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*Decolonial interventions in the  
postwar politics of Japanese  
education: Reassessing the place of  
Shinto in Japanese language and  
moral education curriculum*

*Intervenciones decoloniales en la política educativa  
japonesa de posguerra: la re-evaluación de los  
debates sobre el lugar del sintoísmo en la lengua  
japonesa y en el currículo de la educación moral*

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**DOI:** 10.5944/reec.43.2023.37089

**Recibido: 4 de marzo de 2022**

**Aceptado: 5 de junio de 2023**

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## Abstract

Much of postwar politics in Japanese education has revolved around the tensions between conservative's retrogressive desire for the imperial past on the one hand and the liberal-left's progressive agenda on the other. The former demands a return to the teaching of traditional (Confucius) family values, patriotism and Shinto-inspired reverence (awe) towards the universe, while the latter demands teaching for rational, critical minds deemed essential for democratic citizenship. This binary structure of political contestation is increasingly problematized by the emerging political sensibilities around the ecological crisis and eco-feminist critique of human exceptionalism, hype-separation between human and nature and ontological individualism. The chapter demonstrates how the new ecological and decolonial literature demands a fundamental rethinking of the postwar politics of Japanese education, in particular, in relation to the place of Shinto—the Japanese indigenous belief system—in school curriculum. It exposes the limitations of the postwar liberal-left discourse which has reduced Shinto to nothing but the conservatives' retrogressive desire to 'return.' The chapter concludes, drawing on Chen's (2010) notion of de-cold-war politics, that the Cold War framing of education policy debate must be overcome to unleash the decolonial and ecological potentials of Japanese education towards addressing the pressing sustainable challenges today.

*Keywords:* Shinto; ecological crisis; moral education; national language education; politics of education; decolonial

## Resumen

Gran parte de la política educativa de posguerra en Japón ha girado en torno a las tensiones entre el deseo retrógrado de los conservadores por el pasado imperial, por un lado, y la agenda progresista de la izquierda liberal, por otro. Los primeros exigen una vuelta a la enseñanza de los valores familiares tradicionales (Confucio), el patriotismo y la reverencia (awe) hacia el universo inspirada en el sintoísmo, mientras que los segundos exigen una enseñanza orientada a la formación de mentes racionales y críticas, consideradas esenciales para la ciudadanía democrática. Esta estructura binaria de la contestación política se ve cada vez más problematizada por las sensibilidades políticas emergentes en torno a la crisis ecológica y la crítica ecofeminista del excepcionalismo humano, la separación exagerada entre lo humano y la naturaleza y el individualismo ontológico. Este artículo analiza cómo la nueva bibliografía ecológica y decolonial exige un replanteamiento fundamental de la política educativa japonesa de posguerra. Para mostrar la limitación de la política binaria, y pone en evidencia los potenciales ecológicos de lo que se ha considerado la agenda política conservadora en dos asignaturas escolares: la educación moral y la enseñanza de la lengua japonesa (kokugo, o idioma nacional). Finalmente, se concluye, basándose en la noción de Chen de la política de la Guerra Fría, que el debate sobre la política educativa de aquella Guerra Fría debe ser superado para liberar los potenciales descoloniales y ecológicos de la educación japonesa para hacer frente a los apremiantes desafíos de la sostenibilidad del presente.

*Palabras clave:* Sintoísmo; crisis ecológica; educación moral; enseñanza del idioma nacional; política educativa; decolonial

## 1. Beyond postwar binary politics

Much of postwar politics in Japanese education played out in terms of cultural and political, as opposed to economic, concerns. It revolved around the tensions between conservative's desire for the imperial past, on the one hand, and the liberal-left's progressive agenda for democracy and pacifism, on the other. The former demanded a return to the teaching of traditional (Confucius) family values, patriotism and Shinto-inspired reverence (awe) towards the universe, while the latter demanded teaching for rational, critical minds deemed essential for democratic citizenship. The former was represented by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), back by business and industries, while the latter by the Socialist and Community Parties, backed by labor movements and grassroots activism. Though this binary structure of political contestation became increasingly blurred from mid 1990s onward as a result of the demise of the Soviet bloc and the collapse of the labor movements, much of educational debates continue to be framed thereafter by the language inherited from the Cold War politics.

To put it differently, Japan's postwar political struggle has been over the notion of Japanese selfhood; to what extent the Western, Enlightenment notion of self as rational and autonomous being is to be accepted as the ontological foundation of postwar Japan. This tension traces its roots back to the early Meiji period of the late 19th century during which modern 'civilization' was brought from the 'advanced' West. The enthusiastic embrace of 'anything Western' in the initial stage of modernization did not last too long, soon to be countered by the surging traditionalist demands for imperial order as well as for Shinto and Confucius values. Throughout the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the so called 'catch-up' mentality dominated much of political and economic discourse of Japan, and yet it always coexisted with powerful countering cultural forces. The pendulum constantly swung between the two camps, further intensified after the Pacific War defeat in 1945.

