degree of frustration at the fact that global education policy continues to perpetuate Western onto-pedagogy as a global public good at a time when the crisis of Western civilization is more pronounced than ever, with its social and ecological unsustainability demonstrated over the last few decades (e.g., Bowers, 1987; Hickel, 2020; Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021). Hence, their intervention should be read as strategic and necessarily paradoxical in that the authors are aware that their method of intervention has its inherent limitations, which need eventual 'overcoming.'

To what extent do Komatsu and Rappleye demonstrate much-needed reflexivities with their necessarily problematic and yet warranted interventions? The above discussion clearly suggests that they are cognizant of the argument for strategic essentialism; essentialism is problematic but its use can be justified on strategic grounds, depending on the specific positionalities of those who deploy it within the broader discursive configuration at a given moment in history. More specifically, it depends on 1) under what circumstance, 2) for what ends and 3) by whom the act of strategic essentialism is pursued (Spivak, 1988; see also Ota, 2001; Watanabe, 2015). In relation to the first two questions, Komatsu and Rappleye demonstrate their acute awareness of the particular political juncture that urgently necessitates the strategic deployment of the East-West binary and of the particular end it pursues. In terms of the third question, 'by whom,' Komatsu and Rappleye draw on Japanese domestic thoughts in order to advance their critique of international 'best practices'-cum-Western onto-pedagogy. They also express the concern that few Japanese scholars are engaged in discussion of Japanese education outside Japan (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021a, p. 198), echoing the similar concern expressed in my aforementioned critique (Takayama, 2011). However, to what extent their research represents the domestic Japanese educational research is debatable, a point to which I shall return shortly.

While the political intent of their interventions is worthy, it must be recognized that it is a project built entirely on the presumption of the 'radical otherness' of Japanese education; whatever is recognized as distinctively different about Japanese education from the Western norm ('best practices') is foregrounded as the 'essence' (or 'grammar') of Japanese education and then mobilized to challenge the pseudo-universality of 'best practices.' In this sense, their studies are deeply implicated in the process of social construction of the 'fundamental difference' between Japan (the East) and the West. Hence, their strategic work can only be justified with a full awareness of its paradoxical nature—strong reflexivity—where questions are consistently raised about what (and who) is included/excluded in the process and what consequences, if any, the construction of Japan's 'radical difference' might pose to the domestic and international debates. Komatsu and Rappleye's interventions demand a deep sense of ambivalence, reservation and even self-doubt about the politics of exclusion that are part and parcel of this discursive process (see Hashimoto, 2019).

2) *Transcending ontological reductionism*

Central to Komatsu and Rappleye's entire project is the presumption of the powerful, enduring role of ontological orientations and the cultural 'grammars' that embody them. They assume that given ontological dispositions are widely shared within the bounded geographical and cultural space of 'Japan' or 'East Asia'. At the same time, these dispositions are recognized as a product of human interventions, including schooling, and hence remain dynamic and changeable. The ontological differences thus constructed are then mobilized to account for the "onto-pedagogic grammar" that arguably shapes what goes on in the classroom and how a given pedagogical strategy (e.g. Lesson Study) is enacted in Japan (the East) and the West. Hence, their work gives ontological dispositions a privileged status.

The privileging of ontology comes with an admittedly reductive analysis in which ontological difference trumps everything else. Here, one is reminded of a particular version of Marxist analysis of education popular through the 1980s. In the 'correspondence' theory of Marxism, the economic relations ('base') determine what goes on in the 'superstructure' (school, state and culture etc). Drawing on this crude interpretation of Marxism, some critical education research studied how schools reproduced existing economic relations through differential provision of curricula and schooling for different social classes (see Apple, 1995 for a critique). In an attempt to transcend economic reductionism, subsequent scholars attempted to theorize how social class intersects with other socially salient differences, including race, gender and sexuality, among others. Similar reductionism is also seen in the world culture theory of global institutional isomorphism, where the global 'diffusion' of Western cultural norms or scripts is to account for the eventual institutional convergence in education on a global scale (see Rappleye, 2015 for a critique). Because Komatsu and Rappleye's work privileges ontology as the single most salient factor in explaining the educational differences between the East and the West, it ends up producing the same kind of reductionism as found in the correspondence theory and world culture theory. What is missing in Komatsu and Rappleye's research, then, is attention to how the ontological differences intersect with and are further complicated by the intra-societal differences—class, gender, 'race,' and sexuality etc.—through which differential power is exercised.

