

# “Asian” Perspectives on Education for Sustainable Development

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Consensus among the global elite has recently emerged that key natural resources are finite and that environmental degradation, climate change, and resource scarcity challenge human survival and flourishing and fuel human conflicts (Gadotti, 2008). That humans must change their approach to living on earth or face dire consequences is behind intergovernmental organizations and others' calls for education for sustainable development (ESD). However, as a framework, ESD lacks a substantive foundation in educational research or philosophy. Though philosophers and educators have at times pondered and reflected on the implications of humankind's interrelations with the natural world (e.g., Lights & Rolston, 2002; Benson, 2000), ESD has largely been a political movement, fueled by United Nations and related groups' urgings for action (Hopkins & McKeown, 2002). As a result, answers to critical questions for implementation remain essentially contested, such as how individuals, societies, and the world should move forward (Blenkinsop, 2013; Gadotti, 2008; Maniates, 2001); how to conceptualize the relationship between humans and the natural world (e.g., Krasny & Roth, 2010; Lundholm & Plummer, 2010); and how educators can change attitudes and/or behaviors related to sustainability (Connolly & Prothero, 2008; Vare & Scott, 2007). Due to the complexity of challenges that are not just environmental but also political and economic, and due to perceived clashes of sustainability and development aims, some argue now that ESD and sustainability are neoliberal buzzwords (Bengtsson & Ostman, 2013; Stevenson, 2007).

In this context educators and policy makers have observed that Global North and western and western-centered frameworks for exploring education for sustainable development have proliferated in comparison with Global South, indigenous, eastern, and other perspectives. While the challenge of cultivating scholarship and research that is more geographically and culturally inclusive is well known, particularly in philosophy, how diverse perspectives can productively engage fundamental sustainability issues and questions has not been well elaborated. On the other hand, some suspect that it is a part of western liberalism itself or Christianity that causes sustainability issues to be

inadequately conceptualized in western post-industrial societies. Lynn White posited in 1967 that the Christian view of the earth as a domain for humanity's use has challenged Christian scholars and others coming from Judeo-Christian cultural contexts to cultivate critical environmental understanding. Paul Wapner (1996) and Tamara Savelyeva (in this issue) identify dualisms of mind/body and man/environment as part of the liberal philosophical tradition, wherein Enlightenment was conceived early on partly as ways of productively engaging the material world for the benefit of humanity. It has been a common refrain that western civilization and western modes of development have focused on the natural world primarily as resources to the detriment of humanity and animal and plant species for much of modern history, unwittingly disturbing balances beyond human comprehension in order to "develop" and "progress."

Yet concepts of East/West and North/South should also be problematized as dualisms. And it is necessary to critically examine what eastern or southern (as examples) frameworks for sustainability education can contribute, rather than assuming that deep in the jungle lies the answer to ESD's mysteries. In this special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, scholars explore diverse Asian orientations toward sustainability in education with dialogues of East-West in mind, critically considering what various Asian philosophies could contribute to a more substantive discourse on sustainability education and educational philosophy. These essays do not claim that humanity should go east for direction in this domain, but they examine how East/West can and do interrelate and interact in educational philosophy and practice in specific Asian contexts. As a collection they provide a broad view of Asian sustainability thinking that is not dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, post-colonialism, etc., but regards these themes, and other frameworks for living and education, as dynamic aspects of Asian contexts historically and today. As such they invite readers to consider challenges and opportunities for future theorizing of sustainability in philosophy of education, while at the same time critically engaging the way "Asia" is typically understood.

In this short essay, I give a brief background to ESD in educational philosophy and practice, before exploring some of the key themes emerging out of the articles in this special issue for theorizing sustainability and sustainability education within and across Asian contexts. I argue, in relation to the essays here, that approaches to West/East and conceptualizations of Asia must be

critically engaged when it comes to educational theory, and I frame this topic as one case for developing a better understanding of the dialog of West-East in philosophy of education. Rather than settling the debates mentioned in these pages related to ESD, this issue aims to provide a more critical perspective on the relation of East-West in the 'Asian' world of educational theory. Thus these pages may be of value to people wondering what Asian sustainability or Asian philosophies of ESD might look like or entail, though they do not formally propose alternative (to western or global) worldviews or ESD practices rooted in some pure Asian landscape.

