

The cultural politics of borrowing: Japan, Britain, and the narrative of educational crisis

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(Received 16 March 2007; final version received 1 May 2007)

In the recent debate over education reform, Japanese conservative politicians and intellectuals have selectively appropriated a particular crisis-and-success narrative of British education reform to de-territorialize contentious policy changes. They assert that Britain achieved successful education reform by transforming the very same teaching practices and legal framework that currently afflict Japanese education. In so doing, the Japanese conservatives have legitimized the fundamental ‘reform’ of post-war Japanese education through the combination of nationalistic and quasi-market interventions in education. Drawing on a wide range of literature (literature on educational borrowing, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies), this article illuminates how the Japanese conservatives have appropriated external references to ‘British education reform’ to reconstitute the people’s common sense about the current state and the future course of Japanese education. In addition, we use this Japanese case study to advance the re-conceptualization of the politics of educational borrowing from the perspective of non-western ‘others.’

Keywords: cultural politics; educational borrowing; postcolonialism; Japanese education reform

Introduction

In striking contrast to the international acclaim for Japanese educational excellence during the 1990s, the Japanese media, scholars, politicians, and the public have perceived their country’s schooling as steeped in a dire crisis, afflicted with such ‘educational problems’ as bullying, school absenteeism, violence, and, most recently, ‘classroom collapse’ (*gakkyūhōkai*) or teachers’ loss of control (Tsuneyoshi 2004). The sense of crisis was further intensified after the 1998 announcement of the proposed 2002 revision to the national curriculum standards (*gakushū shidō yōryō*). Touted as *yutori kyōiku* (education for relaxation, latitude, or giving more room for growth) reform, the curricular revision introduced a five-day school week and an Integrated Study Period (*sōgō gakushūno jikan*), as well as further reductions in instructional hours and in curricular content for the first nine years of compulsory education. Ken Terawaki, a high-ranking bureaucrat of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) and a spokesperson for the *yutori* reform, claimed that these measures were designed to emphasize the development of children’s ability to learn and think independently, to de-emphasize rote memorization, and to reduce pressure in children’s lives (Terawaki 2001).

Soon after the announcement, a heated debate over the decline in Japanese children’s academic achievement, or *gakuryoku teika ronsō*, erupted amongst education scholars, commentators, and

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economists alike. Despite the dearth of reliable longitudinal data to substantiate the achievement-decline claim (Honda 2002), the media as well as *yutori* reform critics scandalized public education and the *yutori* reform, creating a new common sense that the curricular reform could put ‘the nation at risk’ (see, for example, Nishimura 2001; Wada 1999).

One notable aspect to the debate was the frequent reference to ‘British education reform.’ Conservative critics of *yutori* reform, including many hawkish Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) politicians who now constitute the newly formed Shinzō Abe Cabinet (formed in September 2006), exacerbated the crisis atmosphere by borrowing the crisis narrative of British education popularized by British conservatives during the 1970s. Japanese conservatives selectively appropriated the ‘examples from Britain,’ constructed a crisis-and-success melodrama of British education reform, and made it appear that Japanese schools were undergoing the same crisis as their British counterpart had undergone three decades earlier. In so doing, the Japanese conservatives appropriated the British New Right’s ‘discourse of derision’ to ‘debunk and displace not only specific words and meanings associated with’ the post-war Japanese progressivism – democracy and egalitarianism – ‘but also those who speak these words’ (Ball 1990, 18).

Drawing on literature on educational borrowing, postcolonial studies, and critical cultural studies, we illuminate the cultural politics of this borrowing practice and its ideological role in reconstituting the people’s common sense about education in a way to naturalize the fundamental ‘reform’ of post-war Japanese education through the combination of nationalistic and quasi-market interventions in education. In addition, we use this Japanese case study to reconsider the hitherto-privileged conceptualization of educational borrowing. Thus, we situate the Japanese borrowing of the British education-reform discourse in the continuing legacy of western cultural imperialism and aim to advance the conceptualization of educational borrowing from the perspective of non-western ‘others.’

