

Philosophers Without Borders? Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Education

Jeffrey Ayala Milligan

Florida State University

Enoch Stanfill

Royal University of Phnom Penh/Florida State University

Anton Widyanto

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry

Huajun Zhang

Beijing Normal University

One important element of globalization is the dissemination of western educational ideals and organizational frameworks through educational development projects. While postcolonial theory has long offered a useful critique of this expansion, it is less clear about how educational development that eschews neo-imperialist tendencies might proceed. This problem poses a question that requires philosophical reflection. However, much of comparative and international development education ignores philosophical modes of inquiry. Moreover, as Libbrecht (2007) argues, philosophy all too often sees itself as synonymous with the Euro-American intellectual tradition, thus ignoring indigenous educational thought that might more appropriately guide local educational development. Drawing on John Dewey's (1938) call for deeper and more inclusive plans of operations in response to social conflicts and Jurgen Habermas (2008) call for "reciprocal learning processes" and "cooperative acts of

translation,” we will attempt to reach beyond our individual philosophical borders to explore the necessity and possibilities of comparative philosophy of education by sharing three examples of our current efforts to apply philosophical analysis to international educational development. These examples will articulate and embody the necessity and the challenges of applying philosophical analysis to educational development work.

The term *globalization* is perhaps one of the most widely used buzzwords in contemporary political and popular discourse. It is most often used to describe the process whereby Western economic, social and political values, institutions, and intellectual frameworks are disseminated throughout the world. It also describes, implicitly if not explicitly, a reciprocal, though unequal, influence of non-Western cultures and institutions on the West via such avenues as foreign travel, trade, immigration, mass communication, etc. Although it can be argued that the phenomena named by the term *globalization* are, historically speaking, nothing new, it is perhaps fair to say that we are witnessing a degree of mutual international influence and interaction that is unprecedented in scope, if not in nature.

In his recent book, *Within the Four Seas*, Ulrich Libbrecht (2007) argues that the pace and scope of globalization, particularly its economic manifestations, has outstripped the growth of the political or intellectual apparatuses necessary to control or even rethink the phenomenon. The effect, he fears, is a renewed and unfettered imposition of Western social, political, and economic discourses on the rest of the world. Although there is an extensive body of literature in postcolonial theory from, among others, Memmi ([1965] 1991), Fanon ([1965] 2005) and Said (1979) to Wallerstein (1995) and Amin (2004) that offers a trenchant critique of Western colonialism and neocolonialism, that literature has tended, according to Young (2001), to deploy Western philosophical discourses—especially critical theory and poststructuralism—to expose and attack Western hegemonic practices in the non-Western world.¹ What is needed, Libbrecht (2007) argues, to avoid “mental colonization” is “an integration of foreign world-views into our own one-sided Weltanschauung What we have to attempt is, in the first place, a dialogue, and this is impossible without a ‘translation’ into the context of the others” (1). But contemporary philosophy, he believes, continues to act as if philosophy is the Euro-American philosophical tradition. What is needed, he concludes, is a more robust comparative philosophy.

Traditional comparative philosophy, however, tended to focus on East–West comparisons, assumed the relevance of disciplinary boundaries that separated philosophy from other social sciences and humanities, focused on the conceptual problems that had dominated European philosophy since Descartes, and confined its analysis within existing linguistic, cultural, and historical borders (Larson 1988). In short, it tended to view the non-Western Other through Western philosophical lenses. According to Larson (1988), however, more recent comparative

philosophy is increasingly challenging these boundaries and biases in the belief that “no culture or tradition can be assigned a privileged place in this game of observing the other” and that the search for solutions to problems, philosophical or otherwise, requires us “to look at it from both sides” (Krishna, 1988, 79). Krishna (1988) describes the promise of such a comparative philosophy in the following terms:

To search for the distinctive philosophical problems seen as problems or for distinctiveness in the solutions offered to similar problems is not only to see the alien tradition in a new way but to enrich oneself with the awareness of an alternative possibility in thought, a possibility that has been already actualized. The awareness of this alternative . . . may, one hopes, free one’s conceptual imagination from the unconscious constraints of one’s own conceptual tradition. Thus comparative philosophy has the chance to function as a mutual liberator of each philosophical tradition from the limitations imposed upon its own past, instead of being what it is at present, the imposition of the standards of one dominant culture upon all the others. (83)

To look at both sides means we must hear both sides; we must be able to listen to the experience of intelligent life expressed in discourses that we may not recognize as philosophical. Panikker (1988) calls this a dialogical philosophy, “a philosophical stance that opens itself up to other philosophies and tries to understand them from the initial perspective—though it changes in the process” (127). Panikker writes:

In the effort of communicating with one another—at the beginning without proper understanding, then slowly by dispelling false imaginations and misconceptions—we forge a common language, we reach a mutual comprehension, we cross the boundaries. This is what I call dialogical philosophy. It is not the imposition of one philosophy or one mode of understanding, but the forging of a common universe of discourse in the very encounter. (132)

This description of dialogical philosophy assumes, correctly in our view, that communication can reach across artificial boundaries such as race, class, nation, etc. that impede thought to access the greatest range of experience that might bear upon the solution of mutual problems, though it acknowledges that those boundaries create false imaginations and misconceptions that often impede and distort the effort to communicate across differences. And both accounts of the necessity of communicating, or philosophizing, without borders anticipate Habermas’ (2008) recent argument that philosophy must make an effort to translate the meanings of fundamental concepts across competing or contradictory discourses to clarify true differences and, perhaps more important, dispel apparent differences that impede coordination or cooperation among discourse communities for the solution of common social problems.

