

Patterns in Japanese Comparative Education Practices: A Contrast with North America and Greater China

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This paper explores the convergence and divergence in the discourses and practices of comparative education in Japan, North America, and Greater China. Research demands, institutional settings, and social and historical background determine the nature of the research discussed and practiced in each place. Some particular patterns were identified in Japanese traditional comparative education such as thick description, limited reference to theories, and a focus on systems and the structural level rather than on classroom practices and pedagogy. Further, an orientation to borrowing foreign policy ideas and to learning about the educational system in neighboring Asian countries has made some themes and geographic research sites popular. Examination of research trends reveals that similar demands to identify policy options also exist in Mainland China and Taiwan.

Together with the research on policies and practices in other countries, in Japanese comparative education there is a strong tradition of area studies based on deep linguistic and cultural understanding of the research sites. Such a research approach is often found among members who conduct investigations in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In addition, there is another group of scholars who show strong interest in international agendas such as development or gender and who conduct research contributing to these fields. This type of scholar has increased since the 1990s and tends to focus on regions such as Africa and South Asia. This has brought Japanese research trends closer to that of North America where a large number of publications were on Africa, Latin America, and Asia throughout the post-World War II period.

Because of the multi-disciplinary nature of this academic field and its openness to quality research from diverse academic traditions, I argue that comparative education can serve as a platform for academic collaboration for advancing the horizon of research.

Keywords: epistemology; research trend; comparative education; discourse; theory

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Introduction

Half a century has passed since the Japan Comparative Education Society (JCES) was established and in 2014 the 50th anniversary meeting was held in Nagoya. During this period, the membership of JCES increased to more than one thousand doubling from 601 in 1990 to 1,153 in 2010 (information provided by JCES secretariat). While the increasing size of the society is an indicator of the liveliness of the academic field, it also hints at dispersion in terms of methodology, epistemology, and practice. Questions have long been raised about the boundaries between comparative education and other fields and disciplines, and about the identity of comparative educationists. However, with the increase in the number of participating scholars and changes in the research environment in the globalized world, the academic identity of comparative education is ever more contested at both the global and national levels. Comparative education is an academic field that has undergone recurring surges of its epistemic discourse and has constantly reviewed its members' academic practices (Hawkins and Rust 2001; Acosta and Centeno 2011).

In the case of Japan, by looking through the past volumes of the journal *Comparative Education* (it will be called CE-J hereafter so as to distinguish it from *Comparative Education* journals published in other languages), it is revealed that there have been various special issues and invited articles that provide overviews, rethink, and look back on "what comparative education is like" since the first issue was published in 1975. It is a characteristic of the field of comparative education to continuously search for the field's academic identity. Ishizuki (1993) stated, "In the case of comparative education, we do not necessarily have a shared boundary as an academic field. It means that although comparative education is recognized as an academic field, it does not have clear boundaries and a well-defined academic core" (p. 157). Given such methodological and disciplinary diversity, this paper aims to understand how comparative education has been perceived and practiced as an academic field in Japan. Then, epistemology and research practices of the members of JCES will be compared with those researchers who have published articles in journals in North America, Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to see where they converge or diverge from one another. The data used for the analysis of comparative education in Japan are the results of a questionnaire survey I conducted² and the classification of articles published in the Japanese journal *Comparative Education* (CE-J) between 1975 and 2011.

This paper will show that there are some consistent trends and accumulated tradition based on what variant of comparative education has been practiced. This tradition reflects Western epistemology to a certain extent but it also shows trends unique to Japan. For example, the research trends among the members of JCES and North America-based Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) converge in several areas such as a tendency to focus on single-country case studies and an increasing interest in basic education while they diverge in their regional foci. The Japanese preference is for specialization in one region versus a North American tendency to "cover" more of the globe. A difference also exists in a Japanese reluctance to point to generalized theories for fear of "cookie cutter" studies with predictable findings. On the other hand, in Japan and Greater China similarities in research trends appear more in terms of regional focus than research topics. In both cases, the regions on which the published papers focus are largely Western Europe, North America, and East Asia. In terms of research themes, while in Japan there is a growing number of papers that are linked with global issues and development in other countries, in Greater China, the major research themes tend to be directly related to domestic educational concerns such as higher education and curriculum reform.

