

Comparative education in East Asia: Growth, development and contributions to the global field

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In recent decades, the field of comparative education in East Asia has grown dramatically. This article charts the growth, and remarks on its significance for the global field. The article commences by noting the role of Asian professional societies in the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). It then comments on the roots and historical evolution of the field in East Asia, before turning to developments since 1990. Four main implications for the field as a whole are noted. They concern the volume of research, the languages of reporting, the geographic focuses of comparative studies, and the topics studied.

Dramatic growth of the field of comparative education in East Asia has had great significance in itself and has changed balances in the field as a whole. This article comments on the scale and nature of work in East Asia, and highlights some significant features. Many of the scholars to whom the paper refers are members of professional societies. The paper includes discussion of the role of such societies, and begins with the umbrella World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES).

The WCCES: Foundation and Growth

The WCCES was formed in 1970, having evolved from an International Committee of Comparative Education Societies which had been convened by Joseph Katz, of Canada, in 1968 (Epstein, 1981; Wilson, 2002). Five societies came together to form the Council, namely:

- The Comparative & International Education Society (CIES) of the USA, which had been established in 1956;
- The Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE), which had been established in 1961;
- The Japanese Comparative Education Society (JCES), which had been established in 1964;
- The Comparative & International Education Society of Canada (CIESC), which had been established in 1967; and
- The Korean Comparative Education Society (KCES), which had been established in 1968.

The fact that two of the five societies were Asian deserves note. Even at that time scholars in Asia were playing a major role, and their visibility increased over the following decades. In 2001, the WCCES had 29 member societies, the Asian members of which included, in addition to the Japanese and Korean societies:

- The Chinese Comparative Education Society-Taipei (CCES-T), established in 1974;
- The Comparative Education Society of India (CESI), established in 1979;
- The China Comparative Education Society (CCES), established in 1979;
- The Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong (CESHK), established in 1989; and
- The Comparative Education Society of Asia (CESA), established in 1995.

The role of the Asian societies has not been limited to mere membership of the World Council. Especially prominent has been the hosting of the World Congresses of Comparative Education. To date, 11 World Congresses have been held. The fourth was hosted by the Japanese society in Tokyo in 1980, with an official pre-Congress event organized by the Korean society in Seoul. Most recently, the 11th World Congress was hosted by the Korean society in 2001 at the Korea National University of Education in Chungbuk.

The development of comparative education societies in the region, it must be admitted, has not been entirely linear and smooth. For example, the activities of the Hong Kong society have fluctuated, in part reflecting the enthusiasm and initiatives of a small group of people (Bray, 1999). The Indian society has also fluctuated in vigor. It had a major impact during the initial period after its creation, but during the 1980s and 1990s it gradually fell into neglect. Encouragingly, the Indian society did send a representative to the meeting of the WCCES Executive Committee at the time of the 11th World Congress, and that representative has hopes of reviving the society. India certainly has many scholars who could contribute to such a revival, and the goal is to mobilize some of those scholars to achieve the reawakening of a body which has been dormant for some years.

Meanwhile, further growth is evident in at least one other part of the region: in 2001, a group of comparative educators in the Philippines resolved to form a national society which in due course would seek affiliation with the WCCES. As a result of all these initiatives, within the WCCES Asia is much better represented than Africa or Latin America, each of which had only one member society in 2001¹.

Roots and Historical Evolution of Comparative Education in East Asia

Some scholars (e.g. Van Daele, 1993) have asserted that the field of comparative education originated in Europe. Certainly European scholars have been very visible in the history of the field; but it is also arguable that the field had multiple origins which included roots in East Asia (Zhang & Wang, 1997). In ancient times the education system of the Chinese empire was viewed as a model by neighboring nations. For instance, in 607 AD Prince Shotoku of Japan sent a diplomatic and academic mission to China to gain ideas for the shaping of Japan's first national system of education (Kobayashi, 1990). Considerable investigation of education systems in different countries was also undertaken in subsequent centuries, and in due course became an academic field of study. Various books were published in China at the end of the 19th century (Li, 1983), and 1901 brought the launch of a Chinese-language journal entitled *World Education*. This journal was quite wide-ranging, and the 1903 issue, for example, contained articles on the U.K., U.S., France, Italy, Belgium, Holland, Austria, Sweden, and Russia (Bray & Gui, 2001).