In the postwar period, the seeds for the binary politics were planted by the US-led education reform during the Allies Occupation of Japan (1945-1952). Since Japan's formal independence in 1952, those on the political right consistently attacked the democratic principles and the decentralized mode of governance instituted by the Occupation, demanding the resurrection of the traditional Shinto cosmologies and Confucius and patriotic values as well as more centrally controlled educational governance (see Takayama, 2010). They called their political agenda the 'normalization' of Japanese education, that is, normalizing the 'unusual' situation left by the Occupation's imposition of liberal values and polity, which arguably detached the postwar generations from the nation's cultural 'essence.' From the mid 1950s to the end of the 1960s, many new measures introduced by the Occupation were removed to strengthen the Ministry's central administrative and curricular control. The 1958 reintroduction of moral education was one of such 'reversing' efforts pursued by the LDP.

By contrast, the Japanese liberal and left saw such a move as a retrogressive desire to reinstate the imperial state and its ideology. They insisted on protecting the liberal, democratic and pacifist principles and constitutional frameworks introduced during the Allies Occupation. Numerous legal challenges were filed to prevent Shinto-informed values and any nationalistic teaching from entering into education, with liberal critics arguing that they would violate the constitutionally guaranteed separation of church and state and freedom of thought (Koyasu, 2004; Miyake, 2003). The wartime indoctrination through

education and the people's general remorse for its consequences were the broader historical backdrop against which liberal concerns about state control over internal matters of education gained considerable political momentum (Takayama, 2010).

This cursory review of the history of Japanese education suggests that the progressive-left camp has relied heavily on the liberal notions such as freedom of thought, reason, individuality and secularity. While no doubt political liberalism served to defend public education from the regressive political interests of the LDP, which was backed by the US during the Cold War era, it now ought to be questioned by the emerging political sensibilities around the planet's ecological crisis. The consequences of ecological destruction have been acutely experienced around the world, and this has resulted in the emerging critiques of cultural and economic foundations of modernity, capitalism and modern schooling (Abram, 2017; Blaise, 2015; Bowers, 1987, 1993; Hickel, 2020; Martusewicz, Edmundson and Lupinacci, 2015; Plumwood, 2002; Taylor 2017). This chapter begins by reviewing some of this literature, including the eco-feminist critique of human exceptionalism, hyper-separation between human and nature, Western, Enlightenment notion of rational, autonomous self and ontological individualism. Drawing on these concepts, the chapter then reexamines the recent politics of Japanese education characterized by the Cold War binary between right and left, with a particular attention to the ongoing controversies in two subject areas, *kokugo* (国語, Japanese, or the national language) and *dotoku* (道徳, moral education). By reviewing them through the decolonial and ecologically minded concepts and insights, the chapter identifies the ecological potentials of the existing pedagogical practices that have long been dismissed by the liberal-left critics. In so doing, the chapter invites readers to rethink the postwar framing of politics of education in Japan, to expel the purity politics (Shotwell, 2016) and the spell of Cold War politics (Chen, 2010; see also Takayama, 2017) so that immense ecological potentials of what appears to be conservative Japanese pedagogical practices can be recognized and released further. The chapter concludes by offering a few admittedly tentative thoughts about how to reconfigure a new politics of education in Japan that is suitable for addressing the pressing sustainable challenges today.

## 2. Ecological critique of modernity and modern schooling

As many scholars argue, modern education has been a central means through which humans learn to hyper-separate themselves from the surrounding biosphere upon which their survival relies (Abram, 2017; Bowers, 1987, 1993; Plumwood, 2002; Yano, 2000). Modern education has long endowed children with attitudes, skills and knowledge that objectify non-human creatures and environment, and in so doing severed their deep emotional and spiritual ties with a more-than-human world. Modern schools have long excluded, or delegitimized localized animistic knowledges that would have invited children to transgress the human-nature dualism, while championing scientific knowledge as the only means for human 'progress.' As the sole possessors of reason, humans claim themselves to be exceptional beings entitled to subordinate the whole biosphere to their needs. The same hierarchical logic, hyper-separating humans from nature, was applied to children, women and 'racial' minorities, who were constituted as close to nature, hence irrational, emotional and savages, respectively (Plumwood, 2002). Educational

institutions relied upon this anthropocentric logic of differences to determine the ‘educability’ of these ‘others,’ and this practice continued throughout the first half of the 20th century (see Takayama, 2018a).