This is the very critique that I developed vis-à-vis international research on Japanese schooling prior to the surge of Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship (see Takayama, 2011). Their ontologically focused interventions may perpetuate the same culturalist discourse around Japanese uniqueness and homogeneity as the works of Tsuneyoshi, Sato and Cave. They also run the risk of promoting the view of culture/ontology as contained within the bounded space of the nation-state, though admittedly they do attempt to broaden their discussion beyond Japan by referring to East Asia. Their works, when translated into Japanese, could easily be appropriated to lend support for the cultural nationalist project in which the Japanese differences come to assume normative functions. Their identification of interdependent selfhood as the constitutive part of Japanese ontology, for instance, could be used not only to describe how the Japanese people are but to prescribe how they ought to be. Hence, it could help reproduce the prevailing discourse of Japanese schooling, which excludes those who do not necessarily subscribe to the prescribed way of being (Takayama, 2011). Regardless of their numerous cautionary remarks and qualifying statements that attempt to nuance the reductive dichotomy to preempt the anti-essentialist criticism, their continuous use of the East-West binary—the very essence of colonial logic—cannot escape the danger of reifying

the binary. Seen from a postcolonial point of view, their work turns the negative colonial binary into a positive force which is then mobilized to undermine the universalist premises of ‘the West.’ This oppositional reification of colonial difference, while it can be warranted on the ground of strategic essentialism, still erases the complex realities of cultural hybridity, cross-cultural interfaces and inherent fluidities of any boundaries (Chow, 2010).

Of considerable relevance here is Yoshio Sugimoto’s discussion of the dilemma of two types of multicultural orientations in social science research. Sugimoto (2014) argues that there exist “negative correlations” between what he calls “intra-societal multiculturalism and inter-societal multiculturalism” (p. 204-205). In his view, Komatsu and Rappleye’s work, which has exclusively pursued the latter, is part of “the anti-Eurocentric discourse that espouses the need for globally multicultural social sciences” (p. 205). While valuable in its own right, the key limitation of this approach is that it “is apt to portray Japanese society, even if strategically and implicitly, as a domestically monolithic and closed unit in an attempt to compete with the allegedly homogeneous ‘West,’ thereby tending to fall into the pitfall of intra-societal monoculturalism” (p. 205). By contrast, the approach that focuses on the former, intra-societal multiculturalism tends to underscore Japan’s similarity with other societies, thereby unable to “dilute the overall cultural hegemony of Euro-American sociology and inter-societal monoculturalism” (p. 205). My earlier research, including the critique mentioned earlier (Takayama, 2011), focused exclusively on intra-societal multiculturalism and consequently was ineffective in addressing the problem of inter-societal monoculturalism.

We ought to ask, then, whether or not one must pursue the two kinds of multiculturalizing projects simultaneously, or even whether that is feasible at all. Komatsu and Rappleye (2021a, p. 199) rightly argue that much domestic Japanese research on education tends to focus on intra-societal multiculturalism, with particular attention to class, gender and ethnicity disparities within Japanese education. Very few educational scholars in Japan adopt an international and comparative perspective to identify Japanese differences (Ichikawa, 1988), let alone to mobilize the differences to peculiarize and particularize what passes as ‘universal’ (Takayama, 2016). In this sense, Komatsu and Rappleye’s single focus on inter-societal multiculturalism can be justified in that it addresses the badly unbalanced nature of the existing scholarship on Japanese education within Japan. However, the issue under discussion here must also be considered in terms of how much their scholarship represents the domestic educational research in Japan, a topic to be explored shortly under *Learning from Japanese educational research*.

