


# Universal individuals: national education in a globalized age

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## ABSTRACT

Are there differences between the pedagogical approaches of East Asian and European cultures regarding the question of how to navigate the complex relations of the universal and the particular, the communal and the individual? By no means an abstract question, it calls for thought in what seems to be an increasingly volatile age: from political and social division and polarization, divergent forces of localization, globalization, and glocalization, increasing efforts to acknowledge and recognize different histories and traditions in expanding intercultural communication processes while simultaneously not losing sight of the global challenges that humankind must respond to without much time for hesitation, it seems that conventional approaches to national education need to adapt. As a critical response to certain stereotypes regarding the apparent relations of sociality and individuality in countries traditionally influenced by (Neo-)Confucianism, this suite of articles gathers positions from colleagues working in East Asian contexts and in the UK to explore these and related problems from a variety of viewpoints.

**KEYWORDS:** universalism, particularism, globalization, cosmopolitanism, East Asia, Europe

Some projects take more time than others. While the precise moment of inception of the idea for this suite of articles is not clear, the initial question that framed our early discussions is more easily brought to mind: *Are there differences between the pedagogical approaches of East Asian and European cultures regarding the question of how to navigate the complex relations of the universal and the particular, the communal and the individual?* This question, which appears no less significant today than it was when we first discussed it back in 2019, is not a purely intellectual abstraction, but arises in certain contexts.

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The ‘End of History’ (Fukuyama 1992) has not only been postponed (Hochuli and Hoare 2021) but seems to be indefinitely deferred as universalist conceptions of a global order are in retreat. Recent times have seen a surge of antipathy towards the idea of a global citizen: cosmopolitanism, it seems, is not as widely recognized as a desirable idea as it was thirty years ago in the wake of the end of the Cold War. For many, the difficulties posed by globalization and multi/transculturalism seem to outweigh the advantages once associated with those movements; the breaking down of borders, once interpreted as a sign of progress towards greater sociopolitical connection and integration among the people of the world, is now seen by many as a threat against which cultural, national, and individual identities must be defended (Brock 2013). Beyond the obvious political polarization, and the rise of fringe politics, these shifts can be observed in the rising interest in national or cultural values, and, relatedly, discussion of a new national education that attempts to orient itself towards certain values deemed to be the backbone of a given state or culture.

Nationalist interests have, of course, never been completely absent from pedagogical discourse. In the past they were framed as concerning the relation between the social and the individual in educational processes: how much should education aspire to support the growth of the individual as individual, and how much of the pedagogical effort should go into an education for citizenship? Or, in Gert Biesta’s (2009) terms: how far should education be about subjectification, how far about socialization, and which strategies can be envisioned and put into practice to achieve one, the other, or both? It is possible to write the history of Western philosophy of education as varied attempts to find an answer to this question. Contemporary discussions, however, seem to view these older debates as ‘luxury problems’, problems that you have only if both sides of the equation—that is, the notions of individuality and sociality—are at least to some extent clear. This may no longer be the case. Not only has the clear distinction between the social and the individual been challenged, but the perspectives on both the individual and the social have been complicated to such an extent that we now face the question of whether or not we can still meaningfully speak of the individual (as that which is ever-withdrawing) and the social (as that which is so transcultural that it is not cultural anymore). Taking into account recent demands for an education for ‘Global Citizenship’ (Bamber et al. 2018), the picture becomes even more complicated: an ever-expanding circle of what we supposedly should call ‘home’—apparently, we should now make the ‘world’ our home—is met with growing tendencies to contract the sphere in which individuals dwell. Globalization and individualism seem to walk hand in hand here.

This is no accident. The laudable contemporary movement of granting universal rights of recognition and acknowledgement, which has justifiably led to a defence of the rights to differ and to be different for ever-smaller groups of people (UN 2001), has also resulted in a certain fragmentation of modern societies, which tend to regard (and deride) less fragmented and more culturally ‘closed’ societies as old-fashioned and traditional. Do we risk displacing the social unit of analysis to

individual persons, whose identities are so complex and particular that any form of generalization entails a negation?

In light of these complications, educational theory and practice may need to find new answers to old questions. One might feel, however, that educators have little opportunity to reflect on this matter: the commodification of education has substituted the idea of the autonomous individual with the idea of the ‘consumer’, for which ‘old-fashioned’ cultural differences seem increasingly irrelevant. In contrast, one might find that societies have grown conscious of the price they paid for losing (or giving up) their traditional ‘closed’ cultures. The result is an increase in discussions around national education, which is thought capable of preventing the continuation of cultural fragmentation within a society on one hand, and the unravelling of the ‘within’ into the ‘without’ through what is referred to as ‘globalization’ on the other. Indeed, it is the very possibility of referring to an ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that is thought to be endangered, and which therefore needs to be secured by committing to a certain set of national values, and it is thereby implied that it is predominantly values which bind people together and distinguish them from others at the same time. In the UK, for example, education is haunted by purported British values that are actively promoted by schools (via the PREVENT programme), assuring the British government that, in preventing harm to those ‘at risk’ of extremism or radicalization, it can protect against forces of fragmentation (Lundie 2019).

The debates around such conceptions of national education often try to balance micro-, meso-, and macro-levels: simultaneously embracing a deeply personal identity whose development it is determined to support, education has the obligation to install national values in its citizens—thereby, somehow, circumventing the danger of a transgressive individuality—and, on an even larger scale, education is expected to be global education, an education for global citizenship and cosmopolitanism which seems to oppose a strong individuality as much as a strong national identity. It may not be too bold to suggest that an education which successfully meets all of these criteria has yet to be developed (Davies et al. 2018).