Much of the critique of human exceptionalism and hyper-separation has been taken up in recent ‘common worlds’ educational scholarship, in particular within early childhood education (see Blaise, 2015; Taylor, 2017). These scholars push us to imagine education where humans learn to decenter themselves and reposition themselves as part of multispecies common worlds, and to recognize the agencies of non-human others. They raise important questions about the current articulation of education for sustainability which preserves the central humanistic assumptions, including the logic of human exceptionalism. Taylor (2017), for instance, challenges the positioning of children as environmental stewards, and humans, in general, as the sole agents for solving the current ecological crisis. Furthermore, these post-humanist and ecofeminist studies call upon us to recognize how existing early childhood pedagogic practices already allow for transgressive space where children disrupt the nature-culture binary and where children interact with the more-than-human world (Taylor, 2017). Silova (2019, 2020) also suggests the tenacity of the ‘creature communities’ today and how social science, including education scholarship, has been blinded to numerous students’ encounters with the more-than-human world during their schooling.

In more concrete pedagogic terms, children’s hyper-separation from the more-than-human world has been reinforced through pedagogical attempts to mold children into the self-governing, autonomous, and rational self. This is the ultimate goal of the Western Enlightenment cultural project dating back to Plato, Rene Descartes and all the way up to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and educational progressivism of the early 20th century (Bowers, 1987). Emerging out of this intellectual tradition, modern, liberal democratic societies necessitate strong individuals, and education has been the primary means of social engineering where children are equipped with dispositions and skills required for autonomous thinking, reasoning, and democratic deliberation. According to Bowers (1993), liberal education inherits “the anti-tradition thinking of Enlightenment” (Bowers, p. 86); it demands that individuals be removed from the ‘dogma’ of local traditions, myths and ‘superstitions,’ which, as Bowers (1993) argue, offer us wisdoms as to how to restore our embeddedness and emotional connections with the more-than-human world (see also Abram, 2017; Hickel, 2020). By locating the locus of authority in individual self and her/his ability to reason, modern, liberal educational thoughts have effectively nullified the regulatory functions of traditional knowledges on individuals. As Bowers (1987) puts it, liberal conceptualization of self as “the epicenter of the social world” (p. 23) has the effect of “relativiz(ing) the communal foundations of a shared sense of moral authority, with the consequence that individual judgement reflects what is perceived as useful, fulfilling, and pleasurable” (p. 25). With “the subjectivism of personal experience” as “the final refuge” (p.28), it breeds nihilism; it erodes “the sense of being interdependent with the large social and biotic community,” which liberal educational thoughts define as “an unwelcomed constraint on individual freedom” (Bowers, 1993, p. 27).

In order to restore children’s radical intimacies with the more-than-human world, Japanese educational philosopher Yano (2000) provocatively proposes what he calls ‘dehumanization’ of education, where children are encouraged to renounce their modern, rationalist and instrumentalist view of and relations to the world. Yano (2000) argues that education for human ‘development’ has dominated the postwar education discourse

in Japan, where learning is conceptualized exclusively in terms of its instrumentalist logics (means-end relationships), or where the present moments are subordinated to what one is expected to perform in the future. He argues that children in postwar Japan have become ‘too human,’ fully socialized into the modern sensibilities where the world is classified, ordered and then stabilized, and where children learn to draw a boundary between self and the world. In this process, learning becomes a process whereby the world is positioned as a knowable entity and children as an all-knowing subject. Learning, conceived in this manner, is to facilitate the exponential growth of learners’ ego; the more they learn, the more their sense of self as an all-knowing subject becomes perfected.

What is lost in the process of modern learning, then, is the experience of self-dissolution (自己溶解) or self-overcoming (脱自), maintains Yano. It is a process where children learn to embrace the impossibility of knowing the world, acknowledging the relative insignificance of self, or small self. Such an experience takes place in a serendipitous manner, when children experience something indescribable in everyday life moments. In such moments, children lose themselves and experience a profound sense of interconnection to the whole universe; they are liberated from the instrumentalist means-end logics as well as from self-other hyper-separation. It could be a profoundly emotional experience, as losing self does cause strong affective responses (fear, anxiety, awe, and ecstasy) (Yano, 2008). Such experience of self-dissolution allows for one’s radical opening towards and deep intimacies with the world, or what Yano (2000) calls “education for life generation” (生成の教育). That is, children unlearn being humans so that they can begin to engage directly with the world. In Yano’s mind, education for development on the one hand and education for life generation on the other are in a permanent tension, constituting the twin wheels of what education is about and for.

The literature reviewed thus far has points to the crucial shortcoming of liberal, modern educational thoughts and practices; their inability to offer the self-limiting principles or mechanisms. As discussed earlier, capitalism, modern schooling, modern science all facilitate the exponential growth of human ego. Hence, cultural and pedagogic means that nurture a smaller and interdependent notion of self, or human humility, are required to address the cultural roots of ecological destruction today. Recent studies indicate that liberal education, or child-centered pedagogy, is likely to promote atomized, bloated sense of self, or ontological individualism, which accounts for a range of social problems detrimental towards sustainable future (see Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021). As a possible source of the alternatives, many of these scholars draw attention to indigenous, place-based and intergenerational knowledges outside the West (Abram, 2017; Bowers, 1993; Hickel, 2020; Komatsu, Rappleye and Silova, 2021). Shinto, a religious/animistic belief in Japan, is one of such bodies of alternative knowledge that can help us imagine how to overcome the cultural, ontological problems of modernity and modern schooling.