1. Comparative Education in the Japan

The Japan Comparative Education Society (JCES) was established in March 1965 with 94 members. The first president was Professor Masunori Hiratsuka, Director of the National Institute for Educational Research (Later renamed as National Institute for Educational Policy Research). According to the chronology compiled by the JCES, the subsequent 50 years can be classified into four periods (JCES 2014). The first period (1965–1980) starts from when the founders were planning to establish the society and ends with the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) meeting hosted by JCES in Tokyo in 1980. The second period stretches through the 1980s, the third period through the 1990s and the fourth period covers the last 10 years (2004–2013).

The founding period was followed by the second period of institutionalization. Throughout the 1990s (third period), JCES saw continuous growth in its membership while globalization and the bursting of bubble economy caused drastic changes in the research environment both domestically and internationally. Criticism arose that the simple introduction of foreign educational situations could not be considered comparative education unless it provided a comparative perspective to investigate Japanese educational issues and their causes (Ichikawa 1990). In response, there were other scholars who claimed that a more serious problem was the weak foundation of area studies and the real challenge for Japanese comparative education was to improve quality in this field (Umakoshi 1992). In the 1990s, said to be the era of internationalization, it was no longer difficult to get general information about situations overseas. Therefore, to achieve a better quality in the educational studies of specific regions it came to be expected that researchers would stay in the field longer or revisit field work for deeper understanding. The fourth period, after the 2000s, saw further expansion, with membership exceeding 1000. Continuing expansion and diversification of members and their interests brought about various efforts at dialogue and collaboration among scholars with different backgrounds but who commonly identified themselves as comparative educationists. One such effort was the research project on which this paper is based.

1.1. Research Practices and Their Matches and Mismatches with the Discourse and Self-image of Scholars

In this section, I will highlight trends in research practice in this field based on 281 peer-reviewed articles published in *CE-J* from 1975 to 2011.

Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 show the trends in themes, in levels, and types of education and in geographic focus. From Table 1, we know that popular themes in *CE-J* throughout its history are policy and social change, followed by curriculum, educational administration (national level), and culture and education. As I have discussed elsewhere (Yamada 2014), based on the questionnaire, I found five major clusters of research interest prevalent among JCES members. The most dominant cluster was the one related to policy and system analysis, which demonstrates high interest in themes such as politics, policy, social change, and educational administration at the national level. The second cluster focuses attention on the relationship between society and education. The respondents in the second group tended to be more interested in themes such as local educational administration, ethnicities, education and religions, languages and education, and culture and education. I labeled the third cluster the “teacher and pedagogy” cluster, as it centered on the themes of pedagogy, teaching–learning process, curriculum, and teacher educa-

Table 1 Trend of research themes dealt with in the peer-reviewed articles of *CE-J*

Year of publication		Politics	Policy	Social change	Educational administration (national level)	Labor market	Educational finance (national and local level)	Local educational administration	Ethnicities	Education and religions	Languages and education	Culture and education	Pedagogy	Teaching-learning processes	Curriculum	Teacher education	Trends of international aid	Gender	Trends of research in comparative education	Research methodologies	Total
		Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts	Counts
1975–1980	Counts	3	11	12	5	4	2	1	0	2	0	10	4	2	3	2	2	0	0	3	66
	%	5%	17%	18%	8%	6%	3%	2%	0%	3%	0%	15%	6%	3%	5%	3%	3%	0%	0%	5%	100%
1981–1990	Counts	11	29	22	14	6	1	7	2	5	4	23	4	4	22	5	2	3	6	5	175
	%	6%	17%	13%	8%	3%	1%	4%	1%	3%	2%	13%	2%	2%	13%	3%	1%	2%	3%	3%	100%
1991–2000	Counts	13	40	25	19	5	3	5	9	10	11	15	4	4	25	4	4	3	0	0	199
	%	7%	20%	13%	10%	3%	2%	3%	5%	5%	6%	8%	2%	2%	13%	2%	2%	2%	0%	0%	100%
2001–2011	Counts	3	38	19	25	8	7	16	8	10	7	12	3	11	23	4	2	4	3	2	205
	%	1%	19%	9%	12%	4%	3%	8%	4%	5%	3%	6%	1%	5%	11%	2%	1%	2%	1%	1%	100%
Total	Counts	30	118	78	63	23	13	29	19	27	22	60	15	21	73	15	10	10	9	10	645
	%	5%	18%	12%	10%	4%	2%	4%	3%	4%	3%	9%	2%	3%	11%	2%	2%	2%	1%	2%	100%