However, much of the emphasis at that time was on foreign rather than comparative education. This emphasis remained longstanding throughout the region, and was noted by Kobayashi (1990) with reference to Japan even in the late 1980s. The field also showed geographic imbalances, with the principal focus on the industrialized countries of Europe and North America, though with some emphasis on parts of Asia. Referring to mainland China and Taiwan, similar remarks have been made by Gu (2001) and Lee (1999).

The remarks by Shu and Zhou (1990) also deserve attention. They began by quoting Kelly (1987), who was based in the U.S. Kelly had described the 1980s as "a time of pessimism in comparative education", with "a growing disillusionment with schools as a vehicle for change" (Kelly, 1987, p. 477). Shu and Zhou contrasted this assessment with the note of optimism struck by education policy-makers in Asia who had confidently underscored the importance of education as "a vital force of development" (UNESCO, 1985, p. 5). Shu and Zhou (1990) then highlighted the social and cultural diversity of the region which, they suggested constituted a great advantage for comparative studies. However, they added:

Although many Asian nations have in recent years attached increasing importance to educational research as the cutting edge of educational development, such research has lagged behind educational changes....In international conferences of comparative education, Asian scholars continue to be under-represented (Shu & Zhou, 1990, p. 68).

Shu and Zhou supported these remarks with analysis of the attendance at, and papers presented in, the seventh World Congress of Comparative Education held in Montreal, Canada, in 1989. However, they also stressed that comparative education research was not only the domain of academics. In that vein, they noted that Asia was the first continent to be endowed with a UNESCO regional office (in Bangkok), and also the first to develop a regional plan and model for educational development (known as the 1960 Karachi Plan).

Developments since 1990

Against this backdrop, it is useful to chart some developments since 1990. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), which was mentioned by neither Kobayashi nor Shu and Zhou, has become increasingly active in the education sector. The ADB produced an important sector policy paper in 1988, which was updated in 1991 (ADB, 1991). A decade later, the ADB published another far-reaching analysis of education in the region (ADB, 2001). The ADB has also produced many other studies of education both in individual countries and in groups of countries

Several important developments also occurred in the academic world, including the following:

- At the University of Hong Kong, a Comparative Education Research Centre was established in 1994;

- At the National Chi-Nan University in Taiwan, a Graduate Institute of Comparative Education was established in 1995;
- At Hiroshima University, Japan, a Center for the Study of International Cooperation in Education was established in 1997;
- At the City University of Hong Kong, a Comparative Education Policy Research Unit was established in 1999;
- At Seoul National University, Korea, an Institute of Asia Pacific Education Development was established in 1999; and
- At the Central China University of Science & Technology, Wuhan, a Centre of International & Comparative Education was established in 2001.

Several journals also emerged, some of which focused explicitly on comparison. In 1992 the journal entitled *Foreign Education Conditions*, published in Beijing in Chinese, was renamed *Comparative Education Review* and became the official journal of the China Comparative Education Society. In 1997 the newsletter of the Chinese Comparative Education Society-Taipei evolved into a full *Journal of Comparative Education*; and in 2000 a Japanese-language journal entitled *Comparative Study of Education and Culture* was launched by Kyushu University in Japan. Other journals were launched with focuses that accommodated comparative education, even though the field was not explicitly named in their titles. For example, in 1996 the *Singapore Journal of Education* was renamed and reoriented as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*; and in 1999 *Tanglaw*, published by De La Salle University in Philippines, was renamed and reoriented as *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*. In 2000 the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) launched the *Journal of Southeast Asian Education*; and in 2001, the Institute of Asia Pacific Education Development in Seoul launched the *Asia Pacific Education Review*.