### 3. Shinto

As Jensen and Blok (2013) points out, “Japan is probably the only major industrialized country in which widespread discussion of animism is still a part of ordinary intellectual discourse” (p. 97). Indeed, the Shinto-inspired, animated worldview pervades all of Japanese society, underpinning mundane aspects of life as well as art forms, cultural practices and popular culture (Carter, 2001; Nakayama, 2019). Shinto values and practices are so enmeshed in Japanese people’s everyday life that they have become their second

nature (Carter, 2001; Kasulis, 2004). Drawing on Shinto scholar Stuart Picken, Carter (2001) explains that Shinto is “a religion that is ‘caught’ rather than ‘taught,’ its insights ‘perceived’ before they are ‘believed,’ its basic concepts ‘felt’ rather than ‘thought’ (p. 45). Unlike other established religions, Shinto has no doctrinal texts, and its central beliefs are maintained through people’s participation in rituals and ceremonies (Carter, 2001).

True to much of animisms in the world, Shinto stresses the greatness of the universe and the relative insignificance of human presence in its entire history. It also recognizes the agencies of the more-than-human world and their spiritual impacts on humans. Shinto locates spirits in both humans and non-humans, including stones, rivers, trees, foxes, thunder, ancestors, rice, waterfalls, and mountains, that is, radical personalization of the universe (Jensen & Blok, 2013). According to Shinto principles, “gods, men, animals, plants and inanimate objects are mutually permeable entities, appearing as a unified and dynamic field of existence, characterized by particular forms of immanence and vitalism” (Jensen and Blok 2013, p. 97).

The Shinto cosmology continues to influence the meaning of the term *shizen*, the Japanese translation of nature, the Western concept introduced to Japan in the late 19th century. As Nakayama (2019) explains, the Japanese concept of nature does not contain the hierarchical Christian idea, where the creator of the world God exists at the top, then man created in the image of God, with all the other creatures comprising nature at the bottom. In the Christian worldview, hence, “God as a transcendent being does not exist within nature, nor are human beings a part of it” (p. 8). This dichotomy between human beings and nature was central to the emergence of the new science in the 17th century, further developed via Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes into the Cartesian worldview and subsequently the conceptualization of nature merely as an object to be controlled by humans (Plumwood, 1993; Hickel, 2020). In contrast, the Shinto animistic view of nature recognizes something sacred in all the creatures, including humans, who are both physically and spiritually a part of nature. Hence, it defies the usual “opposition ...between human subjectivity and natural objectivity” (Nakayama, 2019, p. 9; see also Carter, 2001).

According to Kasulis (2003), the author of *Shinto: The Way Home*, the feeling of awe is central to Shinto. He argues that Shinto, as a contemporary religion in a highly technological society, is striking in its insistence that awe is not to be understood, nor to be comprehended in any systematic way. The point of Shinto practice is “more to make one feel at home with awe rather than try to understand or control it” (p. 167). Kasulis (2004) argues that in contemporary modern societies, we have lost this attitude towards the awesome. According to him, “one result of the predominance of scientific thinking is that today our initial response to the awesome is to try to understand it rather than to stand under it. Instead of filling us with a sense of humility before the unknown, awe has come to challenge us as only the not-yet-known. I don’t know has become an ego-bruising admission of ignorance instead of a sign of wisdom” (p. 167). Following Shinto, Kasulis (2004) invites us to “accept the awesome as part of the world in which we live” (p. 12). Here, it is suggested that the feeling of awe has much to do with letting go of our sense of ego and embrace ignorance as virtue.

The Shinto reverence towards the more-than-human world is central to the Japanese thought and philosophy, according to Carter (2013). In explaining the central component of the Zen/Shinto philosophy, Carter quotes a Japanese landscape architect/Zen monk, Shunmyo Matsuo:

"I wonder just what kind of spirit a certain stone has and how it would prefer to be set out. This is also true of plants and I always consider how I think the plants would like to be displayed. I always feel at one with the plants, when I am planting them, and with the stones, when I am arranging them". (p. 34)

Carter (2013) refers to Matsuo in his illustration of the key thinkers of the Kyoto School, Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, who were likewise influenced immensely by the Zen and Buddhist thought. Matsuo's approach to landscaping epitomizes the kind of empathic identification with non-animated objects that transcend the modernist culture-nature, subject-object dualism. Through self-cultivation, one learns to be one with an object (flowers, stones, and trees); it is a state of nothingness where one comes to know a thing not through reason and language but through intuitions developed through direct experience. Such Shinto-informed sensibilities towards nature permeate various Japanese arts such as traditional garden architecture, flower arrangement, martial arts, poetry (see Carter, 2008; Kato, 2021), including some school subjects to which I now turn.