Postcolonialism and the politics of educational borrowing

Although the phenomenon of educational borrowing has been a focus of theoretical discussion in the field of comparative and international education (see, for example, Phillips 1999; Phillips and Ochs 2003; Steiner-Khamsi 2004), scholars in the field have made little attempt to situate educational borrowing within the legacy of western cultural imperialism, which continues to create a hierarchical relationship between western knowledge producers and ‘other’ knowledge recipients (Alatas 2003; Said 1993). Hence, the theorization of educational borrowing advanced thus far has been inadequate in addressing the particular nature of borrowing from the perspective of non-western ‘others.’ As a number of postcolonial theorists argue, the West’s monopolistic control over the nature and the flows of knowledge remains in place, even decades after colonized territories achieved political independence and nationhood. Although the flow of influence is never one-sided and although the powerful influence from ‘the first world’ is constantly mediated to generate hybridity in the cultural and racial identities of those in the peripheries (Young 1995), global cultural politics continue to perpetuate an unequal flow of cultural commodities, ideas, and discourses from western centers to the rest of the world, affecting the cultural and racial identities of the marginalized populations both within and outside the West (hooks 1992; Smith 1999). Hence, the West continues to be the chief source of cultural refinement, progress, and modernity, normalizing ‘other’ people’s ways of being and knowing according to the ‘global standard’ (Apple, Kenway, and Singh 2005).

In the early part of the twentieth century, Japan was one of the world’s imperial powers; and since the 1980s it has been a global economic powerhouse. Nevertheless, the nation’s economic prosperity has not translated into Japanese cultural hegemony (Miyoshi 1991). The nation

remains a relatively passive recipient of western social scientific knowledge (Alatas 2003; Lie 1996), and it continues to contend with its relative marginality as a non-western 'other' in the dominant western Orientalizing cultural discourse (Ben-Ami 1997; Moeran 1989; Said 1978). Japan's cultural marginality in global power dynamics has resulted in a complicated but still pervasive sense among Japanese of their 'intellectual inferiority against the West' (Lie 1996), keeping alive the Japanese traditional attitude popularized during the Meiji period (1868–1912) of '*Datsu-a nyū-yō*' – leaving Asia and entering the West.

Japan's post-war history of educational borrowing demonstrates its degree of dependence on the West, specifically on the United Kingdom and the United States, which Japan continues to perceive as purveyors of the greatest educational innovation and excellence. Japan's century-old tradition of 'learning from the West' prevails among education scholars, policy-makers, and bureaucrats who constantly assess the nation's schooling in comparison with the latest western educational trends. In this continuing legacy of western cultural dominance, therefore, the discursive construct 'British education reform' has had considerable symbolic appeal in the Japanese domestic debate over education reform, often presented as the 'international trend' to which Japan must conform.

The postcolonial notion of ambivalence (Young 1995) is useful in conceptualizing educational borrowing from the perspective of non-western 'others.' The term *ambivalence* here refers to the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the colonial and postcolonial relationship. Western colonial power possesses powerful symbolic appeal for non-western others, constituting the seemingly universal standard of human esthetics, cultural values, and social progress to which non-western others are compelled to conform 'not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm' (Hall, in hooks 1992, 3). Simultaneously, repulsive responses to western ideas and discourses are a common nationalist reaction in non-western nations. In what Fox (1992) calls 'affirmative Orientalism,' non-western cultural nationalism appropriates the western Orientalist discourse and redefines the West as a cultural and social abnormality, or 'the other' against which non-western others assert their normality and superiority (Befu 1993; Carrier 1995). Hence, the borrowing of western educational ideas and policies can generate a strong backlash from non-western others who see the importation of western ideas and discourses as encroaching undesirable influences that would 'pollute' their cultural and spiritual essence. This nationalistic response to the West occurs alongside their expressed desire to mimic the West. In sum, the discursive West as the quintessential 'other' can simultaneously evoke in non-western others both extremely positive and negative emotional responses. The phenomenon of educational borrowing in non-western national contexts must be examined in light of this postcolonial cultural politics of ambivalence.

