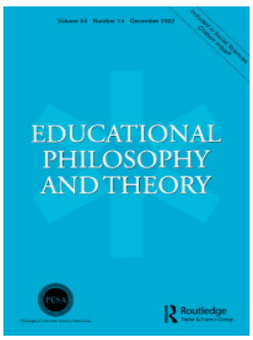

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Comparative philosophy of education: Reading Zehou Li (李泽厚)'s philosophy in a postcolonial time

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ABSTRACT

This article considers a postcolonial approach to comparative philosophy of education as comprising four key features: ethnography, translation, hybridity, and critique. This conception of comparative philosophy of education is first located in the postcolonial context that demands sensitivity to the ongoing dangers of orientalism. Each of these four identified aspects of comparative philosophy of education is illustrated with reference to the comparative work of a prominent contemporary Chinese philosopher, Zehou Li (李泽厚). It concludes with some observations about the challenges that face a postcolonial comparative philosophy of education.

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Introduction

When 'east' meets 'west'[1] in philosophical dialogue in education, and philosophers of education from contexts with different educational, cultural and philosophical traditions engage with one another, they practise comparative philosophy of education. Significant work has been done in exploring issues at stake between Anglo-American and European theories of education (e.g. Biesta, 2011; Standish, 2007). Philosophers of education also write and publish, increasingly, about indigenous education in Australasia, Africa and Canada, and about traditions beyond their own in educational, ethical and political thought in contexts such as China and Japan (e.g. Reagan, 2018; Saito & Hodgson, 2017), exploring, translating, explaining, contrasting and comparing them—and sometimes calling for their retrieval and defence. What is more, transcultural and intercultural approaches to the scholarship of philosophy of education have not only been increasingly emphasised but also deepened (e.g. see Bai et al., 2015; Ergas & Todd, 2016; Lewin & Ergas, 2018).

Yet there are particular dangers when those from western traditions engage with and comment on those that originated outside the West, especially those from the postcolonial world and above all when they attempt to work across their differences, with potential for orientalist misunderstanding and misrepresentation, which demands attunement to the dangers of

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We acknowledge different conventions of writing names in English and in Chinese, and in this paper written in English for consistency we will address Zehou Li in alignment with the English convention that given name appears first and family name last. We cite Li's name in Chinese characters 李泽厚 when it appears first and then cite Zehou Li's family name, that is, Li, throughout the paper.

intercultural injustice. Making the effort to promote justice in the face of globalisation of philosophy of education can enhance philosophy of education everywhere and it requires a willingness to reflect with sensitivity on issues and ideas beyond our own national and cultural contexts.

If comparative philosophy of education implicitly reflects a wish to practise a form of global justice, its practitioners need to take into account the postcolonial context in which they work. This prompts the questions: (1) what are philosophers of education doing when they engage in a comparative study of educational thought?; and (2) what do philosophers of education need to do in order to be just in the face of past colonial injustices in education and the persisting elements of coloniality that mark the present?

Against this background, we aim to offer an account of comparative philosophy of education as comprising four central defining features: *ethnography, translation, hybridity*, and *critique*. We will illustrate each of these features of what we term a postcolonial approach to comparative philosophy of education with reference to the work of a prominent contemporary Chinese philosopher, Zehou Li (pronounced/zeɪ-həʊl liː/, 李泽厚), whose work we set out to introduce to western philosophers of education. We have chosen Li's work as our example because his philosophy has come to fruition following ongoing cultural exchanges since the 19th century between China and the modern West. Li might not have consciously worked in a postcolonial framework, but he reflects a quest that seeks a Chinese modernity which spans several generations of Chinese intellectuals, implicitly addresses the postcolonial context and offers a way out of cultural coloniality that illustrates our postcolonial approach. We recognise that Li's philosophy is not a panacea for the search of post-coloniality, but instead we focus on the relevance of the use of his philosophy as an exemplar.[2] In doing so the discussion that follows will begin by locating the issues at stake in a postcolonial context that demands sensitivity to the ongoing dangers of orientalism, and then we explore the four features we attribute to comparative philosophy of education from the perspective of Li's work. Finally, we will conclude with some observations about the challenges that face comparative philosophy of education, viewed from a postcolonial perspective.