## 4. Kokugo (国語) teaching

Though Shinto is not explicitly taught in Japanese education due to its principle of secularity (Nakayama, 2019), the Shinto-informed sensibilities towards nature, the nature-centered world view, and the stress on humans' interdependence on others are fundamental part of Japanese school curriculum, both hidden and official. School experience for children are organized in a way that Shinto insights are 'caught,' as opposed to being taught, 'perceived' as opposed to believed, and 'felt' rather than thought (Carter, 2001). They are not explicitly introduced as such, and yet a close inspection reveals that they permeate much of social and pedagogic interactions initiated by teachers.

One of the curriculum areas where this has been practiced is the subject of Japanese language, or kokugo (the national language). Both Japanese and international scholars point out that kokugo does not simply teach children how to read and write in Japanese but how to feel and, by extension, behave 'like Japanese' (Gerbert, 1993; Ishihara, 2005, 2009; Takayama, 2018b). Kokugo textbooks implicitly teach children a sense of emotional identification, interconnection and interdependency with others, including humans, non-humans, animated, and non-animated beings. That is, Japanese kokugo textbooks invite children to "imagine the feelings of another and to merge his or her identity with that of the character, even if that character should happen to be an animal" (Gerbert, 1993, p. 161). Examining the primary school kokugo textbooks in contrast to American school readers, Gerbert (1993) highlights the nature centered view of the world and the relative insignificance of the human figures in Japanese textbooks. Her analysis shows that in many of the stories included in Japanese readers, "human protagonists drop out of the picture altogether" (p. 162). In one of the texts that she closely examines, "(t)he self identifies with and merges with nature. It never become a fully constituted "personality" as often seen in American readers" (p. 164). Japanese children are encouraged to develop "a passive attitude towards nature" (p. 163), "be sensitive to small changes in the environment" (p. 163) and "quietly lose the self in the contemplation of nature" (p. 165). Many of the stories feature animals and plants, who are often depicted as "more understanding, more generous, and wiser, in short, more humane, than



humans” (p. 165), including some stories where human characters are given limited roles in the stories. Gerbert (1993) recognizes strong influence of Shinto and Buddhist views in Japanese kokugo readers, similar to Japanese traditional poems (tanka and haiku).

This is contrasted to the American primary school readers where children are depicted “as highly goal-oriented individuals who assume new responsibilities and gain mastery over themselves by facing new challenges” (Gerbert, 1993, p. 158). Many of the American primary grade readers feature a character with a clearly defined personality. Typically, s/he undergoes some challenges and yet eventually overcomes them with determination, perseverance, and ingenuity. Many stories feature nature but, as Gerbert (1993) argues, it is presented from an anthropocentric point of view. Personification is deployed in such stories to depict animals as ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ and invest them with human perceptions and reactions. Pedagogically, an explicit emphasis is placed on logical analysis, formal reasoning, analytical and critical evaluative thinking. Here, American children are invited to distance themselves from the text and objectify the text by assessing the logics, rhetoric and assumptions used and embedded in the texts. This relationship with the text sharply contrasts with the Japanese kokugo approach, where children are invited to reside within the world of the text and lose themselves in it (see Takayama, 2018b).

In recent years, Japanese kokugo teaching has faced intense criticism. Ishihara (2005, 2009), for instance, criticizes the ideological nature of Kokugo teaching. In his view, Japanese Kokugo serves as a moral lesson at the expense of teaching basic literacy skills. Stories selected for the textbooks always include moral lessons, and they are used to instill particular moral values into children, as opposed to teaching how to develop their own interpretations of the text. It serves to suppress individual difference, breed cultural conformity and undermine children’s capacity to reason critically. In his view, kokugo teaching promotes a highly normative view of what Japanese children ought to be like, marginalizing those who do not necessarily conform to the Shinto-inspired worldviews and attitudes. Furthermore, it is argued that the passivity towards nature encouraged through kokugo teaching promotes a romantic view of nature, or the idealized image of Japanese rurality in the past, and it is this passivity that can nurture children’s docility which can be easily manipulated by those in power. In Ishihara’s mind, hence, critical reasoning and intellectual autonomy are the skill set to be developed through kokugo teaching. Morally loaded literacy teaching is said to have no place in a modern, democratic society, as it breeds docility and passivity towards authority.

The kind of criticism, most typically expressed by Ishihara, gained momentum in the backdrop of the declining performance of Japanese students in PISA reading literacy. Japanese students’ underperformance in reading literacy, relative to their higher performance in scientific and mathematical literacies in PISA 2003, resulted in a call for a comprehensive review of kokugo teaching (see Takayama, 2018b). Many Japanese literacy and kokugo experts recognized the considerable gap between kokugo teaching and the reading literacy as assessed in PISA and demanded that the former be reformed to resemble PISA’s reading literacy, where students’ analytical and critical reading skills are assessed (Takayama, 2018b). Virtually no one paid attention to the ecological potentials of Japanese kokugo teaching in the course of the debate. The subsequent revisions to the national course of studies on kokugo have consistently placed more emphasis on analytical and critical reading skills, and this change clearly reflects the MEXT’s strategy to boost the Japanese students’ PISA rankings.

