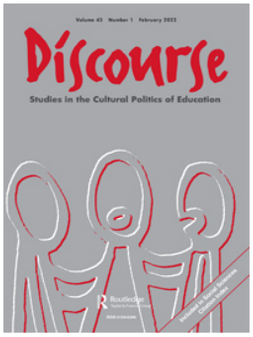

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REVIEW ESSAY



# Comparing high-performing education systems: understanding Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong*

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite the trendsetting of East Asian HPES, education policy commentary and literature on this region remains rather underdeveloped and predictable. In Comparing High-Performing Education Systems: Understanding Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, Dr Charlene Tan moves scholarship on East Asian HPES in a new, sorely needed direction. This review essay of Comparing High-Performing Education Systems describes the guiding conceptual framework of the book and summarizes the book, chapter-by-chapter. This review essay also comments on two striking issues – the explanatory power of Confucian habitus, and the intersectionality of performativity, Confucianism, and neoliberalism. The aim in this review essay is to both celebrate the boldness of Comparing High Performing Systems and offer questions to further enrich the employment of Confucianism as a conceptual and analytical tool to examine education policies, processes, and outcomes in East Asian systems.

**KEYWORDS**

Education Reform; High-performing education systems; Accountability; Confucian Heritage Cultures; high-stakes testing

High-performing education systems (HPES) in East Asia are receiving a great deal of attention around the world in research, media, and in the blogosphere. Parents, teachers, policy actors, practitioners, and researchers are keen to understand what is the 'secret sauce' behind the exemplary performance of East Asian HPES in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme of International Assessment (PISA) and other comparative international assessments. Stakeholders are keenly interested in what happens, on both policy and practice levels, that makes these systems outperform, over time. The need to know 'what works' is indeed perceived as urgent among policy communities, as globalization and global education reform has created intense pressures for public education. Policy actors and intermediary organizations increasingly use performance in comparative international assessments as a proxy for leadership in the global economy (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), as well as to justify education, social, and economic reforms in order to remain (or become) competitive in an increasingly interdependent global economic environment. Meanwhile, school leaders and teachers are keen to

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gain lessons on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, particularly in light of rising pressures from test-based accountability. There are also those voices that, on the other hand, seek to disrupt the popular narrative of high performance in East Asian HPES and highlight concerns regarding issues of inequality, access, and approaches to learning and teaching (e.g. rote learning, test preparation curriculum) (see Park, 2013).

Despite the trendsetting of East Asian HPES, education policy commentary and literature on this region remains rather underdeveloped and predictable. Today, the commentary on East Asian HPES is largely dichotomous. Education reform proponents adopt a de facto positive orientation to high performers. For example, literature produced within the OECD champions East Asian HPES policies and practices as models of education reform, relying on high performance in comparative international assessments as the primary indicator of success (see, e.g. Schleicher, 2018). This is consistent with the position of education reform proponents who advocate for market-oriented, performativity, and managerial policy technologies and the techniques of competition, accountability, and performativity to improve schools and school systems. In contrast, scholarship from academics typically critique accountability, high-stakes testing, and the inequality that underpins and flows from the latter in East Asian HPES (see, e.g. Hoi & Lan, 2006; Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Meyer & Benevot, 2013; Qi, 2007).

Indeed, both positive commentary and critical analyses have offered crucial insights into the ways in which accountability shapes educational opportunity for disadvantaged students and perpetuates inequality in HPES. However, taken as a whole, education policy literatures are relatively thin. Change-focused policymakers and scholars have few theoretically rich conceptual analyses *and* methodologically rich empirical analyses of the character and consequences of education reform in East Asian HPES. Our understanding of HPES remains polarized, at times politicized, and one-dimensional. While we have some sense of the 'secret sauce' behind the success of East Asian high performers, we have little understanding to impart to policy actors and practitioners on the enactment, processes, and effects of education reform in systems with highly complex, unique educational and cultural traditions.

In *Comparing High-Performing Education Systems: Understanding Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong*, Dr Charlene Tan moves scholarship on East Asian HPES in a new, sorely needed direction. *Comparing High Performing Education Systems* neither props up these HPES nor presses solely on the well-known consequences of high-stakes testing. The book is a fine-grained, historically embedded understanding of the landscape of education policy, and the theories of action, in each system. But more importantly, Tan's scholarship problematizes contemporary conceptualizations of (high) performance, and uses the conceptual anchor of Confucian Heritage Cultures to make sense of education, performance, and performativity in these systems. While the concepts of Confucianism and Confucian Heritage Cultures have been employed in a range of sub-disciplines of education studies, Tan's sophisticated, rigorous approach to comparative policy analysis is fresh and moves forward literature on East Asian HPES in a positive direction.