Colonialism and orientalism: Confronting modern Western hegemony

That education has been a prominent theme in postcolonial discourse should come as no surprise, as it was a strategy in the colonisation, mainly by European states, of large parts of Africa, Asia, South America, Canada and the Middle East. It remains an enduring theme in debates on the continuing pursuit of decolonisation and the search for postcoloniality, long after the formal processes of political decolonisation in the latter half of the 20th century.

The ways in which colonial schooling's primary function was to serve the needs of the colonisers have been well documented (e.g. Kelly & Altbach, 1978). This observation applies to the curriculum, organisation, ethos and distribution of schooling. The languages used, curriculum content, and conceptions of knowledge and of moral education were European. Indigenous culture, knowledge and traditions of upbringing were dismissed with a lack of self-awareness that we now find breath-taking, as exemplified in Lord Macaulay's notorious 'Minute on Indian education' in which he observed on comparing Arabic and Sanskrit literature with English: 'I have conversed both here and at home with men (sic) distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. …. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia' (quoted in Said, 1978, p. 152).

Macaulay's comparison is quoted in Edward Said's landmark text, *Orientalism* (1978) which, along with his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) has been highly influential in the development of postcolonial theory. Applying Foucault's claim that knowledge and power are closely

associated, Said's concept of orientalism refers to 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,' and a 'systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (Said, 1978, p. 3). In turn, the West was cast as rational, in contrast to an irrational, exotic, alien, violent, and inferior Orient that was assumed to lack cultural achievements. This inferior Other, constructed by the western gaze, was seen to need correction through western education. The comparisons implicit in orientalism and in the colonial education it implicitly endorsed can in retrospect be understood as a colossal act of misrecognition and injustice. Colonial education was unjust in many ways. For those working, even now, to address the ongoing effects of colonialism and enduring coloniality, the injustice of being misrepresented by outside others (like Macaulay, cited above) who fail to realise their own ignorance in their acts of misrecognition remains hard to bear, and this inevitably has implications for the practice of philosophy of education.

Carnoy's (1974) observation that in the late 20th century when older forms of imperialism had passed colonial era educational systems remained little changed is still pertinent. The fact of neo-colonialism in the development of the global economy under accelerating conditions of globalisation since the conclusion of the colonial era and the achievement of political independence by former colonies has also to be recognised (see Dirlik, 2002). In some ways coloniality in education has intensified, as national educational systems have become increasingly in thrall to the global economy and the policies of supranational bodies (e.g. the PISA programme of the OECD). These global forces, alongside trends like the enduring dominance of the English language, should be recognised as forms of recolonisation of education.

Recently, authors in both philosophy and philosophy of education have paid attention to such problems. Standish (2011) challenges the monolingualism of English in academia and in education (on the issue of the colonialism of English, see also Saito & Hodgson, 2017, pp. 2–3). Furthermore, Van Norden (2017) in his recent book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* addresses the problem of philosophy's homogeneity (viz. a dominant Eurocentric approach) both as a matter of justice and as a matter of the very survival of philosophy as an academic discipline (see pp. 8, 31, 35). Ames (2017), with a particular focus on the case of Chinese philosophy, emphasises the need to understand Chinese thought on its own terms through a self-conscious and interpretive strategy of translation. In particular, a series of (re) translations of canonical Chinese texts by Ames—e.g. *The Art of Warfare* 孙子兵法 (2010), raises an issue about knowledge in comprehending philosophies that are outside the dominant western discourse. Despite such progressive developments, much work remains to be done in exploring possibilities for a flourishing and more global intellectual culture that embraces diversity in cross-cultural philosophy, with potentially the future viability of philosophy of education as an academic discipline at stake.

With these considerations in mind, what conditions might need to be met in comparative philosophy of education so that it both fosters justice in education and supports decolonisation, avoiding new forms of orientalism? As Milligan, Stanfill, Widyanto, and Zhang comment, although postcolonial theory has critiqued the spread of western educational ideals and forms of organisation, 'it is less clear about how educational development that eschews neo-imperialist tendencies might proceed' (2011, p. 50).

Clearly it would be orientalist to cast philosophy of education solely within a western frame, while ignoring the dangers of adopting one parochial but nonetheless hegemonic approach to reflection on education and its aims. Philosophers of education who are committed to postcolonial justice would resist such a tendency. But having said that, what might the features of a defensible comparative philosophy of education be, if it is to be informed and just to all participants and their contexts and traditions—and to the cause of education? What contribution might philosophers of education in the 21st century offer in the face of a history of colonialism in education and persisting coloniality?