## ESD, West and East

In western ethics and popular awareness, the idea that people should or must take responsibility for conserving the environment and natural resources emerged in the 1970s (Benson, 2000). Arne Naess (1973) and Richard and Val Routley (1973/1980) voiced a need for ethicists to consider not harming the environment as an important principle akin to not harming humans or their interests directly or indirectly. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature argued at the same time for environmental education to help people to better appreciate the interrelations of human societies and the natural world as a code for behavior (Lee & Efird, 2014). The 1987 Bruntland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development) gave what is today the most widely cited definition of sustainable development, which emphasizes that economic development should not compromise the availability of natural resources needed for future generations. Since the Rio Summit of 1992 ESD has been a major focus of United Nations work to encourage formal and nonformal environmental education across levels of schooling and in community development around the world. The United Nations proclaimed 2005-2015 the 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development', signaling the importance of ESD across fields and communities worldwide.

In the last few decades a wide range of terms have been used alongside ESD which emphasize different priorities and approaches, such as eco-pedagogy, education for sustainability, sustainability education, and pedagogy of place. Most approaches ask students to consider how human economic and social and cultural concerns interact with the importance of conservation of natural resources. Therefore, all contemporary approaches to ESD are, at minimum, interdisciplinary,

issues-based, and topical. But beyond this sort of general and thin conceptualization, best practices and approaches remain contested. Some argue that transmitting knowledge and appropriate values should be the main focus of ESD; others argue that values of peace, social justice, and human flourishing demand a focus on values and skills education that empowers students to engage in dialogues and problem-solving with others, given the scale and dynamism of environmental and sustainability challenges today (Jackson, 2016; Vare & Scott, 2007).

The notion that western ethics and worldviews are particularly misaligned with environmental ethics and green views that recognize environment and humanity holistically has been articulated regularly in environmental sustainability literature (Benson, 2000; Naess, 1973; Routley & Routley, 1973/1980; Wapner, 1996). As western ethics has focused on individuals in relation to one another in contrast with Buddhism or Confucianism which foreground holism and communities (respectively), many have posited that these latter views, more influential in many Asian societies, may better facilitate the construction of environmental ethics and effective ESD (Lee & Efir, 2014). Studies comparing environmental attitudes in western societies to those in Asian societies such as Japan, Korea, Macau, and China have not given strong support to the idea that such cultural values make a difference in people's environmental perceptions and views, however (Lee & Efir, 2014; Jackson et al., 2016). Such simplifications also ignore the potential importance of different economic and political ideologies in contemporary Asian experiences, as well as the educational orientations that remain popular in Asian societies today.

More broadly, such views of eastern or Asian environmental ethics imply a shallow understanding of 'East' and Asia. As Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen (1997) articulate, Asia should be understood as a concept of human geography rather than physical geography, historically always invoking a dynamic dialectic of east and west of the Eurasian landmass and Asia Pacific region. As Philip Bowring (1987) has noted, the only thing unified by the name of "Asia," which has always encompassed an incredible diversity of cultures, ethnicities, religions, languages, and lifestyles, is its exclusion from Europe: that is, a negative sense of being non-European. The notion of Asian identity within Asia was reflected historically only within the context of anti-colonial and anti-imperial attitudes; Asians did not see themselves as unified in any other way (Bowring, 1987). And Asian

colonial and post-colonial experiences are not particularly similar across the diverse continent and oceanic lands, and are made more complex by the role of colonization by Asian groups themselves. Thus, despite social imaginaries vividly employed within western contexts (wherein ‘Asian American’ or ‘Asian Australian’ refer to particular demographic groups in western society more often than not), there is no particularly useful way of elaborating ‘Asian culture’ or an ‘Asian view’ from within, given the internal diversity and historical east-west dialectics embedded in any so-called Asian contexts.

### Dialogues on Sustainability, East and West

The essays in this special issue foreground the status of Asia as an empty signifier, standing in for far more complex relations of east and west, of dialogical, dynamic histories and contemporary realities. They indicate on multiple levels how Asian societies have looked out, to western ones and one another, just as westerners look east, debunking the notion that any purely eastern/Asian perspective remains. Tamara Savelyeva’s essay, ‘Vernadsky meets Yulgok: a Non-Western Dialogue on Sustainability,’ does this most bluntly, juxtaposing historical Eurasian and Asian perspectives on the environment and humanity’s role in sustainability, namely the metaphysics of Russian theorist Vladimir Vernadsky, and the Korean neo-Confucianism of Yulgok Yi. Rather than asking readers to employ these historical views in developing contemporary approaches to ESD, Savelyeva illuminates how dialogues of east and west and east and east are no new phenomenon, but are reflected in centuries of comparative and intercultural thought in the Eurasian and Asian world.

