

# Reimagining Modern Education: Contributions from Modern Japanese Philosophy and Practice?

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Amidst ongoing attempts to think beyond Western frameworks for education, there is a tendency to overlook Japan, perhaps because it appears highly modern. This is striking given that some prominent strands of Japanese philosophy have formulated an explicit and exacting challenge to the core onto-epistemic premises of modern Western thought. It is also surprising because Japanese educational practices have resulted in some of the highest achievement outcomes—both cognitive and noncognitive—found anywhere in the world and inculcate a worldview that is distinct.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** Herein, we thus attempt to make visible the potential contribution of modern Japanese philosophy by outlining some of the core ideas, then turn to sketch resonances with and responses to other projects outlined in this Special Issue. Our approach is elucidation through relational comparison.

**Findings:** Through this process, we suggest that the notion of self-negation as a mode of learning may be helpful in explaining why—at the empirical level—the outlook of Japanese students, and perhaps other East Asian students, diverge markedly from their Western peers. Yet we also find that an attempt, such as ours, to link divergent onto-epistemic thought to alternative empirical hypotheses quickly gives rise to various doubts and discomforts, even among otherwise sympathetic scholars.

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**Originality/Value:** In directly responding to these doubts, one original contribution of our piece is to show just how difficult it may ultimately be to divest from the symbolic foundations already laid by Western liberalism: Even if divergent thought can be imagined and different cultural narratives explored, dominant readings of empirical “realities” continue to be entrapped in the logic laid by Western liberalism.

### Keywords

Japanese education, Kyoto School philosophy, modes of learning, stereotypes, Western liberalism

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## Introduction: Beyond the Western horizon via the Kyoto School?

Buddhism in this respect is ontologically a system based on the category of *relatio*, in contrast to, say, the Platonic-Aristotelian system which is based on the category of *substantia*.

—T. Izutsu (1977, p. 23)

Our contribution to the Special Issue attempts to think through the Kyoto School, one of the most original and influential strands of modern Japanese philosophical thought. Built largely out of Japanese interpretations of Zen (Chinese: Ch’an) and existential phenomenology, the Kyoto School stands as both challenge and co-creation: It arose from the conflict of Buddhism and Western modern thought but is marked by interactions that are highly creative. Herein, we suggest that the Kyoto School may serve as one generative resource for thinking beyond the Western horizon. More specifically, Kyoto School ideas may indicate how the symbolic foundations of modern education might be reconstructed on different ontological “foundations.” This suggestion was confirmed and deepened in our interactions in the Shanghai Symposium. That is, we came to feel more strongly in Shanghai that the critical concerns and creative (re)constructions of the Kyoto School overlap with and may enrich the wider discussion.

In what follows, we closely follow the structure laid out by the Editors in outlining the Special Issue, at least up until the final task of empirical elaboration. First, we contrast the Kyoto School’s alternative ideas to Western (liberal) thought, seeking to sketch the fundamental differences, roughly along the lines summarized by Izutsu above. Although the synthetic Kyoto School cannot be reduced to Buddhism alone, much of what makes it distinctive is the nontheistic traditions of Buddhism that it carries forward (in English see Wargo, 2005). In the second section, we turn to focus on the triad of knowledge, subjectivity, and learning, showing how the Kyoto School’s contribution is an emphasis on self-negation (or self-emptying, self-overcoming). We underscore here that these terms articulate a mode of encounter, rather than a metaphysical claim. Some

readers may find it more easy to grasp the term self-emptying as a return to the primary relations out of which subject and object subsequently arise, with all the implications for dynamism, elusion of categories, and constant creativity this entails. In the third section, we turn to draw explicit connections to other projects in the Special Issue, as well as flag some points of divergence that may catalyze future dialogue. In the final section, we had initially intended to show—both analytically and in actual practice—how these ideas could open up new ways of seeing modern education; new hypotheses that would allow innovative empirical projects.

Yet, having received critical responses in Shanghai (and elsewhere) to this move to extend philosophy to empirical “realities,” we felt obliged to respond directly here to those concerns. We do this in the fourth section. That is, rather than proceed in trying to bring Kyoto School insights into mainstream educational research, we decided to prioritize the relations, conversations, and concerns voiced at the Symposium. The final section thus emerges as a “clearing of house” of many concerns about modern Japanese education and self-negation that, we argue, have largely been generated by Western liberal analytical frames. In conclusion, we invite the readers to join us in thinking through how best to proceed in the future, as we ourselves continue to experiment with practically viable solutions to move ideas “beyond the Western horizon” *into mainstream research*. More generally, our piece can be read as a sketching out more explicitly ideas that have remained largely implicit in our other papers (e.g., Komatsu & Rapple, 2017a; Rapple et al., 2019) and an attempt to place our ongoing work into dialogue with other resonant projects.

### **The Kyoto School alternative: From ontological individualism to radical relationality**

The Kyoto School represents a direct challenge to Western liberalism in education, particularly liberalism’s first assumption of ontological individualism. The Western liberal ontology begins with the presumption of selfhood as substance, one grasped on the higher plane of reason. This view underpins Cartesian Man and has become increasingly persuasive, particularly in Anglo-American circles (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985; Siedentop, 2014; Taylor, 1989). Moreover, this metaphysical view has formed the very basis for Western humanist education: the training of individual reason and will, the maturity of self, and—under Hegel—a form of heroic subjectivity that progressively remakes the World according to Reason. This triad of individualism, reason, and progress has formed much of the symbolic foundation of Western thought, arising with Stoicism and Pauline Christianity and deepened via the Enlightenment (what Edwards’ commentary to this Special Issue accurately describes as Christianity in secularism form). Even when modern education thinkers attempted to challenge this view (e.g., Marx and Freire), they usually failed to think beyond “the self directing individual [that] treats freedom as unconditional, positive forms of power as an expression of individual agency, and authority as centered in individual judgement”

(Bowers, 1987, p. 23). In effect, the substantive self remains the primarily educational project of Western modernity, liberal, and otherwise. It attempts to form the agentive, independent individual to drive social and political progress.<sup>1</sup>

The Kyoto School alternative asks us to recognize relationality, but in its most fundamental sense. Although Buddhism has often been marked in Western discourses as either nihilistic or mystic (Clarke, 1997), the Kyoto School argues the Mahayana (Sanskrit: Madhyamika, “intermediate”) case for radical relationality; radical in the sense of being ontological. That is, an individual entity only becomes what it is in relation to another individual entity; a “stand alone” individual entity cannot arise (i.e., it cannot autogenerate). Instead of substantive entities, we have merely events in the ongoing relational co-constitution of the world. The alternative state it “aims”<sup>2</sup> to achieve is a state of emptiness (Sanskrit: Sunyata; Japanese: ku). This implies the dropping away of the self that lies on “this side” of the intermediate line of relationality, a state that allows what lies on “that side” to emerge in its suchness (Sanskrit: tathagata). Or more accurately, a dropping away of the notion of a substance that endures beyond that intermediating interaction. This state might also be understood as a realization of complete embeddedness wherein the notion of a disparate self disappears, hence the Kyoto School’s frequent use of terms that signal this negation: no-self, nothingness, emptiness, and so on.

The reason for such an emphasis on (no)self is the belief that a reified self entails essentialism; a worldview that mistakenly envisages a world devoid of change and eternally present objects. These views become the starting point for all subsequent distortions:

From the point of view of Zen Buddhism, the “essential” tendency of the empirical ego is not admissible not only because it posits everywhere “objects” as permanent substantial entities, but also particularly, because it posits itself, the empirical ego, as an ego-substance. It not only adheres to the external “objects” as so many irreducible realities, but it clings to its own self as an even more irreducible, self-subsistent reality. (Izutsu, 1969, p. 92)

This should not be mistaken for the search for a subjective psychological state of nonattachment or bliss, some sort of therapeutic island of tranquility. Instead, it is an expansive way of seeing the world; a worldview. Indeed, it is the expansiveness of the vision that allows the Kyoto School to thus demonstrate how this radical relationality can be extended to myriad concerns of philosophy (logic, epistemology, ethics, ontology) and forms of social life; how it can generate new insights on everything from the modern reification of time (e.g., Rappleye & Komatsu, 2016) to ethical systems not predicated on individualism (Sevilla, 2017) to cosmopolitan citizenship devoid of temporal progress (Yano & Rappleye, in press) to the use of language that prioritizes the predicate (Sakabe, 1999). That is, it is generative in its unwinding of what has been reified ontologically by an empirical ego-substance world. While the Kyoto School

approach may be unsatisfying to a mind schooled in modernity and seeking something more “substantive,” we contend that the Kyoto School’s “mode of encounter” of unwinding the now reified is timely as we are tasked with rethinking the taken-for-granted assumptions of Western liberalism. If the modern minds view knowledge as a “what” (substance), the Kyoto School understands it as a “how” (relation).

## **Reconstructing knowledge, subjectivity (self), and learning:**

### **Self-emptying as a mode of encounter**

The Kyoto School seeks to reconstruct onto-epistemic arrangements and subjectivity on this alternative foundation in at least four ways. First, it offers a critical deconstruction of the meta- of metaphysics, that is, the belief in a separate ontological realm where objects can be found in their true being. It holds that the presupposition of this meta realm is what gives rise to substance ontology, as horizontal relations between entities (not substances) are cut and replaced with vertical relations. The hypostatization of the realm of Forms (or Heaven in Pauline parlance) must be denied in order to recoup the possibility of radical relationality.

Second, the Kyoto School—like nearly all Buddhists—suggests that the self becomes the category or place where relationality can be experienced and verified. It is not, as sometimes assumed, that the self is the only concern. It is simply—if we might be permitted an oversimplification—the easiest methodological route to realization of relationality.

Third, the Kyoto School attempts to keep us focused on immediate relationality by challenging questions posed from outside the immediate relation. That is, we frequently address questions of onto-epistemology and subjectivity by first imagining in our mind’s eye how it might work, that is, stepping back to conceptualize it like a stage play. In such a move, we set ourselves up as a spectator or theorist (from Greek *theoria* from which the word theory and theater both derive). But the Kyoto School, at least in some readings, requests us not to make that move of withdrawal to the position of “spectator” (to not resort to what Haraway once called “The God Trick”). We are always and inextricably embedded. Nishida Kitaro, the founder of the Kyoto School, instead sought to outline a state where “there is not yet a subject or an object, and knowing and its object are completely unified” (Nishida, 1911[2003], p. 9. It is worth underscoring that this position was not only shared among Kyoto School philosophers, but a range of other major Japanese modern thinkers who are not explicitly identified as Kyoto School affiliates, including Hiromatsu Wataru and Ohmori Shozo (Higaki, 2015). Ohmori (1996) underscores that the subject–object split “is the one theme which has been most frequently discussed in Japan” (p. 14), because “since the adoption of Western philosophy, many Japanese have found the subject–object split not merely uncomfortable, but even something inducing a visceral rebellion” (p. 14).<sup>3</sup>

Put more simply, when thinking about the nature of reality, we might logically wish to step back and ask: *If relations co-construct subject and object, what constructs that field itself despite all the other possible fields of relations?* Yet such a question signals that the ego is trying to transcend the immediate field of relations that constitute it; that ego-substance is trying to break free and grasp what constitutes it symbolically, that is, as a representational object. One possible reading of Buddhism well-known answer of “MU” (無, Nothingness) to all metaphysical inquiries might be something like: “The question is meaningless in a world without meta-, stay focused on the immediate web of relations.”<sup>4</sup>

This leads to the fourth strategy for reconstruction: maintaining a healthy distance from words, seeing these symbols as constitutive of meaning only in a relational sense not an absolute (substance) sense. This move is familiar after Derrida and carries forward Daoist ideas.

To fully accomplish this reconstruction, however, a new form of learning is inevitable: one of self-emptying. It might be argued that a substance ontology view of learning results in three pathways: either a transcendence toward Form through Reason, an inward search for “true” self-identity, or outward toward objects (see You, 2020). The search is for substance either Up there, In here, or Out there. In contrast, a radical relation ontology view of learning requires that either the presumption of ego-substance be eliminated or one immerses one-self in things out there so thoroughly that the notion of self disappears. This state is emptiness (*sunyata*), but can also be understood more positively as condition-less acceptance of what lies on “the other side”:

... to betake ourselves to the dimension where things become manifest in their suchness, to attune ourselves to the selfness of the pine tree and the selfness of the bamboo. The Japanese word for ‘learn’ (*narau*) carries the sense of ‘taking after’ something, of making an effort to stand essentially in the same mode of being as the thing one wishes to learn about. It is on the field of *sunyata* that this becomes possible. (Nishitani, 1991, p. 128)

Here, the point of emphasis is the “mode of engagement” required to learn. And what is learning itself? It is fundamental transformation: One must be moved by the encounter for it to qualify as learning. The realization of relatedness cannot mean simply the accumulation of information by a fundamentally untransformed self (like a container where representative images of the other side are stored). It is instead the experience of change in the fundamental constitution of self; a deeper transformation that at once reveals the previous self’s non-substantiality (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017a; Rappleye, 2020). As Silova (2020) points out in her piece, learning signifies a “metamorphosis” that becomes an antidote to the “learning” grounded in Western metaphysics that searches endlessly for essential substance. The terms “self-emptying” or “self-negation” attempt to capture this shift from epistemology to ontology: not changes in knowledge alone but the very constitution of being.

And it is crucial to underscore—in the light of the rise of ecological concerns—since the Kyoto School vision is a mode of encounter, it does not make a distinction between human and non-human objects, as suggested by Nishitani above (and anyways rejects the distinction between culture and nature which arose from Western metaphysics). In line with Taylor's (2020) project in this Special Issue to allow nature to speak in the active voice, we note that the impact of this inherent non-dualism on the Japanese language itself is considerable: Numerous forms of poetry show nature in the active voice combined with self-negation (e.g., the poetry of Basho) and onomatopoeia—what Abram describes as the language of mimicking nature (Abram, 1997, p. 145)—still dominates the Japanese language. It is estimated that the Japanese language still utilizes over 4,500 words of onomatopoeia, while these words have largely been removed from Western languages and even “disappeared from *modern Chinese*” (Luo et al., 2014, p. 372, italics added).