This review essay of *Comparing High-Performing Education Systems* unfolds in three parts. First, we describe the guiding conceptual framework of the book, Confucian Heritage Cultures and Confucian habitus. Then, we summarize the book, chapter-by-chapter. Here, we highlight Tan's main points on four dimensions of her typology of performance (Chapters 2 through 5), as well as the main ideas in her discussion of Singapore,

Shanghai, and Hong Kong as distinctive manifestations of an East Asian Educational Model (Chapters 6 through 8). In the last part of this review, we offer comments on two striking issues – the explanatory power of Confucian habitus, and the intersectionality of performativity, Confucianism, and neoliberalism. Our aim in this review essay is to both celebrate the boldness of *Comparing High Performing Systems* and offer questions to further enrich the employment of Confucianism as a conceptual and analytical tool to examine education policies, processes, and outcomes in East Asian systems.

## Conceptual framework: Confucianism as habitus, heritage, and performance

Tan's book, *Comparing High-Performing Education Systems*, takes on four interrelated questions:

> What do we mean by 'performance' and 'high performance' in the educational contexts of Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong? What are the key similarities and differences between Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong in terms of their educational structures, ideologies, policies, and practices? What common features can we observe from Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong that may suggest the existence of an educational model in East Asia? What are the major international implications from our comparative analysis of the education systems in Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong? (p. 171)

To examine these questions, Tan applies the conceptual frames of Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) and Confucian habitus. CHCs are marked by political, philosophical, and popular Confucianism in societies, organizational systems, and social and public policy. Borrowing from Bourdieu's 'structuring structures' (p. 57), Tan explains Confucian habitus as that which 'comprises the unconscious and ingrained worldviews, dispositions, and habits that reflect the standards of appropriateness in a CHC' (p. 57). Characteristics of CHCs that appear in the habitus expressed by members of CHCs include:

> … achievement-orientation, the importance of education, continuous development, educability of and perfectibility for all, the centrality of personal effort and resolve in learning, collectivism, high expectation of parents of their students' academic performance, attribution of success to effort, high status of teachers, exam-driven schooling, and a hierarchical social structure. (p. 58)

## Book summary: an East Asian educational model

Tan uses CHC and Confucian habitus to frame her analysis of performance Hong Kong, Shanghai, and in Singapore and to discuss how each system is an expression of the East Asian Educational Model. Diverging from common conceptions of performance, Tan presents a Confucian view of performance as the nexus of *li* and *dao*. *Dao* refers to a vision of human excellence, while *li* refers to the 'ethical, communal, and personalised standards of appropriateness that inform, and are performed by, members of a CHC' (p. 12). In a narrow sense, *li* is about accomplishing specific tasks, such as studying for and taking an exam. In a broad sense, *li* is about 'meeting standards of appropriateness in all aspects of life' (p. 15). These standards are exercised through ritual education (*li jiao*) and ritual principles (*li zhi*). In this way, '*li* is the map of *dao*' (p. 15).

With *li* and *dao* as the bedrocks of performance, Tan creates a matrix to anchor the book's analysis of performance. Tan depicts performance as the intersection of narrow

and broad *contexts*, and local and global *levels*.. As such, there are four permutations of performance discussed in the book:

> (1) a narrow-global interpretation where such as PISA are administered, (2) a narrow-local interpretation where national/regional assessments such as the *gaokao* (national college entrance exam) in Shanghai are implemented; (3) a broad-global interpretation where cross-contextual frameworks such as the Fourth Way are used to understand and compare school systems; … and finally (4) a broad-local interpretation where specific educational policies to promote holistic education are enacted in an education jurisdiction. (p. 22)

## Four permutations of performance

In Chapters 2 through 5, Tan describes each of these four types of performance permutation, suggesting each system is a manifestation of the East Asian Educational Model. In doing so, Tan asserts that Confucian habitus, performance (*li*), and harmony (*he*), which produce both academic excellence and exam stress, must be recognized in analyses of education policies and practices in these systems.

***Narrow context-global level of performance in International Large Scale Assessments (ILSAs).*** Chapter 2 (narrow-global) presents a Confucian response to ILSAs. This chapter begins by acknowledging the normative conceptualization of performance and of high performing education systems:

> From the standpoint of standardised transnational evaluation, the *performance* of an education system is measured by its average scores and ranking in the subjects or domains tested in the ILSA. An HPES, it follows, is an educational regime that produces students who are highly proficient in such assessments. (p. 26)

After describing the major ILSAs in use today, the chapter then presents a synopsis of scholars' comments on the utility and value and criticism of these tests. Drawing on the metaphors of global education race (Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013) and, more prosaically, horse race (Kamens, 2013), Tan asserts that effective policy learning necessitates recognition of the cultural and sociopolitical characteristics that underpin an education system. She suggests that to learn from policies in high performing East Asia systems, we must pay due attention to the history and sociocultural foundations of society and education in these systems. The chapter then adds a layer of Confucian analysis of ILSAs, explaining teachers are a main part of cultivating one's soul, academic excellence is only one dimension of *li*, and holistic character and conduct are essential to performance. From a Confucian perspective, 'a top scorer in tests can still be deficient in virtuous character and conduct' (p. 40). High performance is understood as a holistic education that is 'conducive to the flowering of human existence' (Fingarette, 1972, p. 47, in page 42 of the book).