Our fundamental assumption in this article is that the arguments for the importance of comparative philosophy apply to philosophy of education as well as a subdiscipline of philosophy. Moreover, we suggest that the arguments are even more important in their implications for philosophy of education because education has been, and continues to be, one of the most common institutional mechanisms by which Western social, political, economic, and intellectual frameworks are disseminated in the non-Western world and through which the West might learn to listen to and learn from intelligent life beyond our own borders.

In making this argument for more explicitly philosophical inquiry in comparative education and more comparative inquiry in philosophy of education, we recognize that we are not the first, nor the only, philosophers of education to do so. It is implicit, for instance, in Dewey's (1916) philosophy of education and explicit in much of his travel and lecturing abroad (Dewey 1973). More recently, Walter Feinberg (1989) and Terence McLaughlin (2004) have made the case for the importance of philosophy in comparative inquiry and the power of comparative study to shed new light on philosophical questions and answers. We can also point to examples of philosophers of education engaging in comparative studies, such as Timothy Reagan (2005), J. Mark Halstead (2004), Michael Merry (2007), and Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2008), among others.

Moreover, the recent resurgence of interest in cosmopolitanism (e.g. Papastephanou 2002, 2005; Popkewitz 2007; Merry & de Ruyter 2009; Hansen 2009) in both philosophy and philosophy of education suggests a useful reappraisal of the long poststructuralist preoccupation with difference and incommensurability in favor of a renewed exploration of the possibilities of commonalities, or at least dialogue, across differences. However, a review of five of the top journals in both philosophy of education and comparative education reveals only a handful of articles that might be termed comparative philosophy of education published in the last decade.² Therefore, in this article, we intend to take up and extend the argument for comparative philosophy of education summarized above. We are sympathetic to the cosmopolitan argument regarding the possibility of and necessity for reaching beyond the historically and culturally defined lenses that frame our sense of the world to achieve a common, albeit imperfect and provisional, understanding that might underpin collaborative responses to commonly perceived educational problems. However, we believe that doing so requires the kind of understanding of concepts in their historical and discursive contexts that only a comparative philosophy of education can provide.

We hope to illustrate this point by briefly examining three cases from three different cultural contexts: Cambodia, Pakistan, and China.³ We attempt to trace the problem of difference across all three cases to demonstrate the ways in which common challenges may be shaped by different fundamental assumptions and, therefore, require an understanding of those assumptions and their possible consequences before the challenges can be fully understood. In short, we ask "What

difference does difference make in these three cases?" In addition, the examination of each case illustrates the potential contributions of different perspectives to a comparative philosophy of education. These perspectives, inevitably limited by the cultural and philosophical locations of our co-authors, nevertheless contribute, in their own ways, to the effort to communicate across differences that must be at the heart of a comparative philosophy of education. Although these cases are not intended to be full-fledged philosophical analyses of all the fundamental assumptions relevant to each case, they are intended to mark concrete instances where comparative philosophical inquiry is required to more fully understand the educational problem at the heart of each case and thus to contribute collaboratively to the search for solutions. In so doing, we hope to illustrate the need for, challenges to, and the possibility of comparative philosophy of education.

USEFUL PERSONS OR GOOD PERSONS? EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

Although the outsider's perspective on local experience, especially in the context of unequal power relations, always runs the risk of degenerating into an imperial gaze (Said 1979; Pratt 1992), it constitutes, necessarily, one partner in any effort to communicate across differences and hence one potential starting point for a comparative philosophy of education. It cannot, however, become a stopping point, for to do so substitutes monologue for communication and betrays the promise of a comparative philosophy of education for the well-worn tactics of orientalist discourse. But it can, especially in those contexts where local perspectives have not yet been articulated in forms recognizable or available to the outsider, offer a basis for asking critical questions, and thus unsettling premature claims to the establishment of a common universe of discourse on educational problems. Our first case illustrates this possibility through an examination of potential differences in educational goals and their possible effect on educational development in Cambodia.

If, as Popkewitz (2007) argues, schooling is about changing people, then "changing people embodies cultural theses about modes of living" (65), or modes of being in the world. Culture is an important factor in shaping these views and its influence is observed in areas like politics, religion, and education. Often the views of one group are in conflict with those of another. For instance, a culture's beliefs regarding the origins and nature of existence, about the way the world is, inevitably colors the normative ideals of those who hold them regarding the way people ought to be in such a world. Therefore, some understanding of a culture's cosmological traditions might be one useful source of insight into the educational ideals emphasized in that culture and perhaps clarification of where they might overlap or conflict with ideals rooted in a different set of assumptions about the

way the world is and appropriate modes of being in it, even where those differing ideals may be expressed in quite similar language.

For instance, the cosmology of the Euro-American West is often described as grounded in Judeo-Christian religious beliefs regarding the singularity of creation and the journey of individual believers toward salvation, a linear, progressive conception of time reinforced by the emergence of a modern science that provided the conceptual resources and epistemological tools to “offer salvation through human intervention,” a construction of human agency tied to a conception of “individuality that develops in a flow of regulated time” (Popkewitz 2007, 68–69). One might label this view a linear model of cosmology that posits a normative ideal of individuals as agents who bring reason and acquired knowledge to bear in changing the world, to the extent possible, in accordance with their own ends.

Although this is a familiar worldview, it is by no means the only way human societies have understood existence and their place in it. In Cambodia, for instance, many have traditionally subscribed to a combination of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs about cosmology that represent a more cyclical model of recurring periods of creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu), and destruction (Shiva; Canniff 2001; Marston and Guthrie 2004). It is worth considering whether this alternative conception of time, largely unchallenged until relatively recently by that embedded in Western religious and scientific assumptions, has produced different normative ideals regarding the individual’s mode of being in the world from those that developed in the Euro-American tradition. For instance, in many Western societies, life tends to be seen as an individualistic, self-driven activity. Rooted in the Protestant conception of the priesthood of all believers and the concomitant requirement that individuals understand the will of God via the reading of the divine Word, and reinforced by Enlightenment notions of reason as exercised by individual minds and modern science as the method of understanding and guiding experience, the modes of living privileged in Western societies and thus expressed as educational ideals have tended to stress individual agency. The current educational system in the United States reflects this linear model. This individualistic, linear view involving formal education has been identified as one characteristically modern view of education (Reagan 2005).

The cyclical conception of time interpreted in the context of Cambodian historical and cultural experience, however, has tended to produce a worldview that is more communally oriented. Reagan (2005) emphasizes, for instance, that “education and childrearing have commonly been seen as a social responsibility shared by all of the members of the community” (249), rather than a responsibility given over to the occupants of a specialized role as is so common in modern industrial societies. In this view, teaching is not just the duty of designated teachers, but a responsibility shared by all for the purpose of adapting the young to the needs and expectations of current society. This aim is reflected in the assertion of one Cambodian district superintendent who stated that his goal was to help the students in his

district become “good people” (personal communication, June 24, 2008). He realized that most of his students would not attend college and would continue to live in the area after they graduated. This affirmation of developing good, contributing members of the community follows a traditional model of education. In this traditional view of education, success is measured by “helping children grow into the kind of adults who will function effectively and appropriately in their society” (Reagan 2005, 249). Success under the more linear, individual-agency-oriented model common to modern postindustrial societies emphasizes the acquisition of a specific body of knowledge through formal education for the purpose of achieving individual aims.

Where might such differences over educational aims influence educational development in contemporary Cambodia? Cambodia continues to struggle to improve its education sector after decades of conflict, often with the help of international organizations guided by the Education for All initiative begun in 1990 (UNESCO 2008c) and reaffirmed in 2000 in the Dakar Framework for Action. Two of the initiative’s goals are (a) to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, and (b) to ensure achievement of measurable learning outcomes, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills (World Bank 2008). These goals were intended to be “the death-knell of rigid, prescriptive education systems and to usher in an era where flexibility could thrive. From now on, education would be tailor-made, adapted to the needs, culture and circumstances of learners” (UNESCO 2008b).

But, to what extent do Education For All (EFA) goals embody normative ideals premised in ontological and epistemological assumptions that exist in more or less tension with indigenous normative ideals and philosophical assumptions? Can such tensions, if they exist, explain, at least in part, the difficulties development agencies have faced in meeting EFA goals, as well as the difficulties Cambodian educators have faced in meeting their goals? The first of the EFA goals cited previously seeks to move younger children out of the home and away from the early learning experiences common in multigenerational Cambodian households into the classroom, where the priority is getting children prepared for the rigors of learning numeracy and literacy. However, the success indicators for this particular goal in Cambodia are quite low, showing only minimal improvement with a gross enrollment ration (GER) of 5% in 1999 growing to 11% in 2006 (UNESCO 2008a). Could this limited growth be partly explained by the tension between a rationalized and professionalized conception of early childhood teaching common—perhaps necessary—to post-industrial societies and implicit in this EFA goal and a communal model of early childhood education in which the family as a whole “bears the ultimate responsibility for the children and for their education and upbringing” (Reagan 2005, 250)?

The second EFA goal identified seeks to ensure that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved. In contemporary practice, the way these learning

outcomes are measured is through standardized testing of individual learners. Popkewitz (2007), however, points out that this practice of “measurement of achievement, personality, motivation, and cognitive development” assumes a conception of individual agency that emerges from Euro-American cultural history and thus embodies “normative inscriptions about the possibilities and characteristics of who is and who is not agential” (70). Such measurements, then, become a tool for identifying and targeting for intervention any deviations from these normative ideals. In taking a closer look at this EFA goal, it is evident that UNESCO sees improving formal education as an individually-centered outcome as measured by the proxies of GERs in pre-primary education (UNESCO 2008a), for early childhood education and retention to grade 5, and pupil-to-teacher ratios (PTR) for quality education. If, as suggested earlier in the observation of a Cambodian district superintendent, the primary goal of Cambodian education is moral—good people—then one wonders whether standardized tests can measure whether or not students are good people as valued in a Cambodian cyclical, communal model. In this case, different beliefs about the way the world is may yield different ideals regarding appropriate modes of being in the world and thus different goals for education.