## 5. Moral Education (道德, dotoku)

Moral education is another subject area where Japanese Shinto worldview is integrated as part of its curriculum. The following poem is extracted from one of the most recent moral education readers published by the Ministry.

"To feel the greatness  
Rainbows after rain,  
the bright red sun about to set,  
shining aurora,  
drifting ice masses approaching the seashore,  
and splashing waterfalls.  
(Our) heart moves with the overwhelming  
presence of natural phenomena and sceneries.  
When faced with supernatural world beyond  
humans, (we) experience the beauty and  
greatness of nature.  
They move (us), and (we) appreciate human  
Heart" (MEXT, 2014, p. 114).

A sense of awe (畏敬の念) is one of the core themes of moral education curriculum (Murata, 1993), and each reader includes a few texts and photos designed to generate children's feelings towards awe-inspiring natural landscape or something indescribable. A sense of awe has been part of moral education curriculum since its 1958 reintroduction, but it has become a more explicit feature from 1989 onward (Inokuchi, 2005), when children's heart (心, morals) became an intense focus of policy intervention (see Takayama, 2010).

Learning a sense of awe requires children to leave behind the modern scientific form of learning where they are to understand, comprehend, and control the awesome. Instead, they are to cultivate a feeling of awe by simply standing "under it, feel themselves to be inherently part of it and it part of themselves" (Kasulis, 2004, p. 167). This concept relates back to Yano's (2000) notion of 'education for life generation,' where children engage in direct, unmediated relations with the world, or the whole universe, so that they experience profound unity with it. It is a type of experience where the subject-object, self-other split collapses and one undergoes self-dissolution or self-overcoming as a result. Hence, introducing a sense of awe through moral education readers can have ecological potentials; it serves to teach children the insignificance of humans and the existence of something great in the broader universe, while its stress on human ignorance encourages them to renounce human exceptionalism (see Murata, 1993).

The discussion of awe is part of the consistent emphasis on relationality, interdependence, and embeddedness, which is the key feature of moral education readers in Japan. They all address the four clusters of themes, 1) concerning self, 2) relationship

with others, 3) relationship to nature and the awesome, and 4) relationship with groups and broader society, as specified in the Ministry's course of study on moral education (Inokuchi, 2005). More specifically, these readers are organized around the concentric circles with individual self at the center, extending out to family, school, community, nation, the globe, and the whole universe. As Japanese children progress with the readers, they learn to position themselves within the broader collectives of expanding scales, including the overwhelming presence of nature and the universe, where a sense of awe is typically introduced.

Unfortunately, the ecological potentials of moral education have never been explored in the ongoing debate, except for those who endorse the Ministry's initiatives (see Murata, 1993). Situated within the highly politicized policy context described earlier, the seemingly benign Shinto-informed concepts such as 'awe and reverence towards nature,' or 'matters beyond humans,' and 'the insignificance of humans in the whole universe' assume highly contested meanings. Many liberal-left critics argue the Shinto-informed worldview reinforces students' passivity towards nature and by extension towards the authority and the state. They quickly associate moral education readers with the imperial past, where the unquestioned devotion to nature was politically appropriated to generate people's allegiance towards the emperor/imperial state and the catastrophic 'sacred' war for the imperial household.

For Irie (2004) and Miyake (2003), for instance, the 'notebook of heart' [こころのノート], the first iteration of moral education readers published in 2003, shows clear resemblance to Shushin (修身), the prewar moral education subject where Confucius moral values were taught between 1890 and 1945 (officially terminated in 1948). Shushin is often viewed as the key ideological device used by Imperial Japan to instill in children the absolute loyalty to the state. These liberal-left writers unpack the sequence of the text which they claim is designed to instill in children strong national identity; it invites children to start from the core of the concentric circle (self, family, and school) with which they are emotionally attached and then extend it further out to the hometown and the nation-state. Likewise, Iwakawa and Funabashi (2004) argues that the imposition of moral values goes against the democratic principles of education where children learn to negotiate with each other over difference in opinions in order to address the problems within the classroom and beyond. In the idealized democratic classroom, children are to learn morals and ethics through their everyday democratic living at school. The moral education readers' psychological focus on inner self is viewed as part of the new mode of governance under neoliberalism where children's individual mind becomes the intense focus of state intervention (Iwakawa and Funabashi, 2004). In these liberal-left critics' minds, the moral education reader is no different from the wartime ultra-nationalistic teaching in that Confucius values and Shinto-informed ideas are imposed to breed children's docility and submissiveness. Rather, it is far more dangerous because the ideological manipulation is much more covertly performed than during the prewar and war time.