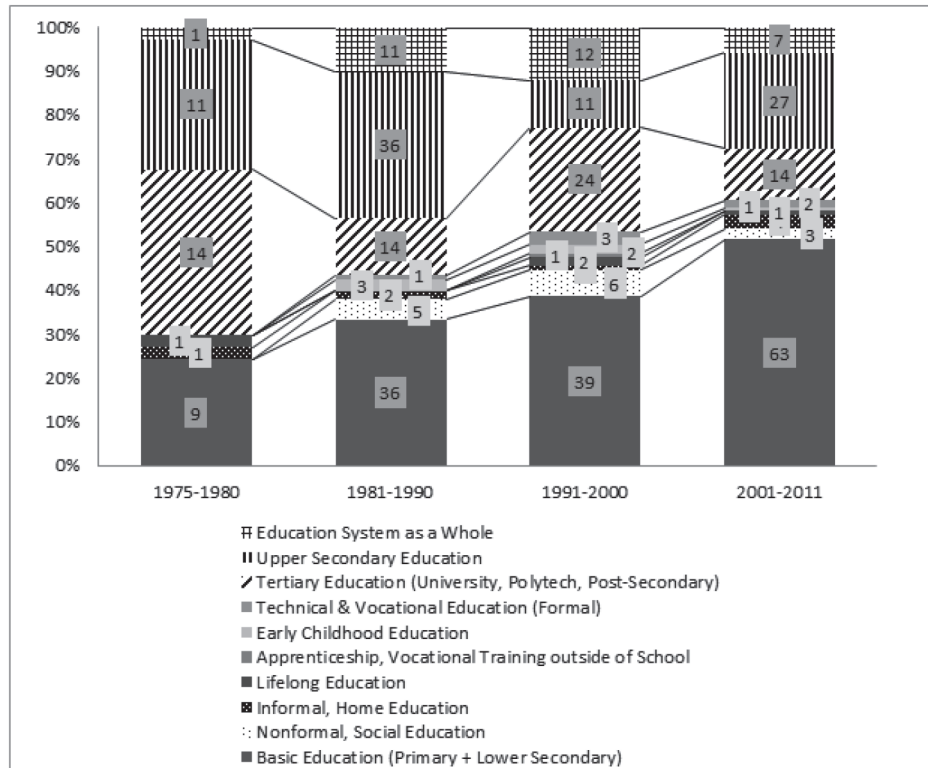
Note: One article may be classified up to three times.

Source: Yamada 2015, p. 248.

tion. Other clusters identified were the “international agenda” cluster, with articles focusing on the trends of international aid and gender as well as the “epistemology and research methods” cluster.

The types of research that fall into the first cluster, “policy and system,” have always been at the core of Japanese research in comparative education. The field started as a means to borrow policy ideas, particularly from Western countries, but policy continued to be a major focus even in research on other regions. At the same time, as repeatedly claimed in the invited articles, there has been a strong drive for holistic understanding of education in its larger context. Scholars who value this holistic approach often align with the “society and education” cluster.

In terms of levels and types of education, as shown in Figure 1, the proportion of articles on basic education (primary and lower secondary) has grown significantly over the years. Traditionally, research on upper secondary and tertiary education has been more popular. A close examination of content has revealed that the increase in articles about basic education is deeply related to the global Education for All movement and the increased commitment of the Japanese government to supporting educational development of less-developed countries. The research on basic education is therefore often different from “traditional” comparative education in Japan in terms