***Narrow context-local level of performance in private supplementary tutoring.*** Chapter 3 (narrow-local) examines the phenomenon of private supplementary tutoring as situated within high-stakes testing and as a dimension of parents' Confucian habitus. The chapter suggests Confucian habitus manifests in East Asian HPES in three ways: (1) sociocultural emphasis on diligence and studying, (2) parent dependence on private tutoring, and (3) public support for terminal exams. Tan thus frames private tutoring as a sign of parents acting responsibly and enabling students to show honor for family and society.

Public support for exams stem from Confucian habitus, as CHCs see exams as a 'checkpoint for a child's learning progress' and a symbol of 'transparent meritocracy' (p. 68). Parent's high investment in private tutoring features high in Western stereotypes about East Asian education, and is indeed a relevant phenomenon in the region. Nonetheless, parents' emphasis on performance goes against meritocratic values in the sense that how much they invest in private tutoring changes according to families' expectations and prosperity. Aware of the potential negative effects of parents' performative pressures in terms of inequalities but also exam stress, the governments of Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong have adopted educational reforms oriented toward the promotion of holistic education, as Tan details in the following two chapters.

***Broad context-global level of performance in Fourth Way framework.*** Chapter 4 (broad-global) draws on Hargreaves and Shirley's Fourth Way framework (2009) to explore the approach to holistic education in the three scrutinized educational systems. The chapter asserts that there are components of these systems that reject global testing and accountability trends, focus on *dao* and *li*, and embody the Fourth Way's pillars of purpose, pillars of professionalism, and catalysts of coherence, albeit in different ways. The three systems are characterized by a hierarchical governance structure, the importance given to effort and responsibility at all levels (including the student and the school levels), and to human capital as a core development asset. Nonetheless, the chapter suggests that despite differences in autonomy and disparities, school actors in all three systems astutely work with paradox as part of their Confucian habitus, strategically reinterpreting (unfavorable) policy directives from central authority:

> … A Chinese proverb, 'Heaven is high and the emperor is far' (*tiangao, huangdi yuan*) encapsulates the longstanding Chinese practice of local officials disregarding official policies from the central government. Another well-known saying is 'The top has its measure, the bottom has its counter-measure' *(shangyou zhengce, xiayou duice*) that draws attention to the counter-strategies devised and employed by policy actors when confronted with unfavourable official directives. In the case of policy implementation in Shanghai, this saying points to the propensity of policy actors such as school leaders, teachers, and parents in the municipality to strategically reinterpret, circumvent, and modify educational policy initiatives. (p. 97)

***Broad context-local level of performance in educational harmonization.*** Chapter 5 presents the final permutation of Tan's performance matrix, a broad-local view of performance. The chapter pitches an East Asian Educational Model, a paradigm that is rooted in Confucian habitus, aspires to high performance and holistic development, utilizes educational harmonization, and is deployed through a strategy of decentralized centralism. Tan suggests this harmonization, which stems from political Confucianism, is a 'defining feature in East Asia … flexible and open-ended in nature … (and is) a skillful practice that requires discretion, tacit knowledge, and prudence on the part of the performer' (p. 105).

Tan claims that in all three systems, decentralized centralism has evolved in ways that are currently embedded in a neoliberal paradigm. Competition, decentralization, school autonomy, accountability, and performance goals allow central and local authorities to mediate in school-level policy in order to enable the school market to work well. In Hong Kong, School Based Assessments were envisioned as vehicles for Assessment for

Learning. However, because School Based Assessments are included in public exams, they are an expression of high-stakes testing and Learning *for* Assessment, or 'experiences planned and carried out for purpose of preparing students for assessments' (p. 116). In Singapore, deregulation and autonomy processes are actually in service of reregulation and external accountability. Finally, in Shanghai, the neoliberal aims of decentralized centralism are visible on perhaps the largest scale:

> It is apparent that the education authority is not merely a mediator and instigator but also a major investor in the smooth operation of the educational market … Instead of weakening its control, the authority asserts its dominance through existing and new initiatives and regulations. Unlike Anglophone societies where the existence of a strong state contradicts the ideal of neoliberals who subscribe to the doctrine of the minimal state, such a tension does not exