

Moral Education in Japan: Values in a global context,

Marie Højlund Roesgaard, London: Routledge, 2016, xiv, 181 pp. + appendix, index, ISBN: 9781138669635 hb, 9781315618104 ebook.

Moral Education in Japan makes an important contribution to scholarly understanding of the role of moral education as a response to the perceived risks of globalisation in Japan. The volume extends arguments developed in earlier work¹ to conceptualise moral education as a ‘gatekeeper’ in response to risks perceived, whether such perception is real or imagined, as entering Japan from the outside. Beyond this important theoretical contribution, it draws extensively on Japanese language literature to provide a strong summary of current research on moral education history, policy, curriculum and textbooks in Japan.

The introductory first chapter outlines the main argument and theoretical framework within which primary materials are analysed. Against a backdrop of globalisation and cosmopolitanism,² new ideas give rise to a perception of risk in societies that experience globalisation.³ Roesgaard follows recent calls in Area Studies to de-centre Japan, as an example taken to understand the interplay between the local and global. As the media plays a role in sensationalising new lows of immorality, the state exploits new fears to increase its level of control or ‘push through’ reforms in a heightened sense of urgency:

“Those in a position of influence try to safeguard what is considered basic and inalienable in Japanese culture and morality, while adjusting to those of the global currents that cannot be ignored” (3).

The theoretical framework sees discourses of ideas and influence to circulate freely, drawing on what Appadurai⁴ called ‘the global circulation of public cultures’. The circulation is open and finds new courses as voices arise and merge, but is also restrained, channelled along traditional lines of power and blocked by competing discourses old and new. Whilst discourses flow, however, systems such as nations have ‘borders’, which can resist influence, particularly from those ideas that are seen to be entering from the ‘outside’. Extending Cowen’s⁵ terminology, actors and groups create immunologies, mechanisms of discourse or power that resist outside influence. Simultaneously, the borders of a system have permeologies, unintended cracks or intentional windows that allow or encourage discourses to flow and influence. Switching from a biological to a physical analogy, the reaction to discourses or ideas can be seen as acts of gatekeeping: refusing entry to some (an immunising reaction) but not others (permeability or a permeable reaction). Moral education is seen as such a political mechanism to keep (perceived) threats at bay:

“The Abe administration, as many political administrations before them in and out of Japan, is seeking to actively employ moral education in schools as one of the tools to rectify what is perceived as a crisis situation nationally; it is an act of gatekeeping where some flows from ‘the outside’ can be shut out while others are allowed in – we can see permeability as well as immunity” (173)

¹ Roesgaard, ‘The Ideal Citizen’

² Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*; Beck and Sznaider, ‘Unpacking cosmopolitanism’

³ Leheny, *Think Global, fear local*

⁴ Appadurai, *Cosmopolitanism*

⁵ Cowen, ‘Late-modernity’; ‘Comparing futures or comparing pasts’

Chapters three and four provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on moral education in the historical and recent political contexts. The secondary sources used are presented with some original analysis to set them within the framework of immunologies and permeologies, risk and gatekeeping. The history of moral education is framed as one of contention from its establishment, navigating the perceived need to establish a common history and morality, questions of religion and content, and of the need to Modernise (10, 27-28). The 2006 Revisions to the Fundamental Law of Education and subsequent curriculum in 2008 are set against a backdrop of debates on strengthening public morality, yet also having substantive aims following international trends, such as academic performance through structural reform and accountability/performativity; and influence from policymakers marshalling arguments for constitutional reform and arguments for an international duty to counter terrorism.

It is important to note that Roesgaard is less interested in evaluating the relative merit of various curriculum changes, which is overviewed as context (112-116), but in demonstrating the means by which they can be analysed as a reaction to globalisation. In this sense, foreign moral icons and discussions on promoting peace in the world are equally as interesting to the author, as are the increase in political discussion on public morality (viz. individualism) and ‘traditions and customs’ (cf 116- 121). This does not mean that the ideas utilised to invoke an immune response are ‘native’ to Japan. Nature and the sublime, for example, *may* be utilised to encourage an essentialist perspective on Japaneseness (p. 113 following Shimamura 2005) but may also have been influenced by Romanticist or progressive European thought (p. 61). Discourses that invoke imaginings can have real effects. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, official channels reserve a greater influence. Textbooks, for example, make an ‘official bid for translating the curriculum guidelines into a practice or a common language of morality’ (p. 74).