Comparative philosophy of education as comprising four features

We now provide an account of comparative philosophy of education that supports a postcolonial approach. Our conception of comparative philosophy of education comprises four key features: ethnography, translation, and hybridity—as well as critique which, we will suggest, has to various degrees a necessary role to play in the first three elements of comparison. We will describe these four aspects of comparative philosophy of education, each followed by an account of how Li exemplifies it. Since the element of critique plays a necessary role in the first three aspects of comparison, the explanation of critique as a component of his comparative work is embedded in our elaboration of ethnography, translation and hybridity in his work. For readers who are unfamiliar with Li's work, we introduce him briefly first.

Li (1930–2021) is one of the most innovative and influential thinkers in China's post-Mao era (see Rošker, 2019), who coins his own thought as *A Theory of Anthropo-Historical Ontology* (人类学历史本体论), addressing ontological, moral and epistemological issues, both from a contemporary perspective concerned with the future of humanity and by offering an illuminating and distinctive perspective on perennial problems in life and in philosophy. Li can be read as a significant contemporary comparative philosopher who bridges western and Chinese traditions (e.g. see Li, 1986, 1999b). In short, Li not only compares and contrasts typical western and eastern philosophical contributions but also combines these with insights that could renew both traditions. Indeed, he is our exemplar comparative philosopher in the way that his work reflects our account of comparative philosophy of education as comprising ethnography, translation, hybridity and critique.

Ethnography

Comparative philosophy of education could, first, approach comparative tasks cautiously, as a kind of ethnography, modelled on anthropology as a systematic, detailed study of peoples and 'cultures'. Thus, the comparative philosopher would, at least initially, focus on confining herself to meticulous description of 'philosophies' of education, explained as far as possible from the inside by those located within a tradition of educational thought and practice, on their own terms. Direct experience of another tradition can also be helpful in understanding the context in which ideas are developed (cf. Schepen, 2017, p. 100). Hence, in the ethnographic aspect of comparative philosophy of education we can detect two main kinds of practice, i.e. both thick description and direct experience.

While we do not propose a form of ethnography that is empirical on the model of anthropological research, the use of ethnography in our conception of comparative philosophy of education draws on conventional ethnographic methods such as thick description, reflexive observation, and immersion in local life. Our postcolonial approach to ethnography emphasises developing sensitivity towards the values and cognitive categories of the marginalised. It is indeed an opening of oneself to the full power of what the Other is saying, but such an opening does not necessarily entail agreement (see Fox, 2012, p. 128). Furthermore, this ethnography facilitates an open reflexivity towards postcoloniality that questions the assumption of homogeneity of 'culture' as well as checking if self-colonised mindsets are at work, thus requiring a role for criticality placed in a back-and-forth sequence of pre-critical, critical, and post-critical (Benner & English, 2004, p. 422).

As a comparative philosopher, Li's work was enhanced by ethnographic exercises. At the age of 28, Li went to Qianfo Temple (千佛寺) in Dunhuang (敦煌) located in the northwest part of China, for a one-month study trip (see Yang, 2021, p. 43). This cultural site preserves the richest Buddhist artworks including a large number of caves, murals and sculptures. Li studied every cave and took notes, with the intention of examining, from an aesthetic perspective, changes in taste that took place through the different historical periods, e.g. of the Tang dynasty

(618–907 C.E.) and the Song dynasty (960–1279 C.E.). Later Li incorporated his historical-ethnographic notes taken in this period to develop his widely-read monograph *The path of beauty: a study of Chinese aesthetics* (for the English version, see Li, 1988/1994). Without this ethnographic experience, Li would not have been able to develop his sensitive insights into Buddhist aesthetics involving several strands of Buddhism such as Mahayana, Chan sect and sukhavati sect (See Chapter VI, 'The Buddha's Worldly Countenance', Li, 1988/1994).