### **The Kyoto School in relation: Resonances with other projects**

The critical concerns and creative constructions of the Kyoto School resonate strongly with the other projects represented in this Special Issue. Reviewers of our piece suggested that we may wish to spend some time making clear various differences between Kyoto School notion of relationality and those of major Western thinkers such as Heidegger (*Das Mas* viewed negatively) and Derrida (largely symbolic, lacking embodiment). However, given limited space, we instead chose to sketch out where the Kyoto School sits within this web of relations brought forth by the Symposium, rather than where we might place it within the critical fringes of the Western mainstream. In doing so, our review below serves as “connective tissue” (Silova, 2020) to deepen the dialogue, while also nuancing our views of Kyoto School ideas.

#### ***Post/De-colonial***

In terms of post/de-colonial thought, the Kyoto School represents a hybrid of East Asian and Western thought; one that refuses the temptations of both universalism and nativism/particularism. Its critical mood resonates strongly with postcolonialism, while its constructive foundations in non-Western thought make it solidly de-colonial. Its notion of self-negation in the process of learning seems to gesture toward a pedagogy to accompany the de-colonial turn: Only in the suspension of the self-evident frames of the present could there be any hope for thinking in different ways; for engaging with alternatives. This form of engagement is powerfully shown in Takayama's (2020) contribution to this Special Issue. Differences with postcolonialism lie, perhaps, in the depth of the challenge the Kyoto School proposes: It demands a move beyond epistemology to ontology, underscoring that not just knowledge but the “fundamental building blocks” of our worldview have been indelibly shaped by Western thought (e.g., Wu's [2011] discussion of how language changed under the impact from the West). It might challenge

postcolonial theorists to think: *Is the critique unfolded at a level deep enough? Or does it still flounder on the bedrock assumptions about language, self, symbolic-normative frames, and the Platonic-Aristotelian ontology of substantia on which the Western academy was founded?*

### **Ecofeminism**

Resonances with ecofeminist thought are particularly strong. Tracing its roots back to Plumwood's (1993) highly resonant critique of Western metaphysics, such statements sometimes appear that they could be lifted directly out of the writings of the Kyoto School:

Becoming with is therefore an ongoing relational ontological process...the kind of learning that proceeds from the unfolding of real-life, inter-subjective, inter-species ontological relations. (Taylor, 2017, p. 7)

When Stengers (2012) writes of the nonconceptual but completely experiential nature of assemblages, we hear resonances with Nishitani:

The indeterminacy proper to assemblages is no longer conceptual. It is part of an experience that affirms the power of changing to be NOT attributed to our own 'selves' nor reduced to something natural. It is an experience that honors change as a creation. (p. 8)

Divergences, where they exist, perhaps lie in the degree to which *relatio* is mediated by language (Rose), the degree to which female is afforded an essential status (concerns raised in Tomalin, 2017, p. 467), and the emphasis placed on remembering and recovering from the destruction of the past: *To what degree might this attachment to history block us from living relations in the present?*

### **Chinese thought**

The close affinities between Mahayana Buddhism (especially Zen) and Chinese thought can be traced historically: Daoist terminology was all that was available when translating the depth of the new Indian Buddhist ideas; Confucian ideas were received on the foundations of Buddhist thought in Japan. Concretely, there is evidence that in Japan Zen (Ch'an) learning practices were integrated into Confucian learning models (e.g., "silent sitting"), and Wu's description of learning resonates strongly with forms of learning still found in modern Japan:

Learning is a process of incessant modification of self, undertaken for the attainment of enlightenment and happiness. And the role of teaching is to detect the horizon of student readiness and make it a handover of a learning opportunity. Pedagogy as a heart-to-heart encounter of inter-subjective interpretation... (Wu, 2011, p. 575, see also Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017a)

Confucianism clearly resonates with this relationality and intersubjective interpretation: "to cultivate an ethical and relational self that brings harmony to the community and the world"

(Zhao, 2016, p. 499, see You, 2020). Yet, here is where we might also detect several divergences. First, Confucian thought talks more of self-cultivation and the enlargement or expansion of self (albeit understood ethically). This stands in contrast to the heavy emphasis on self-negating in Buddhism. Second, it is unclear—at least from the selected readings—whether or not this Confucian “relational” self extends beyond preestablished familial linkages and/or the natural world:

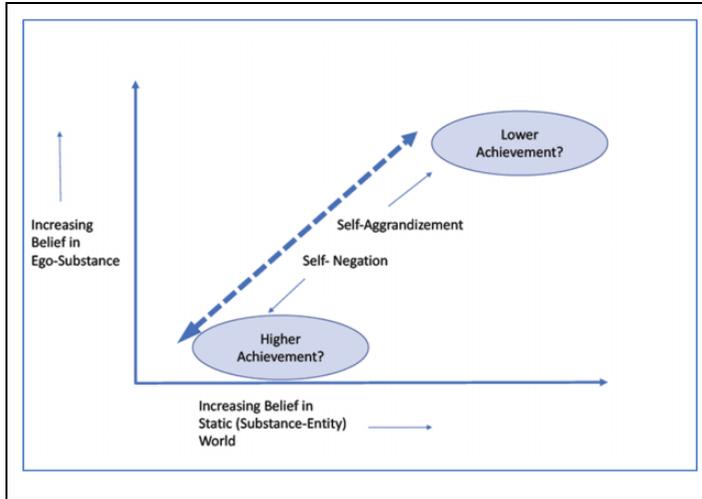
Within the Chinese context, it has been difficult to locate the source of human relatedness beyond family and social networks. Those beyond the personal circle of family and friends, unknown and unrelated to one’s personal life, remain nobodies, and there are no cultural resources to grant them recognition and respect. (Zhao, 2016, p. 513)

We wonder aloud whether it might be useful here to think about the distinction between Confucian relationality and Mahayana relationality as active-ethical versus passive-ontological? In active relationality, relations are conditional, that is, chosen beforehand or structured by pre-determined criteria. In passive relationality, relations are forever present, unchosen, and without criteria. This passive relationality thus allows for the extension of relatedness beyond “family and social networks,” that is, the natural world. We note the strong affinities with Li’s claim in this Special Issue that: “the Buddhist concept of no-self, *anattā*, points out that one’s moral intuition is always situated in the web of social and ecological interconnections” (Li, 2020, p. 98).