These critics also problematize the inclusion of awe in the reader. Irie (2004) is particularly troubled by the fact that many Shinto-informed concepts such as reverence towards the awesome are mentioned without being identified as religious. She argues that this has the effect of privileging Shinto while excluding children of different belief systems. Inokuchi (2005), moral education specialist, also criticizes the moral education reader's focus on nurturing a sense of awe towards nature or "something beyond human power" (p. 115). He problematizes the lack of clarity in what is referred to by "something

beyond human power” and questions whether or not it is a legitimate object of human respect. Inokuchi’s liberal premise is revealed when he states that moral education should be limited to civic virtues, which can be clearly defined and hence can achieve broader social consensus (p. 10). In sum, the liberal-left critics, by and large, call for teaching the principles of rationality and critical reason as well as civic virtues that are central to democratic citizenship, as opposed to instilling docility, which, they suspect, is a political and social necessity in time of neoliberal economic restructuring. What has remained unrecognized is that Japanese moral education includes many elements that can be deployed to nurture ecologically mindful dispositions, not just submissiveness that can serve the interest of the state.

## 6. Beyond the Cold War spell, towards syncretism

Foremost scholar of Japanese pedagogy of unlearning and *mushin* (無心, no mind or nothingness), Nishihira (Nishihira and Rappleye, 2021) makes the following observation about the risk of political appropriation of Japanese traditional concepts towards nationalistic ends:

"For those of us that write about Japanese thought and tradition, we still operate in the shadow of the war, to some extent. We worry that the element of trust and persistence embedded within this model (premised upon self-negation and nothingness) may get co-opted, in a nationalist context, and transformed into a tool of indoctrination. It is a wariness of getting mistaken for nationalists or apologists for the prewar period, and lingering uncertainties about the possible dangerous potentials of self-negation, that has prevented many Japanese scholars, including myself, from more assertively discussing these models. Future work needs to remain vigilant of this. That said, this ‘just trust’ call to faith is not unique to this ‘Japanese’ model, but is a major issue for virtually all forms of tradition— religious, secular, and otherwise". (p. 10)

Though Nishihira does not refer specifically to Shinto, the learning/unlearning model he puts forwards is premised upon the Shinto or Zen Buddhist notions of self-negation, nothingness, and the ‘just trust call to faith,’ hence embodying the same departure from liberal principles of rationality, reason and individuality as discussed in this chapter.

What Nishihira’s reflection illuminates is the predicament of reclaiming what is indigenous or traditional in a context where Western liberalism and its associated educational thoughts permeate the political and educational discourse and institutions. In the context of Japan, what is traditional and indigenous is deeply tainted with war aggression and self-destruction in the past. In the postwar politics of Japanese education, the rejection of liberal ideas, which is always coupled with the assertion of what is traditional and indigenous, has been so tainted with the memory of regressive politics of wartime ultra-nationalism and subsequent nativism in the postwar era. It has been widely accepted in postwar Japan that what drove Japan into the destructive war was its ‘immaturity’ as a modern state, with its people unable to exercise rational, autonomous reasoning, hence succumbing to the irrational authority of the imperial state. Hence, any negation of liberal concepts is quickly dismissed as a retrogressive desire to return to

the imperial past. This has resulted in the view that any philosophical discussion of self-negation and nothingness—often associated with the Kyoto School philosophers (e.g., Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, see Carter, 2013)—is politically naïve, if not outrightly dangerous. Davis (1998), for instance, points to the dangers in transferring purely philosophical arguments of the Kyoto School philosophers to the domain of politics, when he states that “(t)he collapse of subject and object, thought and action long the aim of Japanese philosophers may be innocent enough as epistemology or Buddhist soteriology but it can have a devastating effect when applies to politics” (p. 183).

While the point about the risk of political appropriation should be seriously heeded, it should not lead to a categorial rejection of the rich intellectual and cultural traditions, either. Unfortunately, the experience of the past war was so devastating and deeply ingrained in the mind of Japanese people that there is a knee-jerk response to any indication of positive appraisal of Shinto-informed notion of self-negation, nothingness and the awesome. As a result, the discourse of Shinto in education has become an exclusive property of the political right, with the liberal-left unable to reclaim Shinto through its alternative rearticulations. In the face of the planetary ecological crisis, however, there is an urgent need to reassess this mainstream discourse of Japanese postwar education scholarship, “where Japanese-ness is automatically equated with negative distinctness, prewar myths, and an escape from the responsibility of making Japan “fully modern”” (Rappleye, 2018, p.17).