3) Countering the politics of anti-essentialism

Komatsu and Rappleye’s strategic use of dichotomy must be considered in relation to the emerging backlash against postcolonial and decolonial knowledge projects in the field of comparative and international education (CIE). Two established comparative education scholars, David Turner (2019) and Edward Vickers (2019), categorically reject the emerging projects around non-Western knowledge production and mobilization, including the Pan-African concept of Ubuntu and the decolonial CIE project. They view these projects as embodying a divisive form of anti-Western stances and cultural essentialism. In Turner’s view, for instance, the articulation of Ubuntu by the former president of the Comparative and International Education Society, N’Dri Therese Assie-Lumumba (2016), as an alternative philosophical resource from Africa relies on a divisive form of binary, which “ignores the most

important lesson of comparison, that within-group variance is always greater than between-group variance. And it is only by ignoring the variety of European and African positions that this dichotomy can be maintained” (Turner, 2019, p. 107). Furthermore, Turner rejects her characterization of Ubuntu as centered around the notion of interdependent selfhood as opposed to the dominant Western tradition that is more anthropocentric and individualistic. According to Turner (2019), her argument can only hold “if one is willing to ignore Dewey, Mead, Vygotsky, and Marx” (p. 107). Turner goes on to argue that there is nothing uniquely African there, as much of the same collectively oriented culture and education have long been articulated by these Western thinkers. In Turner’s mind, to reclaim Ubuntu as the key philosophical foundation for African education makes little sense, because not only does it offer nothing new in comparison to Western thinkers, its ‘origin’ cannot be traced. It is not too difficult to imagine how Turner might apply the same set of criticisms to Komatsu and Rappleye’s work on the West-East ontological difference and reach the same dismissive conclusion.

In a similar fashion, Vickers (2019) critiques the emerging decolonial scholarship in CIE, with a particular focus on the Comparative Education Review (CER)’s special edition *Contesting coloniality: Re-thinking knowledge production and circulation in comparative and international education* (Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell, 2017). Among his criticisms, his strongest reservation centers around what he calls the “anti-Western meta-narrative” (p. 4) that rejects everything associated with the West and valorizes anything otherwise. Vickers views the decolonial knowledge project as resting on “a vague and divisive system of categorization” (p. 5): West, North, Anglo-American, or Anglo-European, which conceives differences in highly essentialist terms; “‘Westerners and ‘non-Westerners’ inhabit radically divergent epistemic universes to begin with” (p. 11). In Vickers’ view, the decolonial knowledge work, represented by the CER special edition, “endows moral superiority to those who are deemed on the victim side of the divide” and mobilizes “divisive and essentializing forms of categorization in the cause of contesting Western coloniality” (p. 7). What results is the uncritical acceptance and celebration of any views and knowledge supposed to be “rooted in ‘subaltern epistemic locations’ (p. 7), and consequently the current situation where the merit of scholarship is judged not on the basis of what is argued but “who is doing the arguing” (p. 8), a point also raised by Turner (2019). Hence, there is a striking similarity between Turner’s and Vickers’ arguments in terms of their strong reservations around dichotomy, accentuation of difference and cultural essentialism. They both tend to reduce the emerging body of scholarship to a form of anti-Westernism, or politics of postcolonial resentment, where anything putatively Western is categorically rejected and anything non-Western is valorized. While some of the concerns expressed by Turner and Vickers are also shared by postcolonial scholars (see Chow, 2010, Ch 3), a careful reading of the scholarship critiqued reveals a degree of reductionism in the way these comparative education scholars characterize the decolonial alternative knowledge projects (see Stein, Andreotti, Susa, Ahenakew and de Souza, 2020).