### **From philosophy to practice: Is it possible?**

In the worldview of Modernity . . . “human being” is severed from encompassing relationships and is regarded as an unambiguous, creative “subjectivity” that sees and moves relationships from an autonomous, external position . . . [But in Japan] in the face of this “autonomy” of self which has been so heavily emphasized, it is crucial to once again recognize the educational importance of dependence, something devalued and downgraded in [modern] education. (Association of the History of Educational Thought, 2017, pp. 352–353)

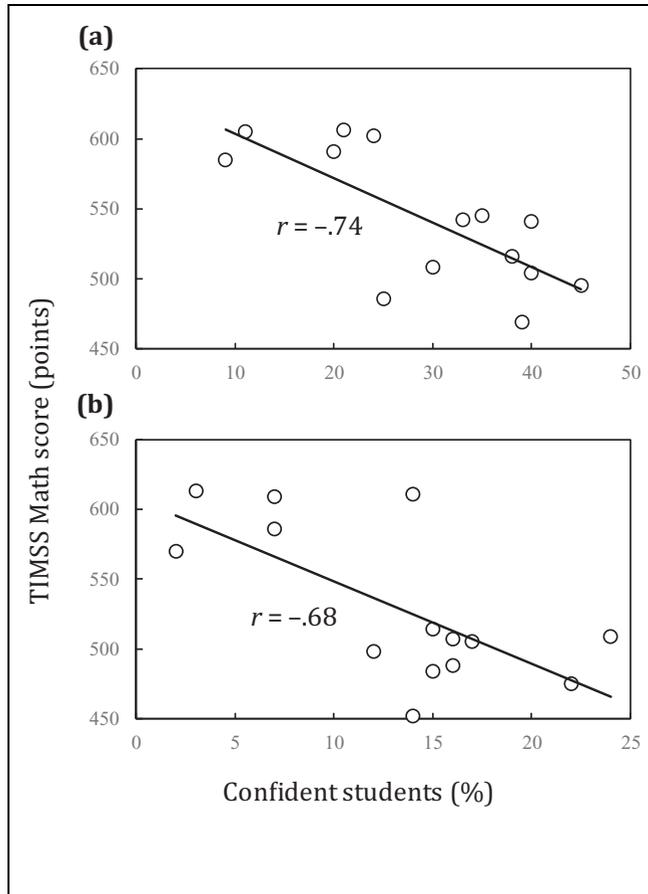
But are these philosophical insights wholly divorced from the realities of practice? We think not. And we are not alone. As this quote from Japan’s authoritative, scholarly *Encyclopedia of Educational Thought* (Association of the History of Educational Thought, 2017) explicitly emphasizes in its entry on “Self,” modern Japanese education has continually struggled with these different notions of self. This is further confirmed by, say, a range of research—here we purposefully cite only English works—showing how policy debates have often revolved around the difficulty of “individualism” (Cave, 2001), how achievement is understood relationally (Shimizu, 1999), and even how Kyoto School ideas have actually explicitly informed education policy (Yano & Rapplee, in press). In Japanese high school textbooks such as *Ethics (rinri)*, *Modern Society*



**Figure 1.** Schematic drawing of the inverse relationship between self-concept and ontological realization that many Kyoto School thinkers seemed to envisage.

(gendai shakai), and Language (kokugo, particularly in engagement with the works of Natsume Soseki and Mori Ogai), both the difficulties of “modern self” and Kyoto School ideas are explicitly discussed. Our point here is that the attempt to extend to the empirical should not be read as a simplistic attempt to read a simple cause-and-effect relationship between the Kyoto School and practice. Instead, it is an attempt to highlight how core ideas (e.g., how learning is approached) and practice both derive from the same worldview, thus making Kyoto School ideas more relevant theoretical tools than those forged from Western worldviews to view Japanese practice (and new theoretical tools to view modern Western practices).

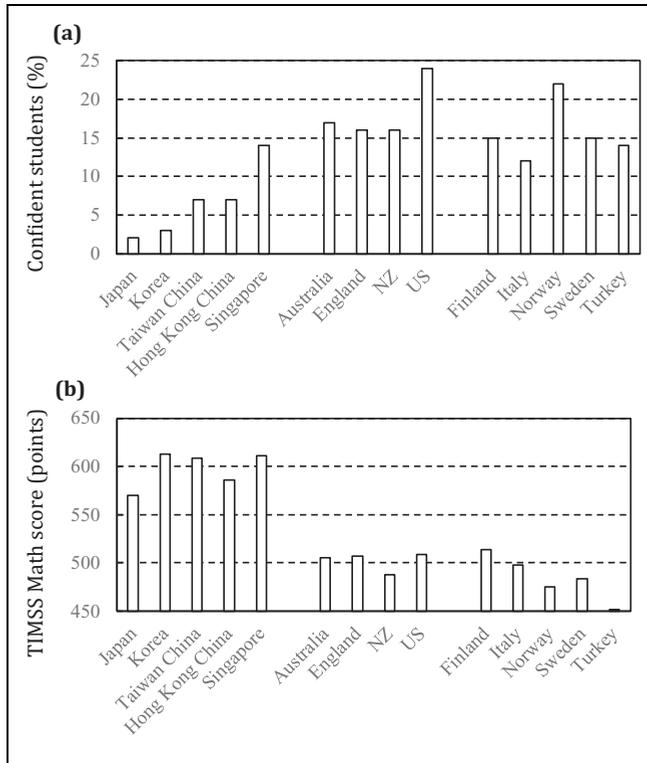
In this vein, we initially sought to extend empirically by (re)examining various “anomalies” in practice with the new theoretical lenses gestured to above. That is, by placing “learning as self-emptying” as the educational approach of a radically relational ontology, it becomes possible to think about modern schooling, particularly in East Asia, in novel ways. Figure 1 represents a rough schematic drawing of the inverse relationship between self-concept and ontological realization that many Kyoto School thinkers seemed to envisage. The *Y*-axis represents an increasing belief in ego-substance (e.g., a substantive “I”), while the *X*-axis represents an increasing belief that the world is made up of static entities, that is a decreasing belief it is relational and fluid. To the degree that the self is hypostasized, the view of the world (symbolic kosmos) becomes objective and static, while the degree of self-negation (or re-embedding) transforms the world (kosmos) into a relational and fluid entity. If we take the further step of hypothesizing that the relational and fluid worldview leads to higher (academic) achievement,



**Figure 2.** Relationship between the percentage of students who were confident with math and TIMSS math scores: (a) fourth grade and (b) eighth grade. For this figure, we used data for Western countries which have been the OECD members since the 1970s and East Asian countries/regions. Original data were derived from TIMSS & PIRLS (2012a, pp. 336–339).

then our prescription for education becomes finding means of self-emptying or self-negating, that is, re-embedding within relational contexts.

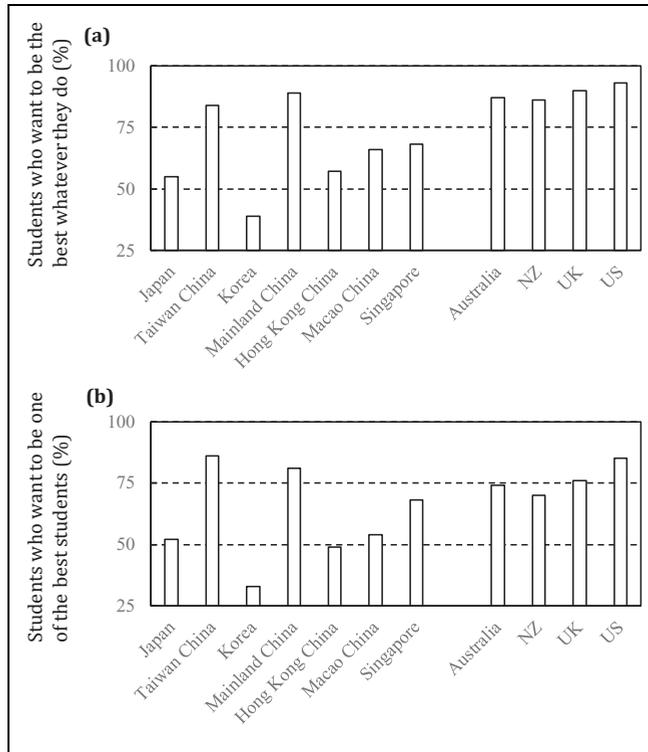
Here one of the most interesting and yet-unexplained empirical puzzles in the world of education is that in international comparisons, East Asian students tend to be less confident and yet the highest performing. In worldwide terms, analyzing country/region-level data of TIMSS 2011 (TIMSS & PIRLS, 2012a), we can observe a strong negative correlation between the percentage of students who were confident with math and the math score ( $r = -.74$  for fourth graders and  $-.68$  for eighth graders; see Figure 2). We can also observe similar correlations for science ( $r = -.58$  for fourth graders and  $-.53$  for eighth graders; TIMSS & PIRLS, 2012b). We note that we are not the