Besides this ethnographic description conducted by Li in his earlier career, of how Buddhist culture developed in different Chinese dynasties, Li also enacts a cross-cultural ethnography. When facing criticisms from a Christian perspective, in order to gain a direct acquaintance with Christian philosophy Li developed his ethnographic study by reading and reciting passages from the *Bible*, including both the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. For example, Li is known to *recite* John 1, from the *New Testament*. He later often compares: 'In the beginning was the Word' in that classical passage with 'Heaven's movement is ever vigorous' in the Chinese *Classic of Change* (the *Yijing* 易经) (Li, 2018a, p. 20, p. 21). This comparison made by Li highlights the cross-cultural contrast between the Christian culture and the Chinese tradition—the former reflects consciousness of a greater transcendent God, while in the latter this concept is 'absent' and does not play a definite part in the construction of its civilisation[3] (Li, 2018a, p. 19). Li goes further than these ethnographic observations to suggest that modern Chinese thought needs to understand and even to absorb some Christian teachings such as a pure heart and a sense of holiness in facing God, in order to strengthen the traditional Chinese cultural psyche which, for him, lacks experience of catharsis such as that dealing with individuals' absolute sense of loneliness (Li & Liu, 2011, p. 100). It is notable that although Li is an atheist and historical materialist, he has reflectively engaged in an open way with Christian scripture.

Ethnographic work in comparative philosophy of education in a postcolonial time could be seen as aiming not only to celebrate difference, but also to foster preliminary understanding through both thick description and direct acquaintance. With respect to direct experience of practices and ideas in different cultural and educational traditions, in working comparatively a philosopher of education is encouraged to be a border crosser, sometimes directly participating in the local educational practices different from her own. For example, a Chinese international student, in addition to her formal study of philosophy of education in a modern western educational system, might be encouraged to attend bible classes to experience a traditional way of Western (e.g. Christian) upbringing and thus to experience an historical feature of western culture. By the same token, an international student in China could be encouraged to experience Confucian rituals or Daoist practices, or to enjoy ordinary Chinese family meals which embody many significant Chinese educational concepts and practices such as that of 'filial piety' and 'harmony'. In addition, martial arts (e.g. taichi, see Lewin & Ergas, 2018, p. 492) and contemplative arts (e.g. yoga) that are becoming prominent in the field of education (Ergas & Todd, 2016) can offer comparative ethnographic experiences of the kinds discussed here.

Translation

But a considerable body of comparative work goes beyond what we call the ethnographic towards translation. By translation we do not mean a word-to-word conversion between various languages, but engagement across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which aims at 'mutual transformation through crossing borders' (Saito & Hodgson, 2017). As Saito (2017) writes about 'cultivation through translation', we also think that engaging in translation assumes an educative quality that changes our original conceptual horizons, shifting our opinions and shaping normative commitments. This highlights a philosophical translation as opposed to a plainly mechanical or linguistic translation. This study of translation not only finds broad correspondence between the different, but also requires being sensitive to the realm of the

untranslatable (Saito, 2017, p. 19). It not only accepts that the processes of translation will never be complete but also recognises that some concepts that appear initially inscrutable can and do become more comprehensible and often illuminating beyond their original text (also see Milligan et al., 2011, p. 52).

There are two senses assumed in our understanding of the translation component. One is its analytic sense that pursues a degree of clarity that could make it possible for those both within and without a local discourse to comprehend what the writer is asserting. In this analytic sense of translation, 'the development of analytic tools that enable the understanding of the inter-discursive processes' (Schwimmer, 2017, p. 53) is emphasised. Through an observant intellectual process of translating, ideas and concepts of other traditions are consciously present in one's own thinking, clearly though necessarily incompletely. Further, we couch this analytic emphasis in Ames' (2017, p. 11) terms as 'to come to an understanding of the uncommon assumptions that distinguish cultures.' Such an analytic interpretation usually necessitates an analogical comparison in order to reveal the distinctiveness of the targeted 'culture' one wants to know on its own terms. The other sense of translation we isolate is its iterative and transformative quality. There are indeed certain fields within one's tradition and across traditions that cannot be translated, involving constant indecisiveness. That said, the distinctive way of sense making cannot speak a language in which it is not at home (Davis & Barmé, 2001). In this case, translation means dwelling in an iterative process to listen to and to ponder repeatedly those constructs that are untranslatable. If in the first sense of translation we highlight an intelligible educative process stabilising different cultural understandings in-between, then in the second sense of translation we discuss an iterative transformative process 'mutually destabilizing in encountering different cultures within and without ourselves' (Saito, 2017, p. 22). In short, both senses of translation are equally important in comparative philosophy of education, just as clarity and creativity are complementary.