Because the symbolic registers 'American education reform' and 'British education reform' have enormous potential to generate strong reactions among people in non-western nations, the characterization of educational concepts and policies as borrowed from the United Kingdom and the United States becomes an effective (and affective) political strategy, with politicians and policy-makers accentuating their western origins to achieve domestic political agendas. In the politics of education reform, the contradictory characterization of the West either as the 'global standard' or as the 'cultural pollutant' becomes the point of ideological struggles among multiple interest groups. In the current cultural politics of Japanese education reform, such iconic keywords as 'school voucher,' 'zero tolerance,' 'topic studies,' 'John Dewey,' 'back-to-basics,' 'child-centered teaching,' and 'A Nation at Risk,' all of which are closely associated either with American or with British education, have become a 'multi-accentual' signifier (Hall 1981), which can be rearticulated into multiple localized political discourses. When these concepts are removed from the 'home' discursive field and placed in an 'other' national context, they are

disarticulated from their particular political assumptions and meanings rooted in the ‘home’ context and then made subject to the politics of dis-articulation and re-articulation in the adapted context. Different social and political groups and individuals compete to articulate these powerful symbolic registers into their own preferred discourses and, in turn, to constitute their own version of social reality as truth (Apple 2006).

In the recent debate over Japanese education reform, the articulation of ‘British education reform’ has derived largely from conservative politicians and intellectuals. The production and the dissemination of counter-hegemonic articulations of ‘British education reform’ have occupied a marginal place in the public debate on education reform, allowing the dominant conservative articulation to acquire an uncontested truth status. In the next section of this paper, we specifically focus on the dominant conservative articulation to challenge its current hegemonic status. To this end, we critique the writings both by conservative political figures who currently occupy powerful political positions in the Abe Cabinet and by conservative intellectuals who are closely associated with them. However, before analyzing the Japanese conservatives’ specific borrowing practice, we need to outline some Japanese societal trends that have arisen since the late 1990s and that have made the conservatives’ borrowing practice especially effective in reconstituting Japanese people’s common sense about the ‘crisis’ in education.

Neo-conservatism and the search for a romanticized past of Japanese education

The late 1990s marked a major transformation of post-war Japanese social, political, and economic structures. The radical neo-liberal turn in both state and corporate capital accumulation strategies resulted in the disappearance of corporate welfarism and the termination of developmentalist state intervention in the economy, capital flight, corporate downsizing, tax and welfare ‘reforms,’ consequent economic polarization (Gotō 2002), the crumbling of the ‘educational pipeline system’ (Honda 2005), and the class-related consequences of these changes in educational achievement and in educational incentives among children (Kariya et al. 2002; Yamada 2004). Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi (2001–2006) further neo-liberalized the Japanese state under his slogan ‘the small and efficient state.’ His cabinet’s aggressive pursuit of privatization of social services and massive reduction of corporate taxes further promoted the widening economic disparity among the populous.

Hence, since the late 1990s, Japan has witnessed the breakdown of post-war certainties and the emergence of a risk society. Under the neo-liberal regime, risk is no longer socially managed by the state; instead, individuals are to calculate and manage potential future risks regarding their own education, employment, and welfare. This unstable social condition has created in people a need to find and invent new certainties for themselves and for others (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994, 14; Oguma and Ueno 2004). Conservative politicians and intellectuals exploited the growing social anxiety and desire for stability by rearticulating debilitating consequences of structural economic and cultural changes into individualizing discourses on discipline, order, morality, and patriotism.

Several interrelated conservative mobilizations in particular have been successful in this re-articulation and have gained considerable political momentum in recent years. Since the late 1990s, the ruling conservative LDP has doubled their calls for amendments to the war-denouncing Constitution. Known as a hawkish politician, the incumbent Prime Minister Abe declared that passing amendments to the pacifist Constitution constitutes one of his top political priorities – one that dovetails with his efforts to end the ‘postwar regime of guilt’ (*Japan Times* 2006a). In his mind, as well as in the minds of many other conservative politicians and intellectuals, the Constitution does not reflect quintessentially Japanese values because it was drafted by the

American Occupying Force (Abe 2006; Nakanishi 2005). Abe has demanded that Article 9 of the Constitution, which renounces Japan's right to wage war or to maintain armed forces, be amended in light of Japan's need for self-defense against the threat of global terrorism and of North Korea's Kim Jong-il, as well as for 'international contributions.'