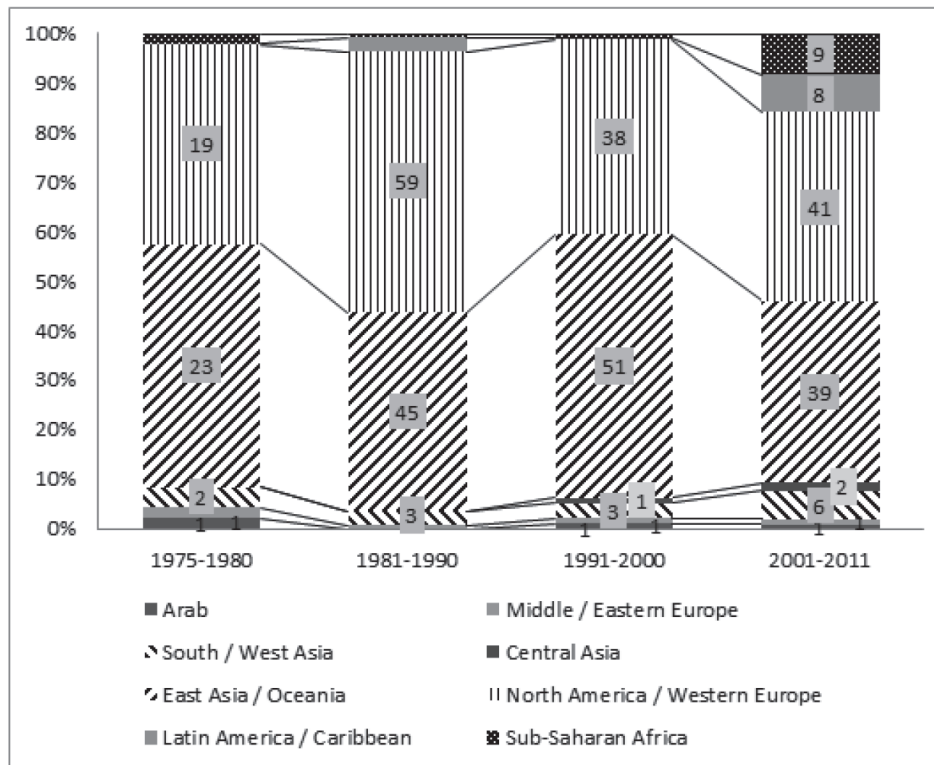
Note: One article may be classified up to three times.
 Source: Yamada 2015, p. 249.

Figure 1 Trend of levels/types of education dealt with in the peer-reviewed articles in *CE-J*

of the types of education and region focused on and in the research approach. Another characteristic of Japanese comparative education practice represented in the *CE-J* is its focus on formal education. In the aggregate, these three major levels of formal education—basic, upper secondary and tertiary education—occupied 81 percent of the peer-reviewed articles. Although there were scholars who expressed interest in informal or social education, articles about these types of education have been rare in *CE-J*.

Figure 2 shows trends in the geographic regions dealt with by the peer-reviewed articles. One can recognize two regions that have constantly been dominant: East Asia/Oceania and North America/Western Europe. In recent years, publications in *CE-J* have geographically diversified with an increase in papers about Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Still, in the aggregate, nearly 90 percent of the peer-reviewed articles have been on East Asia/Oceania and North America/Western Europe at 44 percent and 43 percent respectively.

The above analysis indicates that regardless of the recent diversification of regional focus, the majority of the research papers published in *CE-J* still focus on Western Europe and North America. This means that Japanese comparative education emerged as an academic field of “educational borrowing”, namely, to learn from advanced practices in Western countries or to know about the educational situations in neighboring east Asian countries. At the same time, as was debated in the 1990s, in Japanese comparative education there is a strong tradition of area



Note: One article may be classified up to three times.

Source: Yamada 2015, p. 250.

Figure 2 Trend in geographic regions dealt with in the peer-reviewed articles of *CE-J*

studies based on deep linguistic and cultural understanding of the research sites. Such a research approach is often found among members who conduct investigations in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In addition, the questionnaire outcomes suggest that there is a group of scholars who show strong interest in international agendas such as development or gender and conduct research to contribute to these fields. This type of scholar has increased since the 1990s and tends to focus on regions such as Africa and South Asia that were not often represented in the comparative education research of the earlier periods.

2. Convergence With and Divergence from the Patterns in North America and Greater China (Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong)

Based on the profiles of Japanese comparative educationists identified through the analysis of questionnaire returns and article classification, in this section I will contrast the Japanese research trends with those in North America and Greater China. First, I will compare publication trends in the journals of JCES and CIES, namely, *CE-J* and *Comparative Education Review (CER)* hereafter). Then, the paper will turn to the comparison of trends between *CE-J* and *Comparative Education Review (CER-C)* hereafter) of the Chinese Comparative Education Society (CCES), *Journal of Comparative Education (JCE-T)* hereafter) published by the Chinese Comparative

Education Society-Taipei, and the *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* (Renamed from *Comparative Education Bulletin* in 2013; *CED-HK* hereafter) by the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong.

To contrast the research trends observed through the articles published in *CE-J* and *CER*, I relied on the analysis provided by Charl C. Wolhuter (2008). Wolhuter classified 1,157 articles appearing in *CER*, from the first volume in 1957 to 2006. For background information, the survey by Bradley J. Cook et al. (2004) was referred to. It is probably the largest survey given to researchers in this field, with 419 responses (69.3 percent from the United States). I have also looked into the series of works by Rosalind L. Raby (2003, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2011) that reviewed trends in *CER*-published bibliographies regarding research themes and the geographic focus of the articles appearing in other journals each year. In the same vein, I have also looked at the work of Amy Stambach et al. (2011), which continued the work by Raby on *CER* bibliographies. Regarding the analysis of research practices in greater China, the indispensable source of information and ideas was a paper by Ka Ho Mok (Japanese translation, 2013). A few papers in English on this issue in mainland China and Hong Kong were also reviewed although they do not constitute a direct source of comparative data (Shu and Zhou 1990; Chen 1994; Bray and Hui 2001; and Fairbrother 2005).

Between *CE-J* and *CER*, there are certain common trends, particularly in the selection of research topics. For example, the increase in research on basic education after 1990 and the recent emphasis on the internationalization of higher education and university reforms indicate the synchronicity of the two places. Also, research practices are similar in the sense that a significant proportion of papers focus on a single country regardless of the repeated call for explicit comparison and the development of methods for explicit comparative studies of education (Raby 2003, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011). According to my study, 31 percent of the peer-reviewed articles in *CE-J* are single-country studies (with many more being micro-level studies such as at the district and school level in a single country), while in *CER*, 78 percent of the articles are in this category (Wolhuter 2008, 325).

While higher education is becoming a popular theme of research globally in Japan and North America, it is not as dominant as basic education, at least in the field of comparative education. Comparative education has been influenced by the global trend of educational development in developing countries which highlights the focus areas of the Education for All international goals and this has driven many scholars to write papers on basic education. In Greater China, however, higher education is one of the most popular themes. This tendency is clearer in Mainland China and Taiwan, both having 19% of the papers classified as dealing with higher education (Table 2)³. If one includes “quality assurance” as a one of the issues faced by higher education institutions, the proportion of papers in this category becomes still higher. In the case of *CED-HK*, probably because of the characteristics of the Comparative Education Research Center at Hong Kong University host to the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong (*CESHK*), there are more papers on theories, methods and research examining the field of comparative education itself. Even with the particular nature of *CERC*, the research on higher education occupies a relatively high ratio (9%).

One clear divergence of Japanese practices from that of North America is in regional focus. *CE-J* publishes significantly more papers on Western Europe, North America, and East Asia compared to other regions. Southeast Asia has been a relatively popular region among Japanese comparative education scholars for some decades, but Africa, South and West Asia, the Arab

Table 2 Research themes dealt with in the articles published in three Journals of Greater China

Themes	CER-C (Mainland China)		JCE-T (Taiwan)		CED-HK (Hong Kong)	
Higher education	48	19%	20	18%	8	9%
Curriculum/ teaching/learning	17	7%	8	7%	10	11%
Theory and method	13	5%	2	2%	9	10%
Educational policy/law/governance	12	5%	5	4%	4	4%
Education reform	11	4%	6	5%	3	3%
Organization/management/operation	10	4%	5	4%	3	3%
Secondary and/or primary schools	9	3%	10	9%	2	2%
Financing	9	3%	3	3%	2	2%
Quality assurance (both teachers and students)	8	3%	10	9%	1	1%
Equality/ Minority issues (e.g. ethnic, gender, and poverty)	9	3%	2	2%	3	3%
Scholar	8	3%	7	6%	3	3%
Adult education/life-long education/vocational training	8	3%	7	6%	1	1%
Comparative education research	5	2%	2	2%	14	15%
Teacher training/development/recruitment/efficiency	6	2%	5	4%	5	5%
Others	86	33%	21	19%	25	27%
Total	259	100%	113	100%	93	100%