To illustrate these two intricate senses—the analytic-stabilising and the transformative-destabilising—of the translation component, let us take Li's experience of translation in his comparative philosophical exercise between the Chinese context and the English context as an example, first with reference to the analytic-stabilising translation. In order to identify equivalent comprehensions of the subject among traditions, Li (1999a, p. 174) first makes it clear that the familiar western term of subjectivity is concerned with an understanding of the self that is characterised by conscious thinking (i.e. a cognitive self which is conceived to be separate from the body), and in Chinese should be translated as 主观 (zhuguan). In fact, this translation was first made by Japanese intellectuals who adopted Chinese characters to do this translation and later gained its currency in modern China. Here Li is cautious in addressing the analytic-stabilising aspect of translation, because he is aware that this translation with the Chinese character 观guan is emphatically employed to *specify* the original philosophical use of subjectivity (as a technical term in western philosophy whose origin is traced to a Cartesian conception). This concept of subjectivity has significant implications for education: calling into question the epistemic emphasis in western understandings of the subject, at the expense of 'the universal, necessary practice of making and using tools' (see Li, 1999a, pp. 174–175).

With regard to the destabilising and the 'untranslatable' aspect of the self in the Chinese tradition, the western concept of subjectivity is significantly different from the traditional Chinese understanding of the self whose consciousness and body are in an organic whole (Bai, 2020, p. 15). Since there is no clear-cut distinction in the Chinese tradition between subject and object, further strengthened by the influence of Marx's material philosophy emphasising the human body in praxis (see Standish, 2011, p. 75), the Chinese term 主体 (zhuti) is coined to express the aspect that the original terminology of subjectivity lacks. On the basis of these differentiated understandings, Li (1999a) further creates an English word, 'subjectality', to refer to the intricate and 'untranslated' Chinese understanding of the subject. That is, based on Japanese scholars' contribution rendering western subjectivity into Chinese language as 主观

(zhuguan), with a differentiation from the typical Chinese understanding of subject as 主体 (zhuti), Li proposes a new English word 'subjectality', as a whole living figure in practice, to denote the not yet rendered Chinese understanding of subject i.e. 主体(zhuti). Further, Li's theory of 'subjectality' is a result of synthesising western and Chinese traditional understandings of the subject, combining Chinese collectivism, Marxist socialism and western liberal individualism. By accommodating the species and the individual, sustained by the technical-social and the cultural-psychological formations, a hybrid of western materialism and eastern spirituality is also created. Thus a new English term, subjectality, enriches both the Chinese and the English expressions of the subject.

It might be objected that a neater solution would have been for Li to leave the Chinese term 主体(zhuti) untranslated. For the sake of accurate understanding, leaving the term untranslated as well as requiring going back to its explanation *in situ* might be preferable—as many 'extended' understandings that are tantamount to misunderstanding might thus be avoided. However, the necessity of creating a new English word 'subjectality' herein meets the interest of comparative philosophy to enrich cultures. Let's consider the example of science, a conception which is new to Chinese tradition and later has been translated into a new Chinese term as 科学. Rather than simply leaving the English term 'science' untranslated, the new Chinese word 科学 helps to gain currency in China and now it enriches Chinese scientific ways of thinking. In this same sense, 'subjectality' might be a better term to enrich English-speaking people's thinking about the self, without reverting again to its Chinese explanation of Zhuti (主体). After all, not all readers are familiar with Chinese culture and so an original Chinese term might not make sense to them. Thus, coining new words as pedagogical vehicles could aid understanding, and even accelerate cultural regeneration.

For a thoroughly untranslatable example, Li (2018b, p. 1) finds the Chinese concept of Qing 情, which is central to Li's understanding of Chinese tradition, untranslatable into English. This is because there is no equivalent term: if it is translated into 'feeling', it would be misleadingly insufficient since it lacks the sense of 'situation' that is integral to the concept of Qing. Furthermore, no suitable term can be adapted to express it. It is as complex a concept as Dao 道 or Yin/Yang 阴/阳. Thus Li proposes to use its phonetic transcription (viz. Qing情). From this instance, it can be seen that Li is critically alert to the danger that Chinese tradition could be theorised 'according to Western philosophical assumptions, shoehorning Chinese concepts into categories that are not its own' (Ames, 2017, p. 12), orientalising it. Through these discussions of comparative philosophical translations that are central to Li's work, it has been shown that critical translations encompass both those that can be translated by analytical or creative adaptations and those that can only take 'into account the tradition's own indigenous presuppositions and its own evolving self-understanding' (Ames, 2017, p. 9).

Hybridity

If we accept the obligation to engage in ethnography and translation, aiming to exercise appropriate criticality by transforming our own understanding as well as advancing knowledge, then what else does comparison involve? In a postcolonial context confronting modern western hegemony, comparison as accommodating hybridity seems desirable, as has already been suggested in our discussion of Li's work, e.g. his opinions on Christianity and subjectality. We perceive hybridity as a form of comparison that Bhabha (1994) describes as negotiation of cultural differences as borderline engagements, in spaces in between, developing interstitial perspectives. Indeed, such engagements can involve conflict and consensus. While recognising that neo-colonial relations continue in a neo-colonial world, for Bhabha it is likely that such exchanges will overturn assumptions about the traditional as well as the modern. This struggle takes place in a space that 'opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that retains difference

without an assumed or imposed hierarchy…' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Bhabha shares Fanon's (1986) view that the subordinated are likely to want to retrieve their traditions and histories, while reiterating Fanon's caution about the risks involved in defending fetishised identities.

To demonstrate how such conflicts between the dominant and the subordinated might be critically resolved, and that a degree of revision and consensus is possible, let us consider Li's philosophy again. In particular, we suggest that Li achieves a form of postcolonial hybridity with relevance to the aims of education, by bringing together traditional Confucian, modern Marxist, and western Enlightenment ideas in his comparative philosophy. 'If there is an "end of history", there must be a "beginning of education"', Li (1999b, p. 143) argues in 'Human Nature and Human Future'. To develop his argument, a tripartite critical hybridity among philosophies of Confucius, Marx, and Kant emerges. Inheriting traditional Confucian teaching that education means the development of human nature, Li (1986, p. 137) also draws on a Kantian understanding of autonomous subjectivity and then (1999b, pp. 134–135) converges with a modern Marxist viewpoint to resist inappropriate alienations both of rationality (which turns people into machine-like beings) and emotionality (which degrades persons into animal-like existence). In what could be described as a postcolonial hybridity, Li sets out to build up an ever-enriched account and experience of humanity, in which *individuals* are *realistically* in control of their lives. We suggest this could be understood by using the metaphor of a driver's freedom, say in driving a car on a road. The figuration of modern drivers who operate techno-machines and follow socio-institutions such as the rules of the road, but effectively realise their own purposes, expresses Li's ideal of a modern subject. Thus, the aim of modern education seen through Li's lens that combines traditional Chinese thought and modern western thought, is then reconsidered as cultivating individuals who can live in a grown-up relationship with the natural, the social, and the technical; just like the driver, a real flesh and blood figure who receives cultivation and training in her life-long practice of driving, and lives well with both physical and conventional restraints, on the road of life.

Overall, balancing a socialist view with that of an individualist, bringing together the Confucian emphasis on the theme of human becoming and the Marxist insights on the modern exploitation of human nature, Li combines these significant streams of thought to outline an educational project that highlights the full development of individual human nature. In particular, it is concerned with a rounded psychological growth of individuals, encompassing balanced rationality (abstract thinking as exemplified by western science) and sensibility (intuitive thinking as manifested in the ancient oriental world). More precisely, the educational project that Li proposes aims at cultivating the aesthetic facet of individual subjectivity, which dissolves rationality into emotionality, which he expresses through the analogy of salt dissolving in water (for a critique of this viewpoint, see Liu, 1994, p. 34). Once again, strengthening the Confucian preference for spontaneity, both the Marxist historical materialist perspective and the modern western rational and technological contribution have been absorbed by Li to develop an account of modern subjectality. In Li's aesthetic account of a modern self, the individual is characterised by human spontaneity, sustained by a rationality which is interpreted by Li in terms of both materialism and socialism.

Conclusion: The challenge of postcoloniality

When 'east' meets 'west' in philosophy of education, as our discussion of Li's philosophy shows, its comparative ethnographic work and acts of translation can lead to illuminating forms of hybridity, with critique exercised to different degrees, especially in translation and in developing hybridity. The stance we have taken has supported these aspects of comparison as plausible and attractive in exploring an example of willingness to transform oneself including, as Saito (2017) suggests, through self-criticism of one's own cultural assumptions. We now conclude by

addressing some challenges faced by comparative philosophy of education, viewed from a postcolonial perspective and in light of our argument so far.

We recognise that our example of Chinese philosophy meeting western thought has selected an eastern context that is not typical of those that suffered the worst forms of western colonial destruction (as in India and parts of Africa where military conquest, and settlement of a colonial population on occupied land were followed by systems of colonial education characterised by cultural imperialism; see Carnoy, 1974). For despite attempts by western powers in the age of imperialism to colonise China and the later Japanese occupation that ended in 1945, colonial powers did not succeed in imposing western educational systems, and China's resistance to western imperialism prevented the kinds of *external* destruction of traditional indigenous educational ideas and practices experienced elsewhere. Yet while we have recognised the history of colonialism and how education was imbricated in that history, we nonetheless defend the features of comparison we have proposed as necessary to philosophy of education globally practised.

An alternative view might argue that, because of the orientalism that characterised colonial history, postcolonial comparative philosophy of education should confine itself to ethnographic description in ways that respect indigenous traditions, enabling those marginalised by colonialism to foster recognition and retrieval of their own customs and practices. But we would caution against limiting comparison to a narrow form of the ethnographic, as it presents the danger of relativism, retreating into a primordialist stance that, in effect, eschews comparison. Sheer description, if it were possible at all, would be comparative to a limited degree, and even the ethnographic engagement we have described is in practice not always easily demarcated from translation. Indeed, both the aspects of ethnography and translation as conceived in this paper are devised to constructively recognise the dignity of the Other. There is, however, a particular obligation on the part of philosophers of education educated and practising within western traditions to listen to accounts of traditional educational practices and philosophical ideas, and to do so in a way that consciously sets out to avoid simply extending their own concepts and frameworks to other parts of the globe. Avoiding orientalism does require those working from dominant western perspectives to act as border-crossers, deliberately seeking homelessness and cultivating awareness of their own strangeness.

With regard to hybridity and critique as necessary to constitute a postcolonial approach to comparative philosophy of education, we do argue for 'a possibility for expansion and development' (see Feinberg, 2006, p. 14). On the one hand, if it were assumed that some non-western examples of philosophy of education should be accorded a presumption of truth because they represent the claims for justice of marginalised groups, then avoiding critique could lead to its displacement by a patronising, marginalising form of orientalism, placing a subaltern tradition beyond engagement by insulating it from potential criticism. On the other hand, hybridity and critique as conceived could offer to our world 'a more expansive range of acceptable ways of life' (see Feinberg, 2006, p. 14).

Furthermore, accelerated global economic, political and cultural integration in the decades after the end of political decolonisation has intensified interactions between former colonies, the former colonial powers and also the wider global system. Consumerist culture and the commodification of a range of goods that include education have spread far beyond their original almost exclusively western location. Neoliberal forces are the new form of empire and they are less visible, globally diffused and adaptable. The new form of global domination that Hardt and Negri (2000) have called 'Empire' rests instead on 'the global market and global circuits of production'. A further risk posed by a conception of comparison as confined to respectful ethnographic description risks ignoring changing forms of coloniality. Across east and west, the critical resources of diverse contributions to global philosophy of education should be collectively brought to bear on shared challenges of 21st century Empire.

Notes

1. On the complex relationships between western philosophy and other philosophical traditions, see the Special Issue of Educational Philosophy and Theory: Blind, or Keenly Self-regarding? The dilemma of Western philosophy (Mika & Peters, 2015).
2. Xiaobo Liu (1994) has criticised Li's adoption of a comprehensive approach to examining the modern relevance of Chinese traditional culture, which Liu regards as conservative. However, we argue that an eclectic approach as adopted by Li could be critically balanced.
3. Note that there are various notions of deity in Chinese tradition (be it Daoist gods or the heaven God called as Tian Di 天帝 in ancient Chinese myths); however, these concepts have tended to be marginalised in mainstream Chinese thought.

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