Likewise, amending the Fundamental Law of Education (FLE), which had been a conservative political agenda throughout Japan's post-war history, re-emerged at the turn of the Millennium. Japanese intellectuals drafted the FLE during the US occupation period to replace the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo*), which the wartime totalitarian regime had appropriated to instill in children an ultra nationalistic ideology. Conservative politicians and intellectuals have since claimed that the Constitution and the FLE have placed excessive emphasis on human rights and individual dignity, while harmfully de-emphasizing tradition, patriotism, morality, and public obligation – two trends that have resulted in the 'spiritual desolation of postwar Japan' (Nakanishi 2001, 307).

In recent years, hawkish LDP politicians demanded amending the FLE, which is premised on the preamble to the Constitution, viewing the FLE amendment as a steppingstone toward a constitutional amendment. They argue that seemingly widespread educational problems stem from the education system's prioritization of individual dignity over dedication to the public and the nation (Horio 2002). In 2006, the LDP and its coalition partner, the New Kōmeitō Party, proposed a bill that would revise the FLE. The bill includes controversial clauses that emphasize nurturing a patriotic attitude among children and parental responsibilities in nurturing children's morality and self-discipline. The bill includes also a statement that mandates the MEXT to draw up a five-year education plan and to set up numerical goals (*Japan Times* 2006b). The bill epitomizes the conservative discourse that de-socializes recent 'educational problems' that resulted from structural changes in the economy and the culture, reducing them to simply reflections of children's mental and psychological problems and parental negligence. The revision opens the door to a re-centralization of Japan's educational administration as well as to nationalistic political intervention in schools.

Another key component to this conservative political mobilization is the nationalistic-history-teaching movement. Hawkish LDP politicians who are currently in powerful political positions (e.g. Shinzō Abe, Shōichi Nakagawa, Hakubun Shimomura, and Yuriko Yamatani) were the founding members of an interest group formed within the LDP that had advocated nationalist history teaching. This group has criticized existing history textbooks for disseminating ideologically tainted historical perspectives that focus on negative aspects of Japanese history and that thus allegedly deprive children of national pride. The group took particular issue with textbook references to 'comfort women' (*jūgun ianfu*)¹ and to the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, whose truth status has come under fire from conservative intellectuals and politicians since the late 1990s. These politicians are closely connected with the controversial nationalist-history-textbook advocacy group, the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform (*atarashii rekishi kyōkasho wo tsukuru kai*). Established in 1997, the organization argues that the teachers unions and leftist teachers control the textbook-adoption processes and that these people have succeeded in spreading a 'masochistic' national history. The textbooks written by this group contain many mythological stories and descriptions of the glorified past, while eliminating descriptions of wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army and emphasizing people's loyalty to the public, to the emperor, and to the nation (Asahi 2005). As will be illuminated in our subsequent analysis, spokespersons for these conservative political mobilizations have referred to British education reform as a way to shift people's real anxieties into a traditional conservative discourse that bestows on them a secured sense of both self and place in the context of the neo-liberal risks and postmodern doubts that have increasingly characterized Japanese society.

Conservative constructions and the ‘British crisis’

Japanese conservatives have constructed a particular crisis melodrama that supposedly narrates the historical trajectory of British education reform. It frames the ‘crisis’ thematically in economic, cultural, and academic terms, and temporally in the 1960s and the 1970s, when – according to these conservatives – socialist ideology dominated British social and educational policies. They use ‘English illness’ (*igirisu byō*), a term coined by Margaret Thatcher and by British Conservative media and politicians, to describe the culturally, economically, and politically corrupted condition of British society at that time. Both the extensive social welfare that post-war British governments instituted and these governments’ nationalization of major industries appear on the Japanese conservatives’ radar as the source of both Britain’s culture of dependency and the decline of worker productivity. According to Matsubara (2005), the British Labour governments collaborated with labor unions in promoting excessive egalitarianism, what he and other Conservatives call ‘evil egalitarianism’ (*akubyōdō*), which resulted in the decline of Britain’s economic competitiveness. As a result, the United Kingdom, which had been the richest nation in the world in earlier decades, became economically deficient to the extent that it had to accept emergency financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund in 1976 (Matsubara 2005, 25).

In this crisis narrative, education plays a central role in the cultural and moral demise of British society. Drawing on the British New Right’s discourse of derision (Ball 1990), the narrative alleges that the dominance of progressive ideology in British schools is the culprit of English illness. In particular, the account brands Britain’s 1944 Education Act as the central villain of the crisis. To Nakanishi, a conservative historian, the Act is the product of ‘the leftist liberal movement infused with socialism of the early 20th century’ (2005, 9). The narrative claims that the law assigned curricular authority to teachers and that, consequently, teachers’ unions and the Labour Party dominated schools and local educational authorities and promoted unpatriotic leftist ideological indoctrination. It derides, in particular, three pedagogical practices supposedly promoted under the 1944 Act: ‘masochistic’ history education, or anti-racist education; child-centered pedagogy such as topic studies and experience-based learning; and a lack of religious teaching.

In history teaching, the Japanese conservatives argue, ideologically biased teachers in Britain taught an ‘anti-British masochistic national history’ (*hanei jigyaku shikan*), a history based on the Marxist theory of class conflict, which defined modern British history as the history of invasion and exploitation (Abe 2006; Yagi 2002). To illustrate the masochistic history teaching at the time, Kabashima (2005) and Matsubara (2005) discuss the history textbook *How Racism Came to Britain?* (Institute of Race Relations 1985). Kabashima (2005) argues that the history curriculum under the 1944 Education Act placed disproportionate emphasis on the British colonization in Asia, Africa, and Central America; on the slave trade; and on the British labor movement – an emphasis that encourages British children to feel ashamed of their British citizenship.

Topic studies, or integrated and child-centered teaching, are another pedagogical practice that features prominently in this British-crisis narrative. It describes these studies as less rigorous and less disciplined than the narrative’s preferred modes of learning, such as rote memorization, spelling exercises, and drills, which lead to scholastic ‘cramming’ (*tsumekomi kyōiku*). In the name of topic studies, the conservative Japanese narrative claims, Britain’s school curriculum suffered erosion and fragmentation because each teacher used his or her discretion to select the preferred curricular content (Yagi 2002), and because these teachers placed disproportionate emphasis on children’s spontaneity and individuality (Matsubara 2005, 27). Adherents of this account declare that the topic-studies approach resulted in a massive number of British middle

school graduates who could not perform basic reading, writing, and computation exercises (Abe 2006, 204; Kabashima 2005, 201; Ōmori 2000).

The narrative goes on to note several further negative outcomes: the child-centered pedagogical approach resulted in an increased incidence of student violence against teachers (Yagi 2002) and in high youth unemployment and low worker productivity (Ōmori 2000; Shimomura 2005). Likewise, the 'description' identifies ineffective religious education under the 1944 Education Act as another key culprit of the English illness. Religious education was marginalized by British union teachers who rejected religious values and who promoted multicultural, antiracist education and value-relativism through Dewey's progressive child-centered pedagogy (Kabashima 2005, 217). As a consequence, Kabashima continues, British society faced 'youths' spiritual desolation' as seen in a rise in crime and a decline in sexual morality (2005, 219–220). In sum, the narrative attributes horrendous conditions to British education in the 1970s and then transforms the scenario into a backdrop against which the account creates a dramatic success story of British school reform.

The story of successful British school reform begins with the emergence of a 'grassroots' movement, what the narrative calls the Education Black-paper Movement (*kyōiku kokusho undō*), which allegedly ushered in the nationwide school-reform movement (Kabashima 2005, 223; Yagi 2002, 2). According to Yagi, the movement was initiated by a group of education scholars, parents, and teachers who were concerned about 'academic decline and school violence, progressive education, and enforced evil egalitarianism in public education' (2002, 2). In order to bring the critical condition of schools to public attention and to generate more public support for the movement, explains Yagi, the group issued a series of publications that were known as 'the Black Papers' and that continued from 1969 to 1977.² The climax of the narrative centers on Margaret Thatcher, who supposedly translated the movement's genuine goals into national education policies.

The conservatives' British school-reform melodrama identifies Thatcher's 1988 Education Act as pivotal in marking the end of the crisis and the beginning of school improvement. Kabashima focuses on three particular areas of change that resulted from the 1988 Education Act: history textbooks and history teaching, religious education, and academic standards. After the reform, continues Kabashima, history teaching became more balanced, with more attention given to the positive aspects of Britain's past. He shows contrasting treatments of Britain's colonial rule, slave trade, and monarchy in two textbooks. The pre-act textbook is the aforementioned *How Racism Came to Britain*, and the post-act textbook is *Britain 1750–1900* written by Walter Robson (1993). By selecting these two textbooks as representative of the general change in textbooks in the late 1980s, he concludes that the latter presents a more balanced description of the positives and the negatives of Britain's past.

In addition, Kabashima (2005) and Yamatani (2005) describe how Thatcher reestablished Christianity as the national religion by mandating that the school curriculum reflects the centrality of Christianity to British culture and tradition, and that each school have a teacher who specializes in religious education. Thanks to this establishment of religious teaching in school, Kabashima argues, cases of juvenile crime decreased by one-half – from over 200,000 in 1977 to 100,000 in 2002 (2005, 221). Likewise, according to Kabashima (2005), Ōmori (2002), and Shimomura (2005), Thatcher's curricular centralization initiatives resulted in drastic academic improvements, as assessed through standardized test scores. Kabashima draws on the work *The Betrayed Generations: Standards in British Schools, 1950–2000* by the British conservative critic of education John Marks, and uses his data on the General Certificate of Secondary Education's average test score and OECD's PISA 2000 to point out the 'marvelous progress' that the British school system recently underwent, given that 'British middle school students could not even spell out their names just thirty years ago' (2005, 225).

Constructing the historical correspondence between Britain and Japan

While Japanese conservative politicians and intellectuals are ostensibly narrating the trajectory of British school reforms for Japanese readers, their description is in no way balanced. When placed back in the British discursive context, their narrative on British school reforms reveals its highly selective nature: the narrative draws exclusively on the dominant crisis-and-success narrative propagated by the New Right British critics of education such as John Marks, Margaret Thatcher, and Kenneth Baker (Minister of Education for Margaret Thatcher). In so doing, it completely ignores alternative accounts that shed different light on Thatcher's education reform (see, for example, Tomlinson 1994; Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995). The narrative is more than selective, however: it carefully crafts the British crisis melodrama to legitimize a given set of highly controversial education policies that had long been on the Japanese conservatives' political agenda. As we discussed earlier, the crisis melodrama of British education identifies four key villains of the English illness: the 1944 Education Act, anti-racist ('masochistic' history) teaching, dysfunctional religious teaching, and child-centered pedagogical practices (topic studies and curricular integration). Japanese conservatives carefully selected these specific factors to fabricate a set of 'coincidental' correspondences: Britain's 1944 Education Act and the Japanese 1947 FLE; anti-racist history teaching in British schools and masochistic history teaching in Japanese schools; dysfunctional religious teaching in British schools under the 1944 Act and the lack of religious and moral teaching in Japanese schools under the 1947 FLE; and topic studies or integrated and child-centered curriculum in Britain and the ongoing *yutori* curricular reform in Japan.

The comparison between the British 1944 Education Act and the Japanese 1947 FLE is the key discursive strategy by which Japanese conservatives have attempted to construct the parallel between, on the one hand, the English illness of the 1970s and, on the other hand, the Japanese counterpart of the 2000s. Nakanishi (2005) and Yagi (2002) claim that these two educational acts are identical in their ideological underpinning and that their consequences will hence be highly similar:

The 1944 Education Act, which Thatcher set out to change, was born out of the leftist liberalism of the early twentieth century and mixed with socialist belief. It is American 'progressivism,' derived from the same liberal ideology, that brought the FLE to Japan during the occupation period. This is the fundamental reason for which many advanced nations faced similar educational crises and similar national declines in the latter half of the twentieth century. (Nakanishi 2005, 9)