Obviously, to point out the possible, or even real, tensions between the fundamental philosophical assumptions of, for instance EFA and indigenous Cambodian educational values is not proof that such tensions constitute serious impediments to cross-cultural collaboration or that Cambodian citizens and educators might not actually prefer the normative ideals embodied in EFA. The goals of EFA are, in many respects, admirable and may well be important for helping developing countries grow in ways that are meaningful and desirable for their citizens. To know whether this is indeed the case, one would have to engage Cambodian voices in the kind of dialogue envisioned in a comparative philosophy of education. However, there is a more than sufficient body of philosophical literature unrelated to the Cambodian context that ought to warn the thoughtful outsider that the unexamined use of instruments and normative ideals developed under one set of basic philosophical assumptions may contradict the normative ideals that emerge from a quite different set of basic philosophical assumptions. To impose one upon the other is tantamount to asking developing countries to abandon their cultural views to meet what may, in their eyes, be less desirable objectives. Recognition of this problem, however, in Cambodia or elsewhere, is one potential starting point for a comparative philosophy of education open to dialogue and mutual understanding and thus able to assist in negotiating the terms of genuine collaboration across cultural differences for the benefit of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

Any such effort must, of course, eschew essentialist constructions of East and West along with orientalist assumptions that either individuals or communities are trapped in their historical tradition like flies in amber, and thus incapable of change. On the other hand, it may be equally problematic to assume that cultural traditions

of long standing do not have meaningful influence on contemporary practices. Our brief discussion here is not intended to be a complete, or even necessarily accurate, account of Khmer cosmology or modern Cambodian educational values: we do not claim the expertise on either issue required to provide such an account. Rather, our purpose here has been to illustrate, from our own limited experience and expertise, the kinds of points at which a comparative philosophy of education might begin, in Panniker's (1988) words, "the effort of communicating with one another." We recognize that our effort begins "without proper understanding," but we believe that in the process of "dispelling false imaginations and misconceptions," we struggle toward "common language, we reach a mutual comprehension, we cross the boundaries" (132). The effort must begin, we argue, with the question we have asked here: What difference does difference make?

ISLAMIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE MORAL STATUS OF DIFFERENCE

Any comparative philosophy of education's effort to communicate across cultural differences must be able and prepared to listen to and learn from voices from within alien cultural traditions, even where differences at the level of basic philosophical assumptions yield such different notions of ideal modes of being that one might well wonder whether Panniker's (1988) hoped for mutual understanding is even possible. But these are often the very cases where difference is most dangerous and thus the effort to achieve some sort of mutual understanding most pressing. Educational development in the Muslim world, which has come under considerable scrutiny in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in the United States and other countries, as well as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is a case in point. Some forms of education in the Muslim world have been blamed for failing to provide the sort of education necessary for Muslim children to succeed in the modern world and for inculcating forms of religious extremism that may lead to violent behavior. Both alleged failures are frequently cited as justification for interventions in education in the Muslim world in the name of moderation, modernization, and reform, i.e. development. However, this current interest in educational development and reform in the Muslim world emerges long after many in the Muslim world have rejected the colonial and neo-colonial imposition of Western models of education in favor of a movement to Islamize knowledge and thus Islamize education.

The term *Islamization of knowledge* was coined in the First World Congress on Muslim education held at Mecca in 1977 (Abaza 2002). The movement this congress launched has been profoundly influenced by the work of the Malaysian philosopher, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, and the Palestinian American

scholar Ismail Raji' al-Faruqi (Haneef 2005). Their work begins with the fundamental Muslim belief that all knowledge comes from God; therefore, all knowledge is unified as a reflection of the unity (*tawhid*) of Allah and thus has religious significance. There are, however, two sources or revelations of this knowledge: the Holy Qur'an, which is believed to be the source of revealed knowledge, and nature, which is a source of acquired knowledge (al-Attas 1999). As divine revelations of a single deity there can be no contradiction between them; any perceived discrepancies between them are the result of human misunderstanding. According to al-Attas (1999), knowledge, itself, can be defined as "the arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing. The meaning of a thing means the right meaning of it; and what is considered to be the right meaning is in the context determined by the Islamic vision of reality and truth as projected by the Qur'anic conceptual system"(18). Thus, differences over meaning, say, the nature of truth or what it means to be a good person, are not simply culturally constructed alternatives but errors, *moral errors*.

This is a set of epistemic assumptions that, on the face of it, is fundamentally at odds with those of modern, Euro-American scientific and philosophical discourse where divine revelation is widely dismissed as myth or, at best, moral guidance rather than a source of knowledge. In this discourse, knowledge is a consequence of scientific inquiry into the empirical world unfettered by religious presuppositions or it is seen as a social construct in which invocations of divine revelation are merely the techniques of human agents designed to justify the superiority of one set of knowledge claims over another (Rorty 1982; West 1985; Code 1991). Such Western epistemic claims are the cause of what many Muslim intellectuals see as a multidimensional malaise plaguing Muslim societies around the world brought on by epistemological imperialism: The contemporary problems of the Muslim world, such as inadequate leadership and social injustice, are caused by confusion and error in knowledge brought on by Western learning. "The epistemological weapons they use to bring about the de-Islamisation of the Muslim mind are invariably the same," al-Attas (1999) argues, "and these are—apart from the underlying principles of secular philosophy and science that produced and nurtured them—anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology and the principles and methods of education"(12). In this view, Western education rooted in Western philosophical assumptions is a source of moral error in the Muslim world.