Source: Developed by author based on Mok 2013, pp. 155–158.

region, and Latin America were not. Compared to that, Wolhuter's (2008) analysis of articles in *CER* from 1957 to 2006 demonstrates that Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have constantly been the focus of articles together with North America and Western Europe. It is noteworthy that Africa and Asia have been well represented from the first volume of *CER* (Wolhuter 2008, 328; Foster et al. 2012, 712). For example, among articles published in volumes 1 through 5, 21% were about Asia and 15% were about Sub-Saharan Africa. While North America and Western Europe were the focus of more articles in the *CER* from the first volume until the late 1970s, the proportions were then reversed to favor Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, which continue to be the two major regions today followed by Latin America (Wolhuter 2008, 327–28).

A similar tendency as Japan in, that of publishing many articles on Western Europe, North America and neighboring countries, is observed in Mainland China and Taiwan. In Mainland China, more than 40% of the classified journals are about the United States (Table 3). Except for China itself, which received the second highest attention (12%), there were more than 10 papers respectively on Japan (7%) and the U.K. (4%). The trend in Taiwan is similar to Mainland China. While papers on Taiwan occupied the highest proportion (18%) among articles published in *JCE-T*, it was then followed by the U.K. (14%), Germany (12%), the U.S. (11%), and Japan (10%). Hong Kong is a slightly different case. A majority of papers published by the *CED-HK* is about their own society, China (23%), and Hong Kong (36%). The contrast between *CED-HK* and the other three East Asian journals, *CE-J*, *CER-C*, *JCE-T* is the low level of interest in the Western world. There was only one paper on the U.S. while nothing was published about the U.K.

It is difficult to tell how much of the distinctiveness of patterns in geographic and thematic focus of the journal of CESHK should be attributed to the research needs of the society of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is unique for its political situation and the efforts both by the government and educational institutions to make Hong Kong an international hub of higher education. However, such a context does not seem to be directly related to the publication trends of *CED-HK*; the

Table 3 Countries / regions dealt with in the articles published in three Journals of Greater China

Country/Region	CER-C (Mainland China)		JCE-T (Taiwan)		CED-HK (Hong Kong)	
United States	78	43%	8	11%	1	1%
China	22	12%	7	10%	17	23%
Japan	12	7%	5	7%		0%
United Kingdom	10	5%	10	14%		0%
Germany	8	4%	9	12%		0%
Russia	4	2%		0%	2	3%
East Asia Region	2	1%		0%	4	5%
Malaysia	2	1%	2	3%		0%
Singapore	2	1%	3	4%	6	8%
Australia	2	1%	2	3%	2	3%
Taiwan		0%	13	18%	2	3%
Hong Kong		0%	2	3%	27	36%
Others	41	22%	12	16%	14	19%
Total	183	100%	73	100%	75	100%

Source: Developed by the author based on Mok 2013, pp. 155–158.

tendency of CERC to promote theoretical, epistemological, and methodological research in comparative education was more visible in its publication record.

Putting aside *CED-HK*, publications in Mainland China and Taiwan show similar trends. In both journals, the geographic focus is more on Western Europe, North America, and East Asia, and the dominant research theme is higher education. The Japanese publication, *CE-J*, shows similar trends to Mainland China and Taiwan in terms of geographic focus but the thematic emphasis is more on basic education than on higher education.

One cause of the difference in research focus is the demand for research in the respective contexts. In post–World War II Japan comparative education started as a means to borrow policy ideas from other countries that had initiated new approaches and methods earlier than Japan (Umakoshi 2007). It also served the role of learning about and comparing Japan with neighboring countries so as to situate Japanese education in the regional context. One can assume that the same applies to Mainland China and Taiwan where comparative education research is predominantly to “borrow” ideas from countries with advanced knowledge and to improve understanding about neighboring countries. On the other hand, in North America, research demands were linked with postwar rehabilitation in Europe and development aid for former colonies, and later, during the Cold War period, Third World countries. Japanese academics may not be as directly influenced by politics and diplomacy as their counterparts in North America because of the insulation of Japanese research universities from the politics of priority-setting and financing of research. The major scheme of research funds (Scientific Research Grant-in-Aid) by the Japanese government organizes selection committees composed of academics who decide grant awardees purely on the academic grounds. Therefore, there is less direct financial control in relation to research topics compared to North America. Still, there are certain types of research that is recognized and encouraged by the government and in academic circles and this influences the selection of themes of and approaches to research.