Factors Underlying Recent Development

A range of factors has contributed to the growth of comparative education in different ways in different parts of the region. Thus the factors underlying the work of the ADB and UNESCO have been rather different from those underlying the work of academics in universities; and the field has flourished in mainland China for rather different reasons from Hong Kong and Taiwan, for example.

The work of the ADB and UNESCO is mainly based on practical needs. The organizations primarily exist to serve the governments of their member states. The ADB and UNESCO develop projects and give policy advice, and seek to enhance the quality of their work through comparative analyses. The scale of the ADB's technical assistance in education during 1990s was over three times that for the preceding two decades (Hirosato, 2000). UNESCO work did not expand so much, but the Bangkok regional office nevertheless sponsored many regional and sub-regional comparative studies (UNESCO, 2002).

National development has also been a major force for development of the field in other contexts. In mainland China, for example, one of the key figures is Gu Mingyuan of Beijing Normal University. Gu, who from 1983 to 2001 was President of the China Comparative Education Society, wrote in 1990 that the ultimate aim of comparative education "is to promote educational development and reform in our own country

[China]" (reprinted in Gu, 2001, p. 221). With such motivation, scholars in mainland China during the late 1980s and early 1990s primarily focused on foreign systems from which they felt that China could learn useful lessons.

As mainland China has developed, the emphases within the field of comparative education have changed. China's opening to the outside world has permitted outsiders to obtain information from primary sources of a type previously denied, while even more significantly, has permitted large numbers of Chinese scholars to move out and back, gaining extensive knowledge of other countries and systems of education. Particularly impressive has been the growth of expertise in the English language in many Chinese universities, which equips these scholars for travel and interaction with much broader international frameworks than was previously the case. Also, the university sector has expanded significantly and has become more competitive. As a result, China now has more academics who, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, are being pressed to undertake research and to publish their findings. This pressure affects the field of comparative education as well as other fields.

The expansion of the university system and the pressure to publish findings have also been important factors in Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the perspective of comparative education, Hong Kong has had the added advantages that it is naturally outward-looking because it is small. Also, its universities place considerable emphasis on English as well as Chinese, and all its universities have a mix of local and non-local academics. Taiwan is also outward looking, but for slightly different reasons. Among them is that Taiwan's political circumstances make it conscious of the need for alliances in a competitive environment.

The 1990s also brought significant political shifts in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. These countries were previously in the Soviet sphere of influence, and were generally closed to comparativists and other scholars in the rest of the world. The fact that they have opened their doors, and that many people in these countries have learned English, has greatly increased the interflow with the English-speaking international community.

Implications for the Field as a Whole

The patterns and developments charted above are significant not only for East Asia itself but also for the whole field of comparative education. Four main areas are given specific comment, namely: the volume of comparative research, the languages of reporting, the geographic focuses of comparative studies, and the topics studied.

The volume of comparative research

In per capita terms, several of the comparative education societies in East Asia, which are one major vehicle for research output, are much larger than their counterparts elsewhere in the world. In absolute size, the US-based Comparative and International Education Society is the world's largest society with 2,400 individual and institutional members. However, one third of the CIES membership is international, and in 1998, for example, the CIES had only 650 individual members and 628 institutional members in the U.S. itself--a country with a population of 263 million. By contrast, the Taiwan society had 320 members in an island of 22 million; and the Hong Kong society had 80 members in a territory of just 7 million. The Japanese society was also substantial in size,

with a membership exceeding 600, and the Korean society had over 300 members. In comparison, the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) and the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada (CIESC) each had fewer than 200 members.

The volume of publication is also much greater in East Asia than in other parts of the world. Thus the Chinese-language journal *Comparative Education Review* published by Beijing Normal University, appears 12 times a year with 5,600 copies per issue. By contrast, its English-language counterpart with the same name published by Chicago University Press in the USA is published only four times a year with 2,400 copies. [2] The journal *Comparative Education* published in the United Kingdom by Carfax, appears four times a year with fewer than 2,000 copies per issue; and *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, which is the BAICE journal, appears only three times a year with fewer than 600 copies per issue. To the journals may be added many books, again with much larger print-runs in Asia than their counterparts in other regions of the world. One striking example is a book by Wang, Zhu, and Gu (1982), of which 108,700 copies had been printed by 2001³.

Throughout the world, higher education expanded dramatically during the 1990s and seems set for continued expansion during the decades ahead (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). In East Asia, particularly notable growth is projected in China, which started from a low base, has a huge population, and in the new century has opened up further with entry to the World Trade Organization (OECD, 2000). The growth of the university sector increases the number of courses in all spheres, including comparative education, and also increases the emphasis on research.

The languages of reporting

The field of comparative education is, by its nature, strongly aware of linguistic divides. Like other domains of enquiry, the principal vehicle for international reporting is English. The English language dominates the professional work of the UNESCO regional office, and is the official working language of the Asian Development Bank. However, the growth of comparative education research in Chinese-speaking communities has brought a rise in Chinese as a vehicle for the reporting of comparative education. Other important work is being reported in Japanese, Korean and various other languages. Thus, the comparative education work conducted in Asia on the one hand contributes to the international discourse conducted in English, and on the other hand provides a balance to that discourse with scholarly outputs in other languages.

Geographic focuses of comparative studies

Insofar as Asian comparativists are focusing on Asian societies, they contribute to a balancing in the center of gravity, which was previously dominated by Europe and North America. The Asian societies are diverse in cultures (Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, Confucian), in economic wealth (Japan may be contrasted with Philippines), in size (China may be contrasted with Brunei Darussalam), and in political ideology (North Korea may be contrasted with Singapore). This presents a rich tapestry of variables for comparative study, and can provide examples and insights to enhance overall conceptual understanding in the field. This potential has not yet been fully utilized, but progress has been made and further progress can be expected.

At the same time, some Asian comparativists focus their work on Europe and North America. In so doing, the Asian comparativists can bring to analysis of those regions a very different set of lenses from those used by North Americans and Europeans themselves (see e.g. Fuji, 1999; Zhu & Li, 1999). Japanese scholars, for example, come from a centralized education system which is largely monocultural and which places strong emphasis on formal approaches to learning. The types of questions that Japanese scholars ask about education systems may be rather different from those of scholars that take decentralization, pluralism and discovery learning as a set of norms. They may also present very different perspectives on the roles of comparative and international perspectives in education systems (see e.g. Fujikane, 2001).

A few Asian comparativists are also focusing on Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. However, the number of Asian researchers addressing these parts of the world is small. This domain would seem to deserve stronger emphasis in the future.

The topics studied

Given the range of cultures and societies in East Asia, it is natural that the topics studied by East Asian comparativists should also vary. Again, while some work parallels that in other parts of the world, other dimensions have distinctly Asian contexts and themes. The latter category includes: studies of the implications of Confucian and other traditions for education; the competitive nature of education systems in Asia and the allied pervasiveness of supplementary private tutoring; the role of education in the economic growth of newly industrialized societies; and the implications for education of various types of political transition. East Asian scholars have also made major contributions to large multinational projects, such as those conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The Third International Mathematics & Science Study (TIMSS) is among the most prominent of these.

For those concerned with cross-regional rather than cross-national comparisons, Asia can provide examples of the relationship between colonialism and education, for comparison with Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific. A further under-researched area would be to compare the links between Islam and education in Asian countries (such as Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia), African countries (such as Egypt and Senegal), and Middle-Eastern countries (such as Iran and Yemen).