What is worrisome here is their offhand dismissal of any collectively oriented articulation of difference. Here, anthropologist James Clifford’s (1999) response to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is worth noting. While appreciating Said’s attack on essences and oppositional distinctions, Clifford argues:

(...), but collectively constituted difference is not necessarily static or positionally dichotomous in the manner of Orientalism as Said describes it. There is no need to discard theoretically all conceptions of “cultural” difference, especially once this is seen as not simply received from tradition, language, or environment but also as made in new political-cultural conditions of global relationality. (p. 274)

At stake after Said’s postcolonial deconstruction of ‘essences’ is “the concept’s (culture’s) differential and relativist functions” that helps us counter “the positing of cosmopolitan essences and human common denominators” (Clifford, 1999, p. 275). If we accept Turner’s and Vickers’ rejection of any shared sense of difference on grounds of cultural essentialism, or any meaningful assertion of Eastern knowledge and African philosophy, then what are we left with? What means do we have to arrest the global convergence toward the Eurocentric model of education? To put it differently, Turner’s and Vickers’ deployment of the language of anti-essentialism renders them virtually indistinguishable from “those who wish to insulate their beliefs against the force of difference” (Geertz, 2000, p. 259), or those who tacitly endorse “the continuation of colonialism by other means” (Geertz, 2000, p. 258). It is these questions and concerns that Komatsu and Rappleye’s work brings to the fore for us. Needless to say, the very same questions raised above must be directed back to my earlier critique of cultural essentialism.

The question we ought to be asking, then, is how to resuscitate a meaningful notion of difference that circumvents essentialism and the reification of difference. This is the conundrum that scholars in anthropology and cultural studies have struggled to address since the publication of Said’s work and the postmodernism and deconstructionist turn (Clifford, 1999; Chow, 2010; Geertz, 2000; Hokari, 2011; Ota, 2001; Watanabe, 2015). While there is no easy answer to this conundrum, it should be clear by now that we cannot afford to dismiss the careful and strategic attempts to enunciate a collectively oriented notion of difference—as witnessed in Komatsu and Rappleye’s and Assié-Lumumba’s works—without due consideration for the questions of who is doing the work, to what ends and under what circumstances (Ota, 2001; Watanabe, 2015). The unthoughtful deployment of the language of anti-essentialism must be unlearned or “suspended” (Hokari, 2011, p. 227) in order to preserve difference as a vital resource for cross-culturalising work, which is arguably the central mission of CIE (see also Rappleye, 2020).

4) *Learning from Japanese educational research*

Japanese readers of Komatsu and Rappleye’s research may wonder to what extent it represents and honors domestic educational research in Japan. This question relates to the third point raised earlier in relation to the discussion of strategic essentialism (by whom). As discussed earlier, international and comparative analysis of Japanese education is rare within Japanese education research. As a result, few domestic studies look at Japanese education in terms of its national characteristics and trends, let alone its shared ontological foundations. As Komatsu and Rappleye rightly argue, domestic education research in Japan tends to focus on intra-societal multicultural issues, namely, educational inequalities based on gender, ethnicity and class etc. Reflecting this trend, the domestic education discourse tends to be highly critical of Japanese education; thus, the title of their Japanese book countering this trend, *Japanese education is not that bad* (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021a). Their discussion of the

strengths of Japanese education, illuminated through international comparative studies, helps address the badly lopsided discursive situation in Japan.

And yet, Komatsu and Rappleye (2021a) take a step further in their critique of domestic Japanese education research. This critique centers around the postwar discourse of education where, according to them, any positive appraisals of Japanese education have been automatically labeled as ‘nationalistic’ (p. 200). They trace the origin of this self-negating discourse to the ‘catch-up mentality’ (p. 186) of Japanese modernizers of the late 19th century and the postwar reformers, characterized by the unquestioned belief that Japan must model itself after the West (the US) in order to meet Western standards (p. 186-7). Continuing with this historical legacy, they maintain, Japanese education reformers have long engaged in uncritical mimicking of Western (US) pedagogic practices and thoughts, with ‘active learning’ as the most recent iteration.

Following this historically informed analysis, Komatsu and Rappleye (2021a) direct their criticism towards Japanese education scholars and the media for perpetuating the self-deprecating legacy. With regard to the former, they stress that many educational research associations were established immediately after the war when those with a positive view on Japan’s past were expelled from government positions, and when learning from the US was the default position (p. 187). Here, their argument echoes, perhaps rather paradoxically, the familiar conservative account of politics in Japan, wherein the postwar social and cultural ‘malaises’ are explained as the outcome of Japan’s uncritical acceptance of US liberalism and culture (Takayama, 2020b).