I should also point out an additional institutional context that shapes Japanese comparative education: Japanese comparative education has identified itself with the areas that do not compete with but rather complement neighboring academic fields, such as educational adminis-

tration, educational sociology, and educational philosophy (Ogawa 2013). Comparative education is unique in the sense that it tends not to touch on issues related to Japanese domestic education policies and system where specialists were already established when comparative education emerged. This is another contrast with other Asian societies studied in this paper. In Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, papers about their own societies account for a large share (Table 3). In fact, in *JCE-T* (Taiwan) and *CED-HK* (Hong Kong), they were the largest in proportion (18% and 36% respectively). It rarely happened that *CE-J* would publish a paper on Japan. Since the first comparative education program was established at Kyushu University in 1952, major programs that train young scholars to accumulate research work in this field have concentrated in *Teidai*, the old national universities established in the imperial period albeit with some significant exceptions outside of this category. Takahiro Kondo (2013) points out that the *Teidai* research culture contributed to Japanese comparative education in its focus on the educational system and social context rather than on educational content. Alongside the *Teidai* system oriented research, there were scholars based in major national universities who started at the teacher training colleges such as Hiroshima and Tsukuba Universities. Scholars based in these former training colleges often pick up issues related to subject content and pedagogies while the system and social context have been common concerns for Japanese comparative educationists across institutions.

There is a significant divergence of research orientation in CIES and JCES which relates to the seriousness about becoming specialists in the countries/regions studied. Since I do not have data to discuss research orientation and epistemology in Greater China, the following argument is more specifically based on the contrast between Japan and North America. Most of the articles published in *CE-J* cite literature written in languages other than Japanese. In 55 percent of the articles, three-quarters of the references are from non-Japanese sources with an increasing proportion of the literature in the local languages of the research sites. This is partly because training in major comparative education programs in Japanese universities strongly emphasizes in-depth fieldwork based on comprehensive knowledge of the society including its language. Compared to the finding by Cook et al. (2004) that about one-third of CIES members do not have specific regional specialization but rather had multiregional interests (p. 134), their Japanese counterparts are more conscious of regional specialization and make efforts to access primary sources in local languages. Cook et al. explain the lack of regional focus among CIES members as a result of a competitive job market that makes new scholars try to maximize their employment opportunities by broadening their geographic expertise. The competitive job market is a common issue across countries but young Japanese comparative educationists try to broaden their marketability not by blurring their regional focus but rather by extending the coverage of issues.

This strong emphasis on area studies leads to the next significant epistemic difference, namely a lack of reference to familiar theories in Japanese comparative education research works. Looking at the discourse among North American scholars, theoretical trends were observed as a significant aspect of discourse. Contrary to Japan, area studies-based perspectives diminished after the 1980s, and were replaced by more problem-oriented studies driven by the political and diplomatic needs of governmental, multilateral, and nongovernmental organizations. The problem-oriented approach of comparative education studies required theories that provided analytical tools to compare different societies. This shift to a problem-oriented approach also provided an incentive to use tools from other disciplines, such as economics, sociology, and political science although simultaneously there were vigorous efforts to consider the theories and methodologies unique to comparative education (Paulston 2000, 353–57; Hawkins and Rust 2001, 501–502).