**Figure 3.** (a) Percentage of eighth grader students who were confident with math and (b) TIMSS math scores for different countries/regions. For this figure, we used data for Western countries which have been the OECD members since the 1970s and East Asian countries/regions.

first to recognize this “paradox” (at least when viewed from Western liberalism) but we may be among the first to attempt to suggest these empirical “realities” could be linked to symbolic (philosophical and cultural) foundations (see Shen & Tam, 2008).

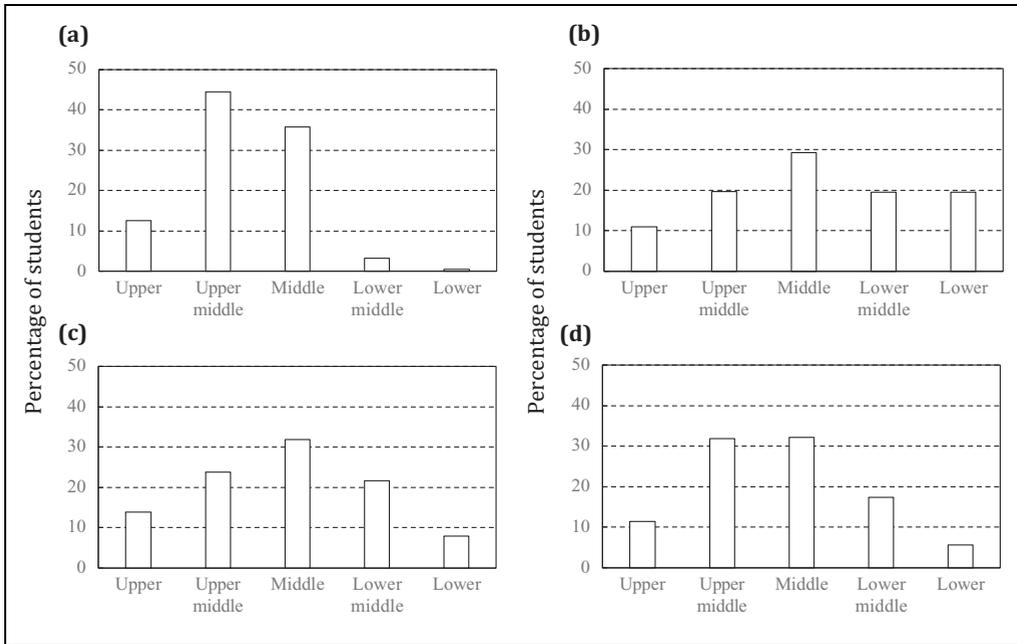
Similarly, East Asian countries/regions had lower percentages of students who were confident despite their high achievement regardless of grade (i.e., fourth and eighth grades) and subject (i.e., math and science). For example, the percentages for eighth graders of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan China were 2%, 3%, and 7%, respectively (see Figure 3(a)). These percentages were much lower than those for Anglo-American countries: 17%, 16%, and 24% for Australia, England, and the U.S., respectively. This stands in contrast to actual achievement: at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, and in both math and science, East Asian students performed at the very top (see Figure 3(b)).<sup>5</sup> Differences evident from PISA 2015 are also striking: When students were asked whether they agreed with the statements “I want to be the best, whatever I do” and “I want to be one of the best students in my class,” there was a wide divergence in scores between several East



**Figure 4.** Percentages of 15-year-old students who agree or strongly agree with the statements (a) that you want to be the best whatever you do and (b) that you want to be one of the best students in your class. The original data were derived from OECD (2017, pp. 309–310).

Asian countries/regions, particularly Japan and Korea, and Anglo-American countries (see Figure 4; OECD, 2017). This is despite the fact that Japan and Korea have achieved at consistently higher levels on the PISA exams.<sup>6</sup>

The empirical project we initially intended to explore would have been, as a next step, understanding if/how self-negation may fuel continual learning. To do so, we had hoped to link this to work in the field of cultural psychology that has found that discourses around positive self-regard (self-efficacy) are not universal (Heine et al., 1999), with special reference to the role of effort in place of reification of self and innate ability that tends to pervade Anglo-American countries (“I am not good at mathematics”; see Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Much of this work can easily be connected to insights into how self-construal differs across cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). We had also planned to explore the self-esteem movement that dominated the pedagogical discourse of the 1970s to 1980s in the U.S. and elsewhere (and finds some resonances in Positive Psychology today; see Miller & Cho, 2017). Here, the contrasts with numerous practices in Japanese (and other East Asian schools) aimed



**Figure 5.** Percentages of students who assess their own achievement position as upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, and lower: (a) the U.S., (b) Japan, (c) Korea, and (d) China. Original data were derived from NIYE (2017, p. 100).

at self-negation and/or reembedding are striking: the emphasis on *hansei* (反省), attention to “manners,” the use of polite language (谦让语), constantly saying please and thank you (i.e., rituals of self-emptying), the rituals of school lunch and school cleaning, lesson study, and so on.

As further evidence, we would have liked to highlight how American students tend to assess their achievement with a strong positive bias. Yet, such a positive bias is virtually absent for Japanese students. For example, one recent comparative study conducted by a Japanese research institute (National Institute for Youth Education [NIYE], 2017) asked 10–12 graders of the U.S., Japan, China, and Korea where their achievement level was located within their classes. Students were requested to select one of the following responses: upper, upper middle, middle, lower middle, and lower. The highest percentage should be logically observed in the “middle.” However, the highest percentage was observed at the “upper middle” for American students (see Figure 5). This was not the case for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean students. Interestingly, Japanese students seem to have a negative bias in their assessment. The percentage of students who selected “upper” (11%) is apparently smaller than that of students who selected “lower” (20%).

## Allowing our selves to be interrupted

Much of what is written above was prepared in advance of the Shanghai Symposium. We had anticipated that questions would revolve around (i) how to understand relationality and self-negation or (ii) how to better understand the relations between this thought and the empirical conditions of contemporary classrooms. Much to our surprise, however, the substantive commentary we received was critique: that the concept of “self-negation,” which we viewed as a potential bridge between ontological and empirical worlds, and as a key to Japanese (perhaps East Asian) achievement unrecognizable from within Western liberalism, was actually a sign of the *negative* dimensions of East Asian education. That is, the claim was that we were sourcing “self-negation” to alternative philosophical-symbolic roots, but this move obfuscated the unequal power relations at play in East Asian classrooms and/or neglected the negative student experiences that dogged East Asian achievement. In short, the claim—one we have heard not just in Shanghai but many times before—was that our move to extend empirically transformed our work into an apologetic for fundamentally problematic approaches in East Asian classrooms. We were challenged to engage with the ambivalent outcomes of East Asian education systems.

Rather than brush off these criticisms—undoubtedly all of which were given in a constructive mood—and continue to develop our original argument, we made a decision after Shanghai to instead engage squarely with that critique. First and foremost, this would reflect the spirit of the Special Issue: substantive dialogue, response-ability, and co-construction. But it would also help us alert readers to the fact that our ongoing attempts to develop an original onto-epistemic perspective have repeatedly run up against similar views (and walls), that is, that we are “hiding” something with our all-too-favorable or “simplistic” analyses. Thus, although we had initially hoped to creatively develop new ideas (as detailed above), we made the conscious decision following Shanghai to allow our *selves* to be interrupted. That is, to prioritize “worlding-with, in company” (Haraway, 2016, p. 58) rather than pursue the disembedded, auto-poetic route of continuing to develop our ideas in isolation from the wider conversation.

Yet, our decision to shift course does not mean that we agree with the critiques of a “negative” side of Japanese education (here our focus is primarily on Japan, but we extend to East Asia when possible). From the comments in the Symposium and our wider reading of the English-language literature on Japanese education, we produced the following list of six potentially negative dimensions of Japanese education and the potential links to self-negation. Below each one of these “negative dimensions,” we examine data to see if such perceptions are accurate in a comparative sense. We roughly organize these into cognitive (first three) and affective dimensions (latter three).

1. *Exam-oriented*: Claim: Japanese education is purportedly exam-oriented, because whether one successfully enters a good university has decisive effects on one’s life. Students who

**Table 1.** Results of comparative survey of 10–12 graders for four countries (NIYE, 2017, pp. 92, 97–98).<sup>a</sup>

Question	Japan	U.S.	China	Korea
<b>Goal</b>				
One of your goals is to get into a well-known university (%)	49.9	82.5	81.4	68.0
One of your goals is to be of a high social standing (%)	48.9	71.4	75.9	63.0
<b>Study-related anxiety (%)</b>				
I want to be absent from school (%)	32.6	48.2	39.3	33.9
I want to quit school (%)	8.0	35.1	17.4	21.9
I want to skip class (%)	27.8	35.3	18.3	28.7
I cannot sleep (%)	17.3	48.6	36.6	11.8
I feel depressed (%)	46.8	32.4	71.7	39.2
I feel irritated (%)	49.9	66.2	68.6	43.4
I feel inferior (%)	37.2	24.3	32.9	39.4
I want to destroy things (%)	9.0	17.3	19.8	14.2
I want to blame someone or scream (%)	5.2	19.7	26.5	6.5
I despair in my life (%)	12.3	13.6	15.3	22.3
Others (sorts of anxiety) (%)	3.4	10.3	3.1	3.4
I have never felt or experienced any of the above (%)	14.6	11.1	7.7	12.8

<sup>a</sup>The survey method is described in NIYE (2017) and Rappleye and Komatsu (2018).

“self-negate” are willing to participate in Japan’s “exam hell” rather than strike out on their own, developing themselves in ways that will help them forge a unique path.

*Evidence:* While this argument may have carried in the past, Japanese education is not as competitive as it was due to the demographic shift and policies adopted to alleviate excessive competition in recent three decades (Rappleye & Komatsu, 2018). As shown in Table 1, the NIYE survey (NIYE, 2017) reported that Japanese 10–12 graders tend to believe that one of their goals is neither “to get into a well-known university” nor “to be of a high social standing” as compared to American peers.

2. *Long learning hours and domination of cram schools:* Claim: although East Asian achievement is comparatively high, this has little to do with different onto-epistemic approaches, but is instead simply a reflection of the extraordinarily long learning hours (particularly in cram schools) with strong exam-related anxiety emerging in its wake.

*Evidence:* in refutation of this, our analysis of PISA 2015 data suggests that Japanese 15 year olds spend less hours than their Anglo-American peers (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2018) and feel

comparable exam-related anxiety (Rappleye & Komatsu, 2018). Qualitatively, the same results are obtained by an analysis of NIYE survey data (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2018). Moreover, no more than 20% of Japanese students attend cram schools at 10–12 grades when the competition becomes most severe during their school years (Rappleye & Komatsu, in press-a).

3. *Lack of creativity*: Claim: the focus on self-negation in Japanese schools may indeed exist but it results in a lack of creativity, as students are forced to reproduce what the teacher teaches and this prevents them from using their knowledge creatively, resulting in a lack of creative or innovative ideas, as students are forced to reproduce what the teacher teaches and/or prevented from self-asserting (note that here creativity is purportedly the creation of strong individuals who break free from the mold of tradition and collective action).

*Evidence*: Japanese students excel not only in TIMSS but in PISA. PISA is different from TIMSS in that it purportedly measures how creatively students can use curricular contents in the practical context of modern society, and how deeply they understand the content (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017a). This suggests that Japanese students are creative, at least in some sense. Further evidence comes from the results of PISA's 2012 test of Creative Problem Solving: East Asian students took all the top spots in the exam, with Korea and Japan's unconfident and unwilling-to-be-the-best scoring third and second in the test, respectively.

4. *Low motivation*: Claim: the focus on self-negation means that students continue studying but they are not highly motivated to do so. They are, in a sense, “forced” to study, quietly conforming without speaking out.

*Evidence*: It is true that Japanese students have a lower level of motivation for learning mathematics and science according to PISA (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017a). However, this does not mean that Japanese students have a lower level of motivation for attending school. Indeed, the NIYE survey data suggest that a lower percentage of Japanese students want to be absent from school, quit school, and skip classes than that of American peers (see Table 1). Moreover, small-scale studies in Japanese classrooms that pretested and posttested all students in a given mathematics lesson found that students who do not speak out (“silent”) learned just as much as those who do speak (“active”), suggesting that a “passive” demeanor does not signify learning is absent (Inagaki et al., 1998).

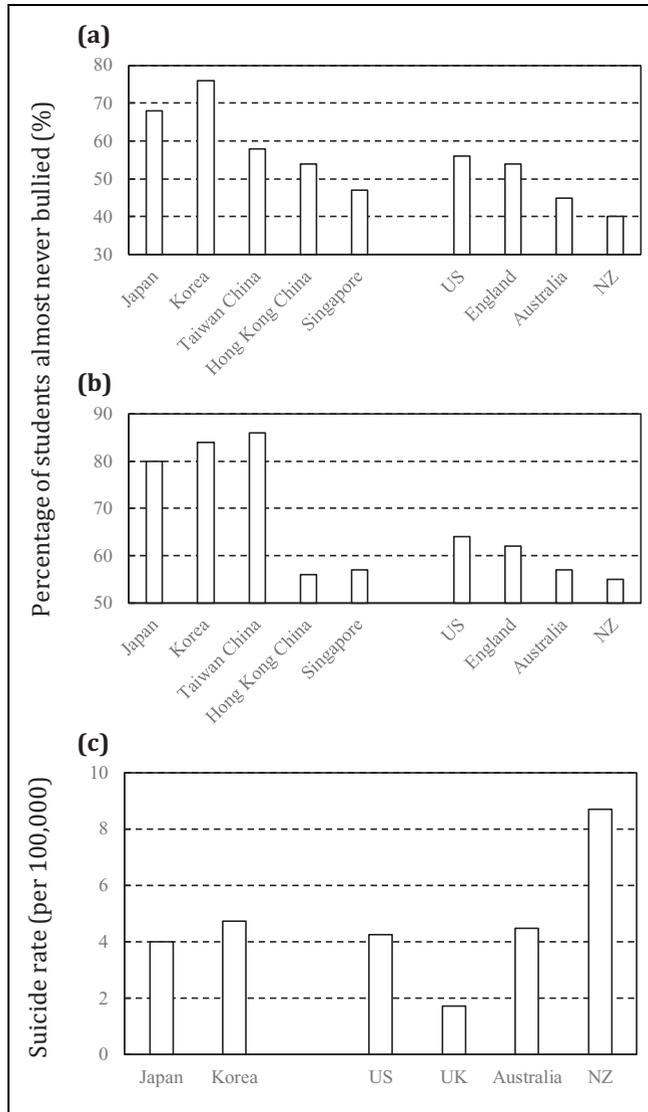
What is more, comparison between PISA and PIAAC scores suggest that Japanese students continue improving their cognitive skills after the age of 15. This indirectly suggests that they leave school with a strong inclination to keep learning, relative to their Anglo-American peers schooled in Western liberalism. When comparing PIAAC scores of the age cohort (25–34 years old) which participated PISA 2000, Japanese PIAAC numeracy score (297 points) was higher

than expected from Japanese PISA 2000 math score and the regression line (293 points; see Figure 1 (a) of Rappleye & Komatsu, 2019). Similarly, Japanese PIAAC literacy score (309 points) was higher than expected from Japanese PISA 2000 reading score and the regression line (288 points; see Figure 1(b) of Rappleye & Komatsu, in press). These results contrast with the cases for Anglo-American countries. For example, American PIAAC numeracy score (267 points) was lower than expected from American PISA 2000 math score (272 points; see Figure 1(a) of Rappleye & Komatsu, in press). American PIAAC literacy score (280 points) was comparable to that expected from American PISA 2000 reading score (281 points; see Figure 1(b) of Rappleye & Komatsu, in press). Japanese in this age cohort thus successfully improved their cognitive skills after the age of 15 years. Or put more simply, Japanese students appear to continue learning after formal schooling ends, a disposition we would argue is by-product of self-negation orientations learned during the formal schooling years.

5. *Bullying and suicide*: Claim: the focus on self-negation can potentially explain why bullying is a major problem across East Asia, particularly in Japan. That is, self-negating students do not stick up for themselves, easily becoming the target of dominant classmates, and suffering in silence as they blame themselves. Sometimes self-negation goes so far as to result in suicide. Meanwhile, bystanders are not self-assertive enough to intervene. “Self-negation” manifests simply as weakness in the face of the high-prevalence of power-dominant relationships across the region; it becomes an excuse not to speak or act against clear wrong doing on the schoolyard (e.g., Yoneyama, 2012).

*Evidence*: Both TIMSS and PISA data suggest that bullying is less severe in Japan than in Anglo-American countries (Rappleye & Komatsu, in press-b). At both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels, the percentages of students almost never bullied for Japan were generally lower than those for Anglo-American countries (see Figure 6(a) and (b)). According to an aggregated index of bullying developed by PISA 2015, the index of exposure to bullying for Japan was lower (i.e., less significant bullying) than those for both Anglo-American countries (Rappleye & Komatsu, in press-b). The youth suicide rate for Japan is generally comparable to those for Anglo-American countries (see Figure 6(c); Roh et al., 2017; Wasserman et al., 2005).

6. *Mental health, anxiety, and happiness*: Claim: the focus on self-negation leads to an internalizing of conflicts that should be worked out externally. When internalized, these emerge in the form of mental disorders such as depression, irritation, despair, destructive behavior, and so on. Self-negation results in lower levels of happiness overall, as students are kept from pursuing what makes them fulfilled. “Self-negation” casts a dark shadow, in the form of general unhappiness with school life, marring any comparatively high levels of achievement.



**Figure 6.** Percentages of students almost never bullied: (a) fourth grade and (b) eighth grade. Original data were derived from TIMSS & PIRLS (2016, pp. 247–250). (c) Suicide rates for 10–19 year olds (Roh et al., 2017).

*Evidence:* Despite such assumptions, Japanese students have a lower level of study-related anxiety according to the NIYE survey. For nine among the 11 components related to study-related anxiety, Japanese students scored lower than American students (see Table 1). Similarly, the percentage of students who never felt or experienced these study-related anxieties was higher for Japan than for the U.S. These findings corroborate with results of PISA 2012, that is, Japanese

15 year olds are happier in school than most of their Western peers (OECD, 2013, p. 32; see also Rappleye et al., 2020).

Having juxtaposed the six most common critiques of Japanese education with existing data, we find it difficult to concede that an emphasis on self-negation has a dark side, and that our work can function as an apologetic for fundamentally problematic approaches in East Asian classrooms. We wonder aloud how we can emphasize the “ambivalent outcomes” of East Asian education systems when we find so little comparative data to support the purportedly negative dimensions. Instead, might it be useful to think about: What mechanisms are working to produce the images of “ambivalent outcomes”? What deeper ontological basis supports these images of “deficient” Japanese? While we would again acknowledge that achievement outcomes are highly complex phenomena and cannot be reduced to onto-epistemic foundations alone, we submit that the pressing problem today—in the wake of Western liberalism that is presumed to be universal—is resuscitating the imagination needed to see the onto-epistemic level, particularly divergent approaches. But we remain blocked from taking this pragmatic route of imaginative reconstruction. Why?

## **Conclusion: The deeper difficulties of going beyond the Western horizon**

We opened our contribution with an intent to introduce the ideas of the Kyoto School, highlighting its deeper onto-epistemic divergences from Western thought (i.e., Platonic-Aristotelian *substantia*). To further clarify and connect, we showed the myriad points of overlap with the other projects represented in this Special Issue, detailing point-by-point lines for further research, contestation, and collaboration. However, acutely aware that such philosophical-theoretical ideas are likely whither today without an empirical project to operationalize and make them visible, we suggested that empirical data supporting “self-negation” could be linked to these onto-epistemic contemplations. But this latter move to “read the world” through alternative onto-epistemic frames produced a critical reaction among some participants of the Symposium (among others). Faced with a choice of forging on alone or answering their concerns, we elected to do the latter. The remaining questions are: Was that the best choice? And what does this reaction highlight about the deeper difficulties of going beyond the Western horizon?

We first wish to underscore that any attempt to go beyond the Western horizon must necessarily be accompanied by an empirical project, otherwise it remains at the level of ideas, imagining, and without practices that could bring a new world into existence (see Lee, 2020). But while most scholars are willing to imagine different ideas, they appear to find it challenging to imagine different realities. They may question onto-epistemic starting points but rarely challenge their own taken-for-granted views of the “real” world. That is, Japanese ideas might be interesting but we “know” that Japanese education is problematic, right? Here our own attempt to sail beyond the

Western horizon has broken up on the shoal of negative views surrounding the empirical actualities of an-Other (read: Japanese) education system.

However, as we outlined, careful, nuanced analyses reveal that most of these negative images are comparatively without empirical foundation. Of course, education could always be “better” (e.g., in a perfect world there would be no bullying, depression, or suicide whatsoever). But in comparative terms, Japanese education (and much of East Asia) is not nearly as bad as our dominant images of it would suggest. Although we acknowledge the importance of Takayama’s (2020) call to stay attuned to “intra-national differences” and be vigilant as to how “international differences” can paper over important differences within a given national context, we feel the need to emphasize that such sentiments sometimes risk granting the fact that domestic political discourses accurately represent empirical realities. As we have most recently shown in relation to bullying in Japan, if one were to believe domestic discourse in Japan, one would conclude that bullying and violence is rife in Japanese schools. But this cannot be substantiated with data (Rappleye & Komatsu, in press-b). In contrast to Takayama then, we are suggesting that political agendas (e.g., liberalism) can misrepresent “realities” in ways that can be, at least in some cases, more distorting and stifling than scholarship that is inattentive to “inter” and “intra” national difference. While ambivalence is important to recognize, so is the possibility of empirically misrepresented systems. While a commitment to the politics of representation is crucial, it must be preceded by a divesting of taken-for-granted views of knowledge, learning, self, and context, otherwise “politics” merely misrepresents.

But—to return to questions raised at the end of the last section—what drives this disconnect between a willingness to imagine new realities but not actually see them? We suggest that the substantial disconnect between our representations of other education systems and of our own are derived largely from images forged out of the normative commitments to Western liberalism as political project. Over the long stretch of the 20th century, Western liberalism was seen as universal and exportable, and anything that diverged from it was marked as deviant or negative. In the case of Japan, this occurred explicitly and repeatedly: during the early Meiji Period (Duke, 2008), during U.S. Occupation, then again in the Japan education “boom” of the 1980s. Take, for example, Tobin’s observations in the 1980s that:

I suggest that our errors in viewing Japanese education are not just the result of ignorance or random, idiosyncratic misunderstandings, but instead the result of culturally shared false assumptions and methodological mistakes. Because most Americans tend to see Japan through the same distorted lenses, we tend to corroborate one another’s distortions. (Tobin, 1986, p. 265)

These “culturally shared false assumptions” are rooted, we are suggesting here, in a discursive and normative field structured by Western liberalism. Major “methodological mistakes” derived

from it would be (i) a valorization of the themes of individualism and identity to the neglect of the relations and interdependence built through Japanese education; (ii) the concern over a perceived lack of student-centered pedagogy and active engagement which is read as unthinking allegiance to collectivism, authority, and/or tradition; (iii) a misunderstanding of tradition itself, that is, as something that can be enabling rather than restrictive of “progress”; (iv) a mistaking of self-negation for a mere political scheme to thwart democratic practices and subsequent neglect of its positive outcomes; and (v) the inability to imagine the symbolic foundations (“culture”) and to maintain the analysis at the level of modern Western social science categories (e.g., politics and nationalism, as opposed to self-construal and onto-epistemic building blocks). This list is not exhaustive but merely illustrative. Space does not permit us to elaborate further. And it should be clarified that these “false assumptions” and “methodological mistakes” are particularly true of English-language (read: globally accessible) work on Japan, primarily because these were produced by scholars initially schooled into Western liberal symbolic-turned-normative frames.

Our point here is that the task before us is more daunting than we initially assumed: We cannot simply remove Western liberalism as an idea but must deconstruct the “false assumptions and methodological mistakes” it has left in its wake. It has already inscribed a “common sense” view of Japanese educational “realities” that foils attempt to reimagine, even among those who are onto-epistemically receptive. In recognizing this, herein we have—despite the tediousness of the entire endeavor—tried to eliminate these stereotypes one-by-one to open up space to see the “real” world anew.

Yet practically this creates difficulties for our shared project of “going beyond the Western horizon.” On the one hand, we want to devote time to exploring new ideas and coming up with constructive empirical projects. But on the other, we are constantly dogged by these culturally specific images that dominate the global research imagination. Should we forge ahead? Or should we show how these are wrong? With only a few thousand words in each article, what is the best use of our time and energy? More concretely, would readers of this piece like to have seen more original theorization? Or were they pleased to have been reassured we are not apologists for a purportedly dark Japanese (East Asian) education system? More philosophically, do we go beyond the Western horizon by building a new, coherent world of ideas that eventually attracts enough support? Or do we accomplish it by challenging the taken-for-granted images within the Western horizon and its global projection? We feel we must surface and consider these questions directly if we hope to gain any momentum for our collective attempts to reimagine modern education.

### **Author contribution**

Both Hikaru Komatsu and Jeremy Rappleye contributed equally.

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## Notes

1. Some might argue that John Dewey recognized the problems of the substantive self and offered a different mode of being to take its place (see Saito, 2005). To an extent we would agree, but Dewey's ideas about self never took hold deeply, as he himself would later lament in articles such as *Individualism: Old and New* (1930). Nor did he sketch out self-negation as a mode of being useful for learning.
2. In fact, it is realization devoid of the agency implicitly carried in the word aim.
3. Of course, Western philosophers have also discussed problems that arise from the subject–object split. In this sense, Nishida's ideas bear a certain affinity with those of William James, Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, and others (Fujita, 2008; Kosaka, 2002). Indeed, Nishida and others actively integrated and learned from Western philosophy, although they often ended up in quite different places after the encounter. That is, the major distinctive characteristic of the Kyoto School (indeed, Japanese philosophy more widely) is how pervasively and centrally the issue of the subject–object split has been discussed, and how it was subsequently resolved (Wargo, 2005).
4. In relation to this point, one contemporary Japanese philosopher even devised a symbol in which the symbol for nothingness (MU) was crossed out (Nagai, 2006 [2018], p. 98). In our reading, this symbol seeks to constantly remind readers that “MU” is a symbol that speaks about symbols rather than aims to represent “reality” (in the sense of objects).
5. We do not take up reading herein, given that recent shifts in the format of the PISA tests seem to have affected those scores (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017b), and the approach to reading—at least in Japan—might be divergent from Western norms (see Takayama, 2018).
6. Here, we recognize that in Figure 4 Mainland China and Taiwan China do not seem to fit our general argument. We report the data, in part, in hopes of catalyzing future research into intra-regional differences. Clearly, there are differences in the symbolic understandings and actual practices *within* East Asia that we must remain attentive to. With regard to the clear gap among students in Mainland China and Taiwan China between levels of confidence (see Figure 3) and aspirations to be the best (see Figure 4), one preliminary hypothesis is that the “self” is emphasized to a stronger degree in pedagogy in Mainland China/Taiwan China (see Li, 2012; Watkins & Biggs, 1996) but that “self-cultivation” that features so strongly in these Confucian-inspired pedagogical discourses may ultimately include a notion of relationality that is quite distinct from dominant Anglo-American notions of an individual “being the best,” with its either-or exclusivity (see Liu & Tobin, 2018).

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