Conclusions

Comparative education has a long history in East Asia; and scholars in two countries of the region, namely Japan and Korea, took a leadership role in the foundation of the WCCES in 1970. Since that time, comparative education has blossomed further. Particularly impressive have been developments in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Certain international bodies, including UNESCO and the ADB, have also had an impressive impact.

However, the field is stronger in some parts of the region than others. Many countries in the region, including some with large populations, have no national comparative education societies. Part of the vision of Comparative Education Society of Asia (CESA)

has been to serve such countries. So far, however, CESA's work has been more visible in the parts of Asia which already have their own societies. Thus the decision to establish CESA was made in Hong Kong (in 1995), the first conference was held in Japan (in 1996), the second conference was held in mainland China (in 1998), and the third conference was held in Taiwan (in 2001). The decision to hold the fourth conference (in 2003) in Indonesia marked an important step in CESA's outreach to other parts of the region. Further effort is also needed in the nature of work conducted. Many so-called comparative studies in East Asia (as elsewhere) really come under the heading of commentary on foreign education systems, and lack in-depth comparison. Also, the extent to which some articles in the professional journals promote theoretical advances leaves much to be desired.

However, it may be argued that relatively unsophisticated forms of scholarship in comparative education are at least better than an absence of any form of inquiry. Unsophisticated analyses, particularly when presented by younger scholars, may have the potential to mature. Such arguments can be used to justify the open-gate policies of many conference organizers who welcome almost all who volunteer to present, and who conduct little prior screening for content and methodological rigor. While some might lament the effect this has on overall standards of conference presentation and intellectual discourse, others would assert that it permits the field to grow because it welcomes to the forums all who have an interest. This dilemma, it might be added, is certainly not exclusive to Asia. It is encountered by practically all 29 member societies of the WCCES, and in World Congresses themselves.

Nevertheless, the emphases of comparative analysis have undergone shifts. While the nation-state remains a dominant unit of analysis within the field, greater recognition is being given to other units of analysis (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Some studies use multiple levels of analysis, and show how complementary insights can be obtained from analysis of different levels. This observation is of course applicable to all parts of the world; but a growing number of East Asian studies show the value of intra-national as opposed to inter-national comparisons (e.g. Adamson & Li, 1999; Lewin & Wang, 1994). Some scholars have focused on cities as a unit of comparison (e.g. Zhang, 1998); and others have chosen cross-national focus on provinces (e.g. Rao & Cheng, 1999).

These trends, and the circumstances of expanding higher education, increased cross-national liaison, and stronger emphasis on research augur well for the field of comparative education in East Asia. Certainly the field faces challenges to improve the quality of work, to widen its scope, and to expand further the volume of research. However, recent decades have shown exciting developments. The East Asian voice is likely to be heard much more loudly on the world stage in the coming years. This will help to balance the Western dominance in the field which was evident during most of the 20th century.

Notes

1. The African society was the Southern African Comparative & History of Education Society (SACHES), and the Latin American society was the Sociedade Brasileira de Educação Comparada (SBEC). In former years, two other African societies had been members, namely the Egyptian Comparative Education Society (ECES) and the

Nigerian Comparative Education Society (NCES). However, these societies had both become defunct. The same applies to two societies in Latin America, namely the Sociedad Argentina de Educación Comparada (SAEC) and the Sociedad Colombiana de Educación Comparada (SCEC). More positively, in August 2001 a new Argentinean society was created and indicated intention to seek admission to the World Council. A Cuban group also planned to seek admission, and discussions had taken place concerning a society in Venezuela.

2. It must be recognised that each issue of the English-language Comparative Education Review is thicker than its Chinese-language counterpart, chiefly because the articles are longer. However, Chinese is a more 'compact' language, generally needing less space than English to cover the same content.
3. The second edition of this book was published in 1985, and the third edition in 1999. This figure refers to the print run of all three editions.

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