Chapter Five is by far the longest, representing the bulk of pithy original analysis supporting the book’s argument. Drawing on current sources in English and Japanese, the chapter analyses the currently non-mandatory textbooks produced and made freely available to schools by MEXT. Whereas analyses of earlier moral education textbooks *Kokoro no nōto* and details surrounding the revision of the FLE are well-worn in English-language sources, comparison of the later versions of these textbooks *Watashi-tachi no dōtoku* are being read here for the first time in English. Three themes of moral icons (great persons), representations of nature, and representations on culture and being Japanese are analysed as statements of official discourse connected with internationalisation and protecting ‘Japaneseness’. Summarising the chapter:

“Rather than just being mixed signals or ambiguity in the material, the local and international elements create a balance which demonstrates that the challenge of ‘globalization’ is truly being acknowledged and engaged, and it presents us with an official bid for how to maintain what is (in official quarters) considered good about Japanese identity and culture while relating to and reacting to challenges, threats and possibilities brought on by global [discourse] flows” (121).

Finally, the chapter makes a foray into analysing ‘semi-official’ sources, focusing on *E-tere* educational programmes produced by NHK (110-112). The insightful recognition of ‘semi-official’ sources, those with a stake in reproducing official messages, is interesting in appearing to open a

new departure in research. *E-tere* does demonstrate how the curriculum *could* be interpreted, even indicating the vision of MEXT and other official groups. Nonetheless, the analysis here remains too short to warrant mention in the chapter's summary.

Chapter six provides examples of classroom practice based on observations and published practitioner articles reflecting on classroom practice. Because Roesgaard's analysis "is about decoding the meaning [...] rather than a determination of impact" (110), the "aim here is to show what the teaching *can* be like and how the intentions of the curriculum guidelines *can* be reflected in actual teaching" (129, emphasis in original). The primary material in this chapter are drawn from classroom practice and shows the potential impact on children, but are not intended to be representative of classroom practice.

Analysed through chapter seven, the examples flesh out the reader's understanding of how an official bid for a common language *may* create meaning through its usage in the classroom. Nonetheless, to correctly understand the meaning of these examples in the study, it is important to note that the examples are not intended to be representative of classroom practice.⁶ The observations and examples are purposefully selected *according to* themes identified in the analysis of official discourse rather than *generating* themes for analysis. They are used to illustrate findings rather than produce methodical data to understand classroom practice. For the purpose of analysing the official bid for creating meaning, this approach is robust, and follows other work utilising Cowen's framework of immunology and permeologies.⁷ To analyse changes in moral education practice in the school or classroom within this framework would require not only methodical, but also significant theoretical, innovation. Imoto⁸ has noted similar limitations to other work following a related theoretical framework. On the other hand, ethnographic works of Christopher Bjork⁹ and Peter Cave¹⁰ have demonstrated agency in the enactment of comparable policies, as has Bamkin¹¹ in the case of moral education practice. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that this volume analyses mainly the official bid for creating a shared language or 'content', and how this *could* look. It does not consider the extent to which the language *is* shared and how meaning *is* created in classrooms.

In light of the preceding analysis, Roesgaard's concluding final chapter makes a convincing argument. The use of moral education in official sources can be seen as a reaction to risks perceived, and sometimes created, in response to globalisation, with both immune and permeable aspects. In the Japanese case, moral education is utilised through official sources, attempting to create a common language to (potentially) help people to navigate them (173).

"Japanese moral education provides us with an illustration of the double nature of globalization, the local and global focus; it can serve as an excellent object of study for

⁶ One school observed is a university-affiliated laboratory school; published examples are likely publishable *because* they have something to offer above the ordinary; and a lesson on *Kimi ga yo* is rightly acknowledged as an exceptional case at this time.

⁷ e.g. in Willis and Rappleye, *Reimagining Japanese Education*

⁸ Imoto, Review of *Reimagining Japanese Education*

⁹ E.g. Bjork, *High stakes schooling*

¹⁰ E.g. Cave, *Schooling selves*

¹¹ Bamkin, 'Reforms to strengthen moral education'

identifying the ambiguous and multi-faceted outcomes of pressures of globalization, the needs for gatekeeping and desires to create the 'ideal citizen'". (176).

This book will appeal to readers interested in globalisation, cosmopolitanism, moral education and policy in risk society. It additionally provides a strong summary of current research on moral education history, policy, curriculum and textbooks in Japan. Readers will find the case of Japan, in addition to the subject of education, de-centred in an examination of risk society analysing the attempts of official sources to erect immunities and their permeologies through the wider discourse of moral education in Japan.

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