It is in this analysis of postwar Japan that we observe the limitations of Komatsu and Rappleye’s analysis and argument, more specifically the limitations imposed by their reliance on the Japan-West dichotomy. In the above analysis, they explain the self-negating postwar discourse of Japanese education in terms of the uncritical acceptance of anything Western or American. While there is a tendency to continue to look up to the US as the source of educational inspiration in Japanese educational research (see Takayama, 2016), the critical appraisal of Japanese education researchers towards their own education cannot be reduced to this single factor. Here, the kind of international and comparative perspective that Komatsu and Rappleye advocate seems warranted; education scholars and media in most liberal democratic states are just as critical of their own countries’ education as are those in Japan, and education research in these countries tends to focus on intra-societal struggles because that is primarily where the politics of (re)distribution and recognition play out. Hasty attribution of domestic problems to uncritical acceptance of ‘things Western’ is a standard rhetoric of the “postcolonial politics of resentment” (Chen, 2010, p. xiii), where ‘Western cultural ‘contamination’ is singled out as the culprit. Failing to distance itself from what could be considered a nativist political discourse might render Komatsu and Rappleye’s work susceptible to the criticisms of essentialism and anti-Westernism, as proffered by Turner and Vickers. Furthermore, their argument could be construed as dismissing the legitimate scholarly concerns about intra-societal struggles over matters of economic (re)distribution and cultural recognition in/through schooling within Japan.

5) Making research relevant to both national and international debates

One of the innovative aspects of Komatsu and Rappleye’s scholarship is the use of PISA data (or other large-scale student performance data) to peculiarize and particularize its

underpinning assumptions. To put it differently, they deploy the secondary analysis of PISA data to challenge the internal logic of PISA itself. It is this aspect of their critique that sets itself apart from many other critical studies that attempt to critique PISA by drawing on logics, theories and normative principles that are external to PISA (see Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021b for a full elaboration).

While this line of scholarly pursuit is most brilliantly executed in some of their English-language works (e.g., Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017a, 2017b; Rappleye et al. 2020), their most recent Japanese publication seems to deviate from it. In *Japanese education is not that bad* (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021a) they rely heavily on PISA data, along with other domestic and international data, to challenge the prevailing self-negating view of Japanese education within Japan. In so doing, however, they reinforce the legitimacy of PISA as a credible source of data for national education policy-making. Here, they may struggle to distinguish themselves from the PISA spokesperson, Andreas Schleicher, who claims that PISA data is above national politics and hence optimal for education policy-making. Needless to say, this view does not sit comfortably with their more politically astute deployment of PISA data, as reviewed in this article, wherein they successfully undermine the credibility of PISA as a culturally neutral international and comparative student performance assessment.

Their contradictory uses of PISA data are highlighted here not to dismiss their scholarship but to foreground the immense challenges of speaking simultaneously to the national and international educational debates (see Takayama, 2020b). The task is even more difficult in a national context like Japan, where the language difference separates domestic education research and debate from the broader international, English-based policy discourse. Reflecting this disconnect, Komatsu and Rappleye seem to adopt markedly different approaches to PISA depending on to which language community they write. On the one hand, their numerous English-language writings focus primarily on undermining the legitimacy of PISA and countering its complete disregard for the rich idiosyncrasies of education around the world. Their Japanese-language publication, on the other hand, focuses on challenging the dominance of the self-negating, dismissive discourse about Japanese education within Japan. These two agendas are closely related in their mind; by removing the prevailing negativities, Japanese education scholars can identify the ‘hidden’ strengths of Japanese education hitherto unacknowledged within the domestic debate. It is these strengths, or their radical differences, that they urge Japanese scholars to mobilize in order to arrest the global encroachment of the ‘best practices.’ Removed from the domestic education discourse and politics, PISA data provides an expedient means to convince Japanese researchers and the general public that ‘Japanese education is not that bad’ and that some aspects of Japanese schooling are unique and can be mobilized as a resource for education researchers beyond Japan (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021a).