Needless to say, what is proposed here does not at all endorse the nationalist attribution of anything liberal to the postwar US ‘imposition,’ nor does it support the romanticization of Japan’s imperial past. Instead, it is a call for political syncretism for which the following two tasks are in order. First, we need to recognize the immense potentials that Shinto offers for us to transcend the limits of modern education and to reimagine it towards ecologically balanced future. As Carter (2001) stresses, Shinto remains “one of those cultural treasures which remains alive and well, awaiting its time to spring forth healthy and vibrant...” (p. 61). Current ecological crisis has created the opportune moment for Shinto to be recognized as such treasure. How Japan reintegrates Shinto into school curriculum while disarticulating it from the nationalistic cultural forces, should offer important lessons for other countries with similar animistic traditions.

Second, the proposed political syncretism demands a careful discerning of what is desirable and otherwise towards both ecologically balanced and politically engaged educational thoughts. The outcome of this discerning work is likely to be a creative assemblage of elements that are indigenous and modern (Western), inviting children to live in multiple worlds simultaneously (see Silova, 2019, 2020). In more concrete terms, this means that students will learn to directly experience deep interconnection with the more-than-human world by tentatively suspending the modern, scientific mode of thinking and by simply standing under what is awesome. On the other hand, they will simultaneously learn to engage in rational, critical, and autonomous reasoning, to actively participate in democratic processes, and to interrogate the traditional knowledge when necessary.

To put it differently, this is a call to reject what Shotwell (2016) calls “purity politics, or purism” (p. 7). The politics against purity, as proposed by Shotwell (2016), begins with clear recognition of “complexity and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives, rather than as things we should avoid” (p. 8). Drawing upon Bruno Latour and others in the STS (Science and Technology Studies), Shotwell (2016) stresses that different ways of being, traditions, priorities, and practices come together to constitute the world and that

all practices in real world always manage “constitutive noncoherence” (p. 14). Just as elsewhere, daily lives and practices in Japan are full of such noncoherences; for instance, they are saturated with both advanced forms of technology and science and the penetrating presence of Shinto animism. After all, it is a country where rocket scientists visit a local shrine for their successful space endeavors (Nelson, 2000, p. 1). And indeed, the strongly nature-centered worldview has been quietly integrated into kokugo and dotoku teaching as discussed in this chapter, despite the official constitutional commitment to the secularity of public education. This means that Japanese educators and children are already engaged in the kind of syncretic work as proposed here, where different, often contradictory things are assembled and held together.

It is important to note that Shinto itself remains highly noncoherent; Shinto is a placeholder for multiple interests within Japan. The dominant, nationalistic discourse of Shinto, or what Kasulis (2004) calls the highly normative and prescriptive, ‘essentialist’ Shinto spirituality, is certainly with us. But there is also the ad-hoc, flexible, and descriptive form of Shinto as a popular praxis, or what Kasulis (2004) calls the existentialist Shinto spirituality, which pervades much of place-based invocations of Shinto cosmologies in festivals, rituals, and mundane life moments. The localized, existentialist Shinto spirituality gives us a way to be radically different today that centers on immanent connectedness of humans and non-humans.

The distinction between essentialist and existentialist Shinto spiritualities is only for heuristic purposes, and admittedly they often overlap with each other in actual manifestation (Kasulis, 2004). And yet, it should help Japanese scholars of education to recognize the possibility of the creative syncretic work, as it does suggest how Shinto could be brought inside school walls without necessarily enacting the nationalistic politics of exclusion and the retrospective desire for the imperial past. For instance, existentialist Shinto is enacted through people’s participation in local festivals, everyday events and rituals (Carter, 2001; Kasulis, 2004). These could be brought back into school, and they can provide children with direct experiences that serve as a meaningful context for the nature-centered, more-than-human world as depicted in kokugo readers and for the sense of reverence towards the awesome as featured in dotoku readers. Doing so, however, does require Japanese educators to explore post-secular politics (Hokari, 2011), to rethink, if not entirely reject, the very presumption of secularity that has historically underpinned public education.

Pursing these syncretic tasks is part of what Chen (2010) calls de-cold-war politics in East Asia. Chen argues that “the Cold War is still alive within us (Asians)” (p. 118), pointing to the overwhelming presence of the US in popular culture and people’s habits, ideas, languages and even their desires and aspirations, hence their subjectivities. In order to release subjectivities in Asia from the dead hand of the Cold War, he suggests that those in Asia need to engage in de-cold-war politics, that is, to “confront the legacies and continuing tensions of the Cold War” so as to “reopen the past for reflection in order to make moments of liberation possible in the future” (p. x). Cold War as a major geopolitical and historical event, might have ended almost three decades ago, and yet the languages, imageries, and discourses developed during the time continue to haunt the politics of Japanese education. They are deeply entangled with the collective memories of the imperialism, war defeat, the Allied Occupation, and postwar reconstruction under the strong American influence. Freeing us from the Cold War spell is the first step towards appreciating the pedagogical potentials of Shinto-informed worldviews and concepts towards ecologically balanced, sustainable futures not just for Japan but beyond.

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