Because knowledge exists in minds, the nature of knowledge depends on the spiritual, moral, and intellectual qualities of the mind or soul that has received or created it; therefore, modern Western knowledge with its underlying secular values is inappropriate for Muslims (Wan Daud 1998, 306). However, "in the minds of good Muslims . . . every bit of information (or) ideas from any source whatsoever, can be Islamized or put in its right and proper place within the Islamic vision of truth and reality" (Wan Daud 1998, 309). Islamisation can thus be understood

as “the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition, and then from secular control over his reason and his language” (al-Attas 1999, 45). Based on this perspective, the Islamisation of knowledge is an intellectual countermovement against the influence of Western secularism. It represents, according to Abaza (1993) “a disguised battle on the ‘difference’ between competing intellectuals (local against Western experts, but also divergent interests and ideological orientations within the local context) over the bargaining about who knows better the reality”(307). Although not everyone in the Muslim world supports this conception of Islamization (see Rahman 1988), its influence is pervasive in the Muslim world (Hashim 2004, Milligan 2006, Hefner and Zaman 2007).

If education is about, at least in part, the acquisition and transmission of knowledge by one generation to another, then such epistemological assumptions are foundational to any approach to education, whether or not those assumptions are explicitly considered. Therefore, differences on these basic assumptions as fundamental as those sketched here are likely to engender seemingly irreconcilable differences over the goals and methods of education. Educational development implicitly premised on a set of epistemic assumptions so different from those held by the community to be “developed” presents a fundamental challenge to educational development in such contexts.

One educational manifestation of such a conception of difference is illustrated in a recent study of parental decision-making in the largely privatized educational marketplace of contemporary Pakistan (Nelson 2008). This study, based on more than 800 qualitative interviews, found that the large majority of Pakistani parents interviewed believed a religious education to be more important than basic, vocational, or liberal education. Although most parents wanted their children to be good and materially successful, if limited choices or resources forced them to choose one over the other, they reported they would choose religious education: In effect, being a good person trumps being a successful person in this context. This choice, Nelson (2010) argues, is not simply borne out by the small numbers of parents who choose an exclusively *madrasah* education for their children, but by the large majority who deliberately combine *madrasah* and non-*madrasah* schooling for their children. There is, thus, a large market for religious education in Pakistan, a market from which the Pakistani government has effectively withdrawn through its failure to adequately provide for education and into which sectarian educational entrepreneurs have increasingly entered.

Given contemporary concerns about the influence of Islamic education in Pakistan on Islamic radicalism, the study went on to examine parents’ perceptions of religious and sectarian difference—Sunni, Shi’a, Deobandi, etc.—and whether acknowledging and learning to respect such differences should constitute a part of their children’s education. The author found that parents, at first, tended to deny the existence of such differences, claiming, “there is only one Islam” (Nelson 2010, 605). When the rather obvious sectarian differences existing in Pakistan

were pointed out to them, parents argued that their children's education should emphasize commonalities and minimize differences to avoid conflict. Not surprisingly, however, the commonalities to be stressed coincided with the sectarian beliefs of the parents, and the differences to be ignored coincided with the sectarian beliefs of others. Thus, the fundamental belief that there is one Islam and one truth construes difference as un-Islamic moral error, something to be erased if possible or ignored if not, certainly nothing to be celebrated. The author concluded that, in a competitive educational marketplace populated by a variety of sectarian schools, such a conception of difference was a recipe for sectarian conflict: the inability to forge a "common universe of discourse" (Panniker 1988, 132) in the Pakistani context results in both real and symbolic violence.

In the Islamization of knowledge movement described here, epistemic claims are recognized as legitimate knowledge if and only if they correspond with the truth embedded in divine revelation. And, according to al-Attas (1999), "when the truth of the matter is revealed to man and recognized by him, it then becomes incumbent upon him to guide his conduct so as to conform with that truth"(20). Thus, different understandings of difference in Muslim societies are likely to be seen as having, or not having, some sort of divine warrant prior and superior to any corresponding social conventions. Without this correspondence theory of divine truth and its concomitant foundational epistemology, bearers of modern Western conceptions of truth and knowledge as historically contingent social constructs shaped by constantly evolving power relations are likely to interpret such claims of divine sanctions as absurdly transparent attempts to perpetuate oppressive power structures (Foucault 1990; Code 1991).

We do not intend to imply that any of the advocates of the Islamization of knowledge cited here would support the suppression of sectarian difference in Muslim communities; nor can we assume that all subscribers to a correspondence theory of divine truth and an epistemology founded on it would reach identical conclusions on the issue of difference. However, the controversy over this issue in Pakistan illustrates the contradictory conclusions that can be reached regarding matters of social significance via a mode of reasoning premised on divine truths and a mode of reasoning that rejects the very idea of divine truths. Insisting upon one reading or the other of the theological-philosophical rationales for different ideas about the value of difference is highly unlikely to facilitate the cooperation of those on either side of such cultural, religious, and philosophical divides who are genuinely committed to fostering respect for diversity in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Such cooperation might be furthered, however, by sufficient understanding of the Other's philosophical assumptions to ascertain arguments for alternative conceptions of difference, or any other point of disagreement, within the framework of those basic assumptions. To do so requires comparative philosophers of education to listen carefully and, if possible, sympathetically to voices from the inside of different cultural and philosophical traditions. This may

not lead to agreement, but it may clarify where and to what extent there are real disagreements, rather than misunderstandings, and thus expand the terrain upon which genuine collaboration might occur. This is, we think, something like what Habermas (2008) means by a philosophy of translation.