Granted that their pragmatic approach to PISA data is understandable, it does violate their principled approach to PISA, which they refer to as “the middle approach”: “one that locates itself somewhere between unreflexively utilising PISA-data and denying it altogether” (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021b, p. 9). While they have shown how this middle approach has worked to rearticulate PISA towards alternative educational theorizing, the Japanese book, which engages in a less reflexive form of PISA data use, reveals that they have been somehow “subsumed by aims of the OECD, the assumptions of its test makers, or narrow national policymaking priorities” (Komatsu and Rappleye, 2021b, p. 2). At this moment, however,

this contradiction is only visible to bilingual researchers who are familiar with both their English-language research output and their Japanese book.

For Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship to become more relevant to the domestic educational debate in Japan, it must acknowledge the inherently contradictory nature of what they identify as the 'strengths' of Japanese education. As many Japanese education scholars rightly argue, the strengths of Japanese education can be a double-edged sword. For instance, the collectively oriented school culture, or the inter-dependently focused onto-pedagogy, to use Komatsu and Rappleye's parlance, comes at a price; it may breed a dense sense of in-group belonging that could generate exclusionary effects for those who are 'othered' in various ways, including linguistic, cultural, physical, socio-economic and sexuality-oriented differences (Ishii, 2020; Shimizu, 2010). While no doubt Komatsu and Rappleye's scholarship is warranted for the project of inter-societal multiculturalism and has generated new insights hitherto underexplored in domestic Japanese research, it must account for the inherently contradictory effects of what they see as the key characteristics/strengths of Japanese schooling, which they promote internationally. This insight is of crucial political importance at a time when the Japanese government has begun actively exporting its model of education overseas (see Hashimoto, 2019 for a critique).

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Hikaru Komatsu and Jeremy Rappleye's scholarship has made a tremendous contribution to the field of CIE, international research on Japanese education, and Japanese domestic education research. Through a series of studies where philosophy and quantitative method are combined generatively, these two researchers have placed Japanese (and East Asian) education at the center of the ongoing international debate. Their work has inspired many of us who study Japanese and East Asian education, including myself. In this article, however, I attempted to critically assess their scholarship, in particular in light of my earlier critical review of international literature on Japanese schooling. In dialoguing with Komatsu and Rappleye's research, I identified the five key themes/challenges around which the broader implications of their research were explored. In particular, I highlighted the set of tensions and contradictions generated as a result of their paradoxical interventions as well as the complexities of contributing simultaneously to the national and international debates. In a nutshell, my critical engagement with Komatsu and Rappleye's work was meant to explore the different ways in which postcolonial predicaments could be navigated in/through CIE research.

Much of the discussion developed in this paper sprang out of a series of conversations with the two authors, in particular Jeremy Rappleye, who is my colleague at the Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University. I have spent many hours over the past two and half years discussing with him our scholarship, both during work hours and in private time. Komatsu and Rappleye's research, reviewed in this paper, has had a lasting impact on my recent thinking/rethinking, partially documented elsewhere as well (Takayama, 2020b). In this sense, this article, which began as an attempt to critically assess their research, has actually done more than that; it has forced me to reflect upon and document how much their research has triggered a shift in my own thinking over the last several years. They have helped me to

seriously consider the essentially paradoxical and strategic nature of the use of binaries as well as their limitations. While I stand by much of the critique that I developed a decade ago, I am far more cognizant of its limitations; the critique could have been delivered in a more nuanced manner, in light of the broader global policy conjecture as well as the discursive context of CIE scholarship as explored in this paper. In this sense, the paper is both about the work of Komatsu and Rappleye and about my own process of ‘overcoming self,’ or learning through negation (Takayama, 2020a).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Taeko Okitsu and Jeremy Rappleye for taking the time to read and comment on an earlier draft of the article. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any shortcomings of the arguments presented.

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