An east-west dialectic that rejects a type of purist Asian view is also elaborated in Mousumi Mukherjee’s essay, ‘Educating the Heart and the Mind: Conceptualizing Inclusive Pedagogy for Sustainable Development.’ Reductive views of post-colonialism tend to see colonization as disempowering and oppressive overall, particularly in the Indian context. Yet in Mukherjee’s assessment of the work of one school, a historical institution that took on a mission of intercultural integration and increasing equity for disadvantaged Indian youth and girls over time, the value of cross-cultural dialogue in envisioning empowering post-colonial institutions is foregrounded. Further, Mukherjee observes how ‘theory too must be deimperialized’ (quoting Chen Kuan-Hsing, 2010) in

understanding diverse Asian educational histories, as the complexity of post-colonial landscapes like India are often made opaque in western theoretical examinations. A kind of east-west dialogue, Mukherjee asserts, is at the heart of the success and impact of one of India's most remarkable educational institutions, from the perspective of sustainability education as education for greater equity and social justice for all.

Similarly, Wu Jinting examines how dialectics of economic development, western-style commercialization, and local cultural sustainability synchronize, but in this case quite problematically, in the context of an ethnic minority tourism project in contemporary China. As noted previously, some theorists have suggested that sustainability and development are at a crossroads rather than being mutually complementary (Bengtsson & Ostman, 2013). In 'Ethnic Tourism and the Big Song: Public Pedagogies and the Ambiguity of Environmental Discourse in Southwest China', Wu provides rich data to elaborate such notions, vividly portraying how a rural ethnic community and its culture has become commercialized as a result of a project aimed at rural indigenous development and sustenance. On the one hand, Chinese tourists are encouraged today to flock to the countryside to appreciate and learn about sustainability, where the air is clean and longstanding cultural traditions remain a part of everyday life. However, to keep tourists coming and open-minded to this form of ESD requires modern sanitation and beautification of the village, and popularization of distinctive historical ethnic folk songs. The community must accept its neighborhood facelift and musical reduction to poppy jingles in order to experience something like its own sustainability. It must change to stay the same or to remain, within a China oriented paradoxically toward both sustainability and development today.

Kanako Ide bridges contemporary ESD related to caring and peace education of east and west, this case in Japan, in 'Rethinking the Concept of Sustainability: Hiroshima as a Subject of Peace Education'. Focusing on the post-war Hiroshima social, educational, and natural landscape, Ide's essay highlights points of interrelation between Nel Noddings's care and relational theories of education and peace educational philosophy as practiced in understanding environmental degradation and sustainability in contemporary Hiroshima. Though Noddings has not focused on human relations with the natural world in depth in her work, Ide finds significant parallels in view between

Noddings's focus on relation with and care for others in education; and the way educators teach against war and for sustainability in Hiroshima today, through helping students understand how they relate to the natural world around them, and can care and be cared for by plant life growing in this site of infamous human and natural tragedy. Like Savelyeva's essay, this article highlights points of similarities across apparently divergent intellectual traditions, emphasizing new opportunities for dialogue across east and west.

The final essay here (first, as organized in the contents) is 'Self, Natural Sustainability, and Education for Sustainable Development' by Wang Chia-Ling. In this essay Wang reflects on the question raised previously, whether there is something fundamentally more pro-ecological about Asian ways of seeing the world. Evaluating the concept of *no-self* in Buddhism (and *non-action* in Chinese Daoism), Wang argues that there is rich potential in juxtaposing these views with traditional western ideas of the relationships between environments and individuals. Concluding with remarks for education, western and eastern thinkers and philosophers are invoked in her recommendation for mindfulness education. Perhaps the most traditionally styled philosophy of education essay in this collection, Wang provides provocations to western and Buddhist (and Daoist, and other Asian) readers alike here, to consider how their views may correlate or clash in their educational implications and possibilities.

Taken as a whole, these essays reflect that diversity, not uniformity, is part of both western and Asian philosophies of sustainability and sustainable development; that dialogue across and within East and West characterizes so-called 'Asian' theory in this case, rather than any pure eastern view; and that significant challenges as well as possibilities mark the contemporary theoretical and practical landscape for sustainability and ESD in Asia today. The world can no more rely on a singular and monolithic Asian way or best eastern practice in the future than it can revert to historical western conceptions of nature as natural resources and of humanity as in control of the world. As we clearly have all been living together across borders for many centuries despite the notion of 'Asia', not just geographically but also culturally, socially, and politically, it makes little sense to presume separateness, mutual exclusion, and dualism in historical or present-day theorizing. As revealed in these essays, Asian philosophies of education for sustainable development are diverse, intersecting

with each other and with western views. Developing a new approach to Asia and east-west relation is vital for productively reflecting upon already existing historical, commonplace dialogues of east and west as discussed here, which can in turn enhance the development of more critical theoretical and practical approaches to ESD that better represent and reflect human vision as a whole.

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the authors for their contributions and patience with the production of this special issue and Michael Peters and Susanne Brighouse for support and expertise with production.

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