By defining Britain's 1944 Education Act as the villain and the 1988 Act as the hero in the recent trajectory of British education reform, and by comparing the former with the Japanese 1947 FLE, Japan's conservative critics attempt to naturalize the view that Japan must revise its counterpart to solve the much hyped 'Japanese illness' (Matsubara 2005, 24). In so doing, they erase the significant qualitative differences between the British Act and Japan's FLE. Unlike the former, which is purely an administrative law, the latter is known as the 'educational constitution' created to promote in post-war Japanese schools the pacifist and democratic idealisms proclaimed in the Constitution (Horio 1988). Furthermore, their identification of anti-racist teaching as another cause of the English illness is no coincidence either. This coupling serves to legitimize the recent revisionist-history-textbook movement led by Yagi's Japanese Society for History-textbook Reform and by hawkish LDP politicians such as Prime Minister Abe:

Behind the English illness lies British youths who forgot their independent spirit and hard work. Without reinvigorating these youths, Britain could not have recovered from its illness. Confronted with this problem, Thatcher tried to reestablish history education so that the youths would learn about their predecessors who had worked hard for their nation and the world. Thatcher's

educational belief is exactly what we need the most now for the further growth of our nation. (Nakagawa 2005, 6)

Likewise, the Japanese conservatives' framing of Britain's topic studies as another key villain also speaks directly to a particular domestic agenda in Japan. Conservative politicians and intellectuals have been increasingly critical of the 2002 *yutori* reform, which they argue is based on western child-centered ideology, the culprit of economic and moral decline in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1970s (Abe 2006; Wada 1999). They extol Thatcher for having achieved success by rejecting the child-centered pedagogical approach akin to the *yutori* reform. The reference to Britain's 'successful' school reform hence serves to justify Japan's replacement of the *yutori* reform with more traditional back-to-basic approaches to teaching.

The Japanese conservatives' construction of the crisis in British education reveals their ambivalence toward the West: the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the colonial and postcolonial relationship. When they construct the Thatcherite-British education reform as the model best suited for Japan's emulation, the conservatives invoke the unquestioned superiority of the West – a West that has been the source of innovation, progress, and prosperity. And by invoking this 'global standard,' the conservatives try to de-politicize and de-territorialize their agendas as if not pursuing them would put the nation at risk. On the other hand, in their rejection of the pacifist Constitution, the democratic FLE, and the *yutori* curricular reform, the conservatives draw on a well-engrained repulsion to the West, which emerges not as a purveyor of progress but as a cultural pollutant, or a threat to Japan's cultural and moral essence. Therefore, Japanese conservatives appropriate the contradictory symbolic images associated with the discursive West, born out of the continued legacy of western cultural imperialism, to articulate people's genuine feeling of insecurity in a time of political, economic, and social change. This articulation harnesses the feeling of insecurity to bolster a conservative discourse of traditional values, patriotism, and discipline, from where the amendment to the FLE, re-nationalization of history teaching, and the re-introduction of authoritative pedagogical approach seem to be the only legitimate course of action.

Furthermore, this postcolonial ambivalence is clearly manifested in the particular way Japanese conservatives articulate the success of British education reform. They do so by inserting Japanese cultural virtue into their construction of British success, emphasizing the fact that traditional Japanese education was the model for Thatcher's education reform (Abe 2006; Matsubara 2005). Hence, Japan's borrowing of British education reform amounts to a retrieval of a lost past – of a Japanese education system unpolluted by the US-imposed post-war democracy and by the *yutori* reform. Japanese conservatives' retrospective desire for this pristine cultural essence has found expression in their glorification of the Thatcherite-British education reform.

Conclusion

This article has illuminated the conservative cultural politics over the articulation of British education reform in Japan. The conservative Japanese politicians and intellectuals have selectively appropriated the British education reform narrative to de-territorialize contentious domestic educational interventions. By declaring that Britain achieved successful education reform and that this success hinged on making major transformations to the very same practices and legal framework that 'happened' to exist in Japan, the conservative critics tried to naturalize their proposed radical alterations to the post-war Japanese education system. In the emerging neo-liberal risk society, where people's lives are increasingly exposed to unpredictable factors, and in a partly postmodern society, where traditional values, authority structures, and morality

are constantly questioned, they creatively appropriated the people's attraction and repulsion in relation to the discursive West to reconstitute their common sense about Japanese education's current condition and its future course. The critics played on these ambivalent tendencies in order to harness Japanese people's genuine feelings in support of the conservative discourse of tradition, order, patriotism, and discipline.