CRISES OF DIFFERENCE: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION AS BRIDGE BUILDER?

We have argued thus far for a philosophy of education that engages in comparative inquiry into contemporary, lived, educational experience in other countries to critically inform educational development in a world in which educational ideas are routinely transmitted across borders. We have attempted to illustrate the need for and the possibility of such a philosophy of education by examining one possible focus of inquiry for a comparative philosophy of education: difference and the difference it makes when different cultural traditions offer alternative educational ideals—the Cambodia case—and when different epistemic and truth claims yield radically different attitudes toward difference within and among religions—the Pakistan case. We have also attempted to show the potential relevance of both outsiders' and insiders' perspectives to comparative philosophy of education. But difference also occurs across time, both socially and existentially. Therefore, our final case briefly examines the educational challenges precipitated by these two manifestations of difference. It also offers a tentative sketch of the theoretical insights one of our co-authors has found in attempting to combine both an outsider's and insider's perspective in a comparative approach to philosophy of education that attempts to bridge what she has experienced as a social and existential crisis of difference in contemporary Chinese education.⁴

In the span of a few decades, China has undergone a social and economic transformation almost unprecedented in its scope and speed. In this time, China has changed from a largely rural and agrarian to a rapidly urbanizing, industrializing society, from a planned, socialist economy to free-wheeling capitalism, and from a strong communitarian ethic to a new ethic of individualism. These changes, however, have not been uniform over Chinese society. Thus rural, agrarian, communitarian-oriented segments of Chinese society exist alongside and in tension with individually-oriented, modernizing segments. Difference is therefore experienced not only historically, but socially. The scope and speed of these changes profoundly undermines the sense of cultural continuity that would normally bridge the past, present, and future, and thus give individuals and communities the sense of knowing who they are, where they came from, and control over where they want to go.

But the contemporary Chinese educational system fails to account for this new reality or the crisis of continuity it precipitates. It tends to value individual achievement through a rigid and competitive examination system that uses one standard

to evaluate all students' academic performance. This closed system thus easily excludes opportunities for students who do not follow the standard. Moreover, this exam-oriented education system produces a dominant culture which encourages excessive competition in the name of individual development and individual achievement. It does not value difference and so fails to provide sufficient opportunities for individuals with different interests and talents, thus losing sight of social justice.

This rupture in the sense of continuity mirrors, in important ways, the existential crisis precipitated by my own educational journey. As persons born under the one-child policy in China after 1980, we are often called the "new generation" who live in an economic boom, not in the mass political campaigns, as our parents' and grandparents' generations did. We are on the front line of radical change; cut off from traditions, whether traditional Confucianism, radical antitraditionalism, or mass political campaigns, and we have to learn to live with change with which our elders have little experience. In the first twelve years of my education, I was told that my goal of study should be entering a prestigious university. It was not until I reached this goal that I realized that it did not satisfy me at all, even if it did satisfy others. I was not happy and I disliked myself. I was desperately lost, experiencing a quiet, but intense, crisis in the first years of my college life. After successfully negotiating the gauntlet of the Chinese examination system, I found that I had not learned how to formulate my own purposes to navigate an unknown future. I only knew what had been prescribed for success in an individualistically and materially oriented modern Chinese social system.

In this sense, studying abroad was a trip into exile for a self without mind. But it became a trip of discovery instead of escape. After several years abroad I learned:

It is only on this marginal ground that I feel psychologically *secure* and even culturally privileged. By virtue of my self-chosen marginality I can never fully identify myself with any center The feeling of self-torment, perhaps representing the negative side of a bicultural marginal person, can be turned into a positive character strength. (Lee 1994, 231)

In that time, my dissatisfaction with the Chinese educational system and my multicultural educational experience in exile clarified for me a problem in need of philosophical analysis that might not be as apparent to those who are primarily cultural insiders or cultural outsiders: What are the fundamental elements of an approach to Chinese education capable of bridging the social and existential crises of continuity brought about by a rapidly and radically changing Chinese society? In exploring this question, I have found that the American pragmatist, John Dewey, and the Chinese Confucianist, Liang Shuming, offer crucial insight for my own philosophical reflection on this problem. In discussing Dewey's and Liang's ideas,

I hope to avoid criticizing one or the other by comparing their ideas: It is not about the West teaching the East or the East providing authentic thought for the West. Rather, I invite Dewey and Liang to join me in a philosophical conversation across borders about the questions I am concerned with. In other words, I try to draw from both Dewey and Liang to help me understand this specific problem of a rupture in the social and individual sense of continuity and explore what they have to offer to an approach to education that facilitates a continuous sense of self in a radically changing context.