On the other hand, in the traditional epistemology of Japan-based comparative education theories are not something that can be used to find patterns or draw lessons. It is said that a truly good work in area studies does not select one or two aspects of educational practice to focus on based on agendas (or theories) brought in from the outside (Otsuka 2009, 45–50). Therefore, it tends to be difficult to find clear theoretical orientations among scholars who are trained in traditional comparative education programs in Japan. At the same time, one should be careful not to consider this as a matter of giving up on theorizing about what is observed on the ground. While cautioning about the application of readily-available theories to the phenomenon at hand, Umakoshi (2007) urged researchers to “generate hypotheses” to be applied to research by starting with the effort to understand the context deeply and richly. This challenge from Japanese comparative educationists oriented toward area studies poses an important question about theories. If we do not question the adequacy of using familiar theories to frame our research, we open the way to produce similar cookie-cutter articles and the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis will be predictable.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to note the convergence and divergence in the discourses and practices of comparative education in Japan, North America, and Greater China. Research demands, institutional settings, and social and historical backgrounds determine the nature of research discussed and practiced in each place. There is no universal form of comparative education. Rather, it is perceived and practiced differently by scholars situated in different places. As this paper revealed, there are some unique features in Japanese traditional comparative education such as thick description, rare reference to theories, and a focus on systems and the structural level rather than on classroom practices and pedagogy. These characteristics emerged in response to the institutional context of Japanese research universities at which other fields of education were established earlier so that comparative education developed in a way not to overlap but to supplement these existing fields. Also, the research orientation to borrowing policy ideas and at the same time to learn more about the educational situation in neighboring Asian countries have made some themes and geographic research sites popular. For example, in the 1970s and 80s, there were many papers published in *CE-J* on issues related to international students studying in Japanese universities and Japanese children returned from overseas in response to the increase of short-term international migration of youths and children because of their parents’ work or education. From the observation of the research trends, one can tell that similar demands to identify policy options also exist in Mainland China and Taiwan.

Meanwhile, since the 1990s in Japan, the role of providing solutions brought from elsewhere to domestic problems was increasingly taken over by specialists on particular issues such as learning assessment, lifelong learning, or accreditation of higher education institutions who do not necessarily identify themselves as comparative educationists. In contrast to the era when access to information from overseas was limited, contemporary international research is not monopolized by scholars who explicitly specialize in it. While comparative education has developed in the niche of the *Teidai* institutional environment with a great deal of effort to refine its methods and philosophy of area studies and comparison, researchers from other related fields now expand the scope of their own research which results in challenges for the academic identity

of comparative education.

As I have discussed in this paper, the 1990s saw the emergence of scholars who are concerned about international agendas such as educational development in countries with lower educational indicators or gender equity, topics which were not previously found in JCES. The flexible and open nature of comparative education has attracted scholars who are internationally oriented and who do not comfortably fit into any existing categories. Such new groups of scholars who are different in research orientation and in the locus of their research projects have added a dimension to Japanese comparative education that corresponds more closely to research trends in global society and North America.

Given the diversity of perspectives and practices of comparative educationists in Japan, it is difficult to say if there is any common attribute or collective role to play for promoting comparative education globally. Rather, I would like to highlight the potential role of comparative education as a platform for multilateral partnership among scholars with different disciplinary or thematic backgrounds. Today, the social phenomena that require analysis by social scientists including comparative educationists are changing dynamically and often exceed the scope of research in the conventional disciplines and academic fields. Therefore, creative efforts are needed by scholars to extend their academic boundaries and step into areas in which the methods and standards of research may not be established but where social demand is high. The broad-based and flexible framework of comparative education and its constituent scholars who are ready to appreciate quality research with different academic orientation from their own would serve as an ideal forum for sharing ideas and collaboration.

Notes

1. This research is part of a larger research project, “Reconstructing Educational Research on/in Developing Countries: A Fusion between Area Studies and Development Studies,” which was enabled by a grant-in-aid from the Japan Society for Promotion of Science.
2. The questionnaire was sent to 699 out of approximately 1,150 JCES members in November 2009. The JCES asks its members when they register for the first time whether they are willing to share their personal information with people outside of the secretariat. These 699 allowed such sharing of their information (the contact information of the other members does not appear in the JCES directory and the secretariat does not give permission to access this information). I received 264 usable responses constituting about 38% of the population contacted.
3. According to Mok, the sampling of articles from the respective journals is done according to the following procedures: (1) *CER-C* – Out of 1,717 articles published between 2001 and the end of 2009, 192 articles in 12 issues were selected randomly according to the “constructed year” sampling method; (2) *JCE-T* – out of 66 issues of the journal published from 1982 to 2009, 67 articles out of 14 issues from 2000 to 2009 were selected because of their availability on the web site; and (3) *CED-HK* - CESHK has published 11 issues of the journal from 1998 to 2008 with a total number of 76 academic articles, all of which were included in the analysis (2013, pp. 155-158).

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