This paper's focus on the conservatives' appropriation of British education does not mean at all that the signifier 'British education reform' is free from cultural contestation. Just as any sliding signifier, 'British education reform' can be the focus of intense ideological struggles among multiple groups striving to construct a particular reality regarding the condition of Japanese education. In recent years, a number of progressive Japanese scholars have started to espouse alternative narratives of British school reform and to discuss the reforms' undesirable consequences (for example, Arai 2005; Fujita 2005; Sanuki 2002). Nonetheless, in the public discussion on education reform, the discursive battle has been decisively in favor of the conservatives. Abe and other hawkish LDP members have occupied the government's central offices and continue to propagate the same British crisis-and-success story to push through the nationalist and market-based approaches of their education-reform projects.

In January 2006, the proposed revision to the FLE passed the lower diet by a unanimous vote from the LDP and its coalition partner, the New Kōmeitō. Under the current moral panic over children's declining academic achievement and their unruly behavior, it is likely that the administration can adopt other conservative interventions supposedly modeled on the British experience, a step that would thus further erode the democratic and egalitarian foundation of Japanese education that observers both in and outside Japan have praised (Cummings 1980; Fujita 2005). The overblown sense of crisis has marginalized the discussion of the real crisis in Japanese education today: the widening achievement gap and the widening aspiration gap between the haves and the have-nots, the further erosion of the democratic and egalitarian principles of Japanese education, and the increasing use of state intervention as a way to instill nationalism in schools. In this article, we have aimed to counter the conservative onslaught against public education by exposing the highly selective and ideological nature of the related borrowing practices.

We have had a theoretical agenda as well, one directly related to how critical educational researchers should think about the issue of borrowing in more complex ways. Our use of material from both postcolonial understandings and from cultural studies has facilitated our efforts to illustrate the cultural politics over 'British education reform' as currently played out in the Japanese discussion of education reform. The still-vibrant legacy of western imperialism and colonialism endows 'British education reform' with considerable symbolic power that Japanese conservative politicians and intellectuals re-direct toward a de-territorialization of their contentious domestic political agendas. These conservative critics appropriate the discursive West both to legitimize their calls for learning from the British school reform and to de-legitimize the FLE's democratic principles and the *yutori* reform's focus on student-centered teaching. Hence, this Japanese case has shown that, in a wider context, the cultural constructs of 'the West,' 'the United States,' and 'the United Kingdom' constitute a powerful discursive tool with which dominant political forces in non-western nations re-articulate their domestic political agendas and base them on the 'inevitability of globalization.' Hence, our analysis has shown the importance of re-conceptualizing the politics of educational borrowing in a way that takes full account of the continuing effects of western cultural imperialism in non-western national contexts, a point that has been underemphasized in the hitherto-privileged conceptualization of educational borrowing.

It has become ever clearer that decisions made about educational reforms in nations such as the United States and Britain have power well beyond their geographic borders. Whether it is the

Thatcherite ‘reforms’ in Britain or more recent policies such as No Child Left Behind in the United States (Apple 2006), such reforms circulate widely and are disarticulated and rearticulated in complicated ways. Understanding the manner in which such policies are recontextualized (Bernstein 1990), the politics of the processes used to accomplish this, and the real and determinate effects, should be of crucial interest to those of us who want to critically analyze the ways in which dominant educational ideological forms have real effects in real institutions – even when these effects occur outside our borders. Indeed, paraphrasing a well known novelist, we might say that a major part of the real history of the United States and Britain occurs outside our borders (Rushdie 1981). A better understanding of these relations might help us uncover the complicated ways in which narratives of political/educational crises are mobilized in powerful ways throughout the world.

Notes

1. ‘Comfort women’ euphemistically refers to the enslaved women forced to sexually serve the Japanese military. They came mostly from China, Korea, and the Philippines.
2. For British scholars’ critiques of the Black Papers, see Ball (1990) and Wright (1977). Yagi (2002) edited a Japanese book entitled *Education Black Papers (kyōiku kokusho)*, wherein articles by conservative intellectuals discuss ideologically tainted teaching in Japanese schools. Comparing his book with the British Black Papers, Yagi urges for grassroots conservative political mobilization for the ‘normalization’ of Japanese public education.

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