Both Dewey and Liang have well-articulated theories on the development of individuality and its relationship with the social as the foundation of a modern democratic society (Dewey 1916, 1930; Liang 2000). Both suggest that there is no premade or fixed sense of self: Self is evolving in life experience. The individual needs to transform the existent self and see a broader and more inclusive self in which others become part of this new self. This process of self-transformation makes learning possible. Furthermore, through this process of self-transformation, both Dewey and Liang see a broader social self that includes others as part of the self. It is this social self that creates democratic space in which different interests and personalities can blossom. Neither Dewey nor Liang separate this unique self and the social self, but rather take them as two inseparable faces of a single whole. Therefore, they are neither traditional individualists nor communitarians, but are rather trying to develop a conception of individuality that encompasses the social. In their thought, the individual can explore and develop their unique potential without being trapped into an isolated and exclusive individualism, or having their individuality suffocated in social forces.

Their philosophies, however, do have important differences because they are developed in two different philosophical traditions: American pragmatism in the case of Dewey and Chinese Confucianism in the case of Liang. Also, their thought has different emphases. Dewey's philosophy emphasizes the continuous and interactive character of experience in the development of the individual. He considers communication an important component of a method of intelligence capable of directing that experience toward individual ends (Dewey 1916). Liang admits the significance of this dynamic component of human individuality but gives much greater emphasis to the relatively stable self which is deeper than and thus less influenced by the flux of ongoing experience (Liang 2000).

I use the term *inner self* to express Liang's concern with this deeper self. Although this may sound essentialist, it is not because this inner self is not some preexistent, unchanging thing, but rather an aspect of the individual that has, indeed, emerged from changing experience. However, because it is a product of fundamental choices it is not susceptible to easy change when its environment changes. It evolves when the self tries to understand the predicaments of life everyone shares and thus understand the need of one's self from inside, rather than the need directed from external demand. It is not a matter of fact, but a

disposition to make the effort to resist external distractions and respond primarily to the genuine needs of this inner self.

Although they used different vocabularies, Dewey and Liang seem to agree about the cultivation of the inner self and the possibility of preserving a continuous sense of self in radically changing social contexts. However, it is not clear to me in Dewey's thought how this continuous sense of self can be sustained. But reading Dewey's thoughts on experience through Liang's conception of an inner self offers me a better way to way to understand his vision of individuality as the foundation of a democratic society. At the same time, without Dewey's emphasis on the interactive and continuous aspect of individual experience, it would be easy to miss Liang's vision of change, and thus fall into an essentialist reading of Liang's idea of the inner self.

Reading Dewey and Liang dialogically helps me begin to theorize a conception of self that is distinctly individual yet shares commonalities with others, a conception of self that might bridge the difference between past and present that emerge in the social and existential crisis of continuity taking place in a rapidly changing Chinese milieu. What I am calling the inner self is relatively stable but always opens to new and unknown experiences, including the experience of alien "others," to its own enrichment. But this process of self-transformation does not turn the self into something that it is not because the unique inner self—the self attuned to the needs that emerge from inside, rather than the pull of externally imposed needs—provides a continuity-in-motion in the flux of on-going experience, rather like a planet that spins on its own axis even as it pulled by the gravitational force of other objects in particular orbits. Going back to the felt difficulty that sparked my dialogical reading of Dewey and Liang, if I am able to recover and maintain this continuous sense of self through my radically different experiences then I can turn the experience of difference into a precious resource for the enrichment of an evolving individuality rather than an existential threat to a static identity like that described by Nelson (2010) in Pakistan. Such a conception of self is more conducive to a sense of social justice because it understands the value of difference and change as potential contributions to an enriched individual experience rather than a meaningless flux to be either surrendered to or controlled.

The possibility of a unique but inclusive individuality that emerges in this dialogical reading of John Dewey and Liang Shuming suggests an alternative approach to individual development in stark contrast to the prevailing conception of development through individual competition in China. Thus, it may offer the beginning of a radically different approach to education. The closed examination-oriented educational system cannot cultivate creativity and understanding of difference—two crucial elements for building connections with unknown others. My analysis of the idea of individuality in Dewey and Liang suggests that the opportunity for individual development will be blocked if the inability to communicate across and thus bridge, difference makes connection with others

is impossible. Therefore, if future education reform in China cannot respond to the diverse interests and needs of individuals, then the current rush for individual achievement is likely to exacerbate the sense of alienation at the heart of my—and many other Chinese students’—felt difficulty.

The ongoing philosophical conversation briefly recounted here among John Dewey, Liang Shuming, and myself illustrates, albeit imperfectly, but one possibility for the comparative philosophy of education we propose in this article. The exploration of the distinctive responses of Dewey and Liang to the problem of difference and continuity in rapidly changing socio-economic systems will, I hope, “free [my] conceptual imagination from the unconscious constraints of [my] own conceptual tradition” and enable me to become aware of “an alternative possibility in thought” (Krishna 1988, 83). When we invite different perspectives to the discussion of a particular educational problem, we draw on different philosophical or cultural traditions as valuable treasures that enrich our understanding of current problems and thus kindle new ideas for their resolution.

DISCUSSION

In this article we have called for and, in the cases examined, demonstrated the need for more philosophical inquiry in comparative education research and more comparative inquiry in philosophy of education. For decades, philosophy of education has concerned itself with the educational consequences of difference, among many other topics of inquiry. But this reflection has been largely confined to Euro-American educational experience and philosophical tradition. For just as long, comparative philosophy has pioneered inquiry into the philosophical traditions of other cultures, but it has not widely or systematically considered the implications of those traditions for modern educational practice. And comparative education, naturally concerned as it so often is with the contemporary empirical concerns of educational development, has tended to ignore the influence indigenous philosophical assumptions may have on contemporary educational practice. We believe, however, that the increasing internationalization of educational problems, as well as efforts to resolve them, demand the complementary insights of all three forms of inquiry; in short, they demand a comparative philosophy of education.

We are not, however, suggesting any sort of comprehensive philosophy capable of explaining all the disparate intellectual traditions of the world in a single philosophical system. We remain as incredulous toward metanarratives as most contemporary philosophers. Nor are we suggesting anything like a single technique or method by which the sorts of inquiry we call for should be conducted. And although we have argued the necessity of a philosophy of education without borders, our cases—Cambodia, Pakistan, and China—are defined by them. But we are not denying the significance of borders, geographical, cultural, existential,

or otherwise. Difference is. Differences exist. They matter. Indeed, one might argue that the very idea of inquiry presupposes this fact. What we are arguing is that, although differences profoundly affect our perceptions of the world and thus complicate our ability to communicate across them, we are not trapped in our differences. In the act of dialogue attempted across differences, our understanding of problems and our ability to solve them are enriched. The effort, we believe, can help free “one’s conceptual imagination from the unconscious constraints of one’s own conceptual tradition” (Krishna 1988, 83) and contributes to the effort to “forge a common language . . . reach a mutual comprehensions . . . cross boundaries” (Panniker 1988, 132) in search of useful responses to critical educational problems where ever they occur.

This is easily enough said; however, the kind of inquiry we argue for here faces a number of difficulties. Not the least of these is language. Learning a second or third language well-enough to understand or conduct philosophical inquiry in it is no small accomplishment, particularly outside the European languages in which Western philosophy has been conducted for centuries. And the problem is only compounded when we recognize that culture is, itself, a language, a sign system in continuous interaction with the language itself in an ongoing construction and reconstruction of meaning. There is also the problem of sources: Do they exist? Where? What are they? Are they philosophical? This is not so much of a problem for inquiry conducted in the long-standing traditions of Western philosophy or the accepted methods of empirical research. But it is an important challenge to any attempt to understand the most fundamental assumptions of cultures that may not have written intellectual traditions. And finally there is the question: Dialogue with whom? Who are our partners in such a dialogue? Given the inherent difficulties and the lack of resources available in many societies to devote to equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to overcome them, is such dialogue, however desirable, realistic?

Although such difficulties are very real, and by no means inconsiderable, they are not insurmountable. For instance, the need to explore fundamental ideas on education outside of those expressed in European languages suggests, perhaps, a new emphasis on translation as an acceptable form of scholarship in philosophy of education. It might also suggest renewed attention to the existing resources in philosophical and comparative inquiry that at least provide starting points. For instance, Western feminist theory (Martin 1985, 1994) offers models for the use of nonphilosophical sources—myth, fiction, art, etc.—and pioneered the use of philosophical reflection on personal experience as techniques to study a topic—women’s educational experience—that has been largely ignored, until relatively recently, in Western intellectual discourse. The discussion here of the impact of forms of difference on educational values in Cambodia, Pakistan, and China suggests at least one topic where such approaches might be useful. And all three cases raise the possibility of mixed ethnographic and philosophical inquiry along

the lines of studies conducted recently by Milligan (2000, 2005) in the southern Philippines and Merry (2007) on Islamic education in the United States and northern Europe. And there is, of course, a long history of comparative philosophical inquiry into Islamic, Chinese, Indian, and other intellectual traditions.

Finally, although philosophy of education as a specific sub-discipline is still largely a Euro-American affair, advances in communication technology and ease of travel make the sort of cross-cultural collaboration in educational philosophy that we have called for—and attempted to model here—increasingly possible. Most important, however, are the resources and strategies we have not imagined, for in very concrete ways our own experience and training as philosophers of education limits our ability to conduct the very comparative philosophy of education we call for. We can, however, as philosophers of education linked, in one way or another, to the cultural contexts examined here, see the critical importance of a comparative approach to philosophy of education that we are as yet imperfectly equipped to carry out, but which comparative philosophers of education will work out as they endeavor to venture beyond our borders and bring the resources of an emerging comparative philosophy of education to bear on educational problems where ever they emerge.

Notes

1. For instance, Edward Said (1979) quite explicitly describes his method in *Orientalism* as genealogy, a methodology pioneered by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Albert Memmi's ([1965] 1991) *The Colonizer and the Colonized* is clearly indebted to Hegel's dialectic and its illustration in the master-slave narrative. And Samir Amin's (2004) critique of Americanization in *The Liberal Virus* is heavily influenced by Marxist philosophy.
2. We reviewed ten years of the journals *Educational Theory* from 1998–2009, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* from 1999–2009, the *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* from 1997–2007, *Comparative Education Review* 1999–2009, and *Comparative Education* from 1999–2009.
3. These cases are drawn from our own experience and/or areas of expertise. However, we believe our central argument is applicable between other cultural/philosophical contexts across and within national borders, such as Native Americans in the United States or Hui Muslims in China.
4. We shift here to an example of an on-going inquiry grounded in the personal experience of one of our co-authors, thus the shift from third person to first, and tone, from objective to subjective.

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