If the picture is not yet complicated enough, we must also acknowledge that these kinds of problems—problems of balancing the various levels of individuality and sociality—might be specific to certain parts of the world: what, for some, might seem to be a futile attempt to re-install a long-lost sense of national uniqueness might, for others, appear to be a necessity in order to guarantee the sustainability or even survival of a culture or nation. And whereas for some it might seem possible or even appealing benevolently to relinquish the idea of cultural uniqueness, for others the defence of such uniqueness is a question of survival. The proud declaration of cosmopolitanism by someone who does not feel any political imperative to lean on their specific culture might not sit well with those whose culture has been neglected, oppressed, or even abolished, and who have fought and died for the right to live and celebrate their own culture (Williams et al. 2003); to declare ‘I am British’ is in no way comparable to declaring that ‘I am Haida’, or ‘I am Ainu’.

Conversely, an emphasis on individuality might, likewise, only be relevant in certain parts of the world. Stereotypical descriptions distinguish between cultures

which are more individualistic and those which are more oriented towards the collective (Cuddy et al. 2009). East Asian countries are often subjected to this kind of stereotyping, as though places influenced by (Neo-)Confucianism have at least one less problem insofar as education there does not have to ask itself how to negotiate between the celebrated individual and an equally embraced collective (such as the nation), since the individual is hardly of any importance. Such stereotyping means that questions, if they arise at all, occur as versions of the problem of reconciling cultural identity with global identity, perhaps with the added complication of how to establish a cultural identity in the first place. However, these stereotypes might not hold much truth, or at least it can be assumed that things are more nuanced than usually imagined.

Contemporary education confronts these complexities, which not only increase to the extent that educators attempt to engage in international and intercultural discourse, but also to the extent to which people increasingly move around the globe to participate in (or contribute to) various ways of educating. It seems that conventional views on national education need to adapt. Changing conditions and life-worlds, opposing movements of globalization, localization and *glocalization*, attempts to acknowledge and recognize different histories and traditions in the ever-increasing intercultural communication process—all these aspects and many more demand a dialogue that is sensitive to these differences. This project therefore asks: *how can contemporary national or collective education look in divergent, especially European and East Asian contexts which frame identity in different terms?* How can the circle of being simultaneously culturally exclusive and inclusive, universal and individual, be squared? How can we embrace Cosmopolitanism, and Nationalism, and Individualism at the same time, and accept that others might be more or less cosmopolitan or nationalistic than oneself? Or, in more fundamental terms: how can the universal and the individual, the general and the particular, be reconciled in or through education? Do they need reconciliation? Or is reconciliation actually a kind of negation, another form of colonization?

Naturally, such questions invite contributions from different parts of the world, and so we invited colleagues from different East Asian cultures to respond to a relatively open question regarding the relation of particularism and universalism in relation to people's personal identities, in the hopes that we would be able to contrast those explorations with some European investigations. That was the plan; until, in early 2020, everything changed: these problems played out on a global scale. Suddenly, large parts of the world were unified against a common enemy—namely Covid-19—and most reacted with hyper-particularism: countries closed their borders, cities their communal spaces, and families had to define 'bubbles' for those who were allowed to congregate. Bodies became more and more separated, while minds increasingly united virtually to an extent never experienced before, divided only by access to the right technology and the almost unavoidable positioning of the accompanying bodies in different world-time zones. In creating these virtual worlds, the maps of connectedness and division were reconfigured and transformed, and what had already been critically explored in discussions around inter- and

transculturality now emerged in a very different guise: much more complicated, much more diffuse, and much more confusing. And still, our question was out there, and it was responded to.

We are very grateful to those colleagues who accepted our invitation and contributed views that show a great variety in focus and emphasis. In this variety, the breadth of the problems to be discussed under this heading reveals itself forcefully; the questions of pedagogically relating the general and the particular, the universal and individual, reaches from problems of content (what it is that is taught or instilled), to questions of method (what can be done practically in pedagogical processes), to questions of the identities of those encountering one another in pedagogical processes. The curious eye must cast its gaze across space and time in order to understand the intricate complexities woven into the fabric of the contemporary pedagogical discussions included here. And it has to take into account histories of enforced particularization disguised as universalization, of particularization that proves to be less particular than perhaps thought; while at the same time keeping in mind what is philosophically (and therefore also pedagogically) possible. In the end, it will be an expression of positionality and probably also of serendipity which of those problems one wishes to emphasize—herein expressing a particularity whose relation to the universal problems formulated in a particular language, bound to a particular culture, poses yet further challenges.

This suite of articles gathers contributions from colleagues located in South Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the UK, whom we invited to explore those questions in relation to the cultures in which they live or work. As such, they are descriptions, but also expressions of the ways in which such problems are negotiated in different contexts. The hope is that this juxtaposition might undermine stereotypical assumptions surrounding the characteristics of identities, which still seem to prevail in much that is said and done. It does, however, also come with a challenge. An encounter of scholars is always also an encounter of academic traditions—of ways of writing and arguing. That becomes visible especially in relation to what is usually called *philosophy*: Europeans are very aware of the different traditions shaping their own philosophical discussions, differences that often seem to be difficult to reconcile. However, it may be worth remembering that this reconciliation could well turn out to be less difficult than those arising from encounters with different cultures with their own traditions of reflecting. Although the exchanges have been lively, and despite quite a number of scholars moving almost freely between the different spheres, it is important to recognize and acknowledge dissimilarities. And despite the fact that most scholars now bow to the apparent necessity to adopt English as the academic *lingua franca*, the attempt to walk the tightrope of expressing culturally bound thoughts in an equally culturally bound and therefore usually very much inadequate foreign language, remains as challenging as it has ever been. The only acceptable response to this fact is generosity, appreciation, and gratitude—and maybe an *epoché* that postpones the judgements that seem to come so fast these days, embracing an intellectual patience that lets us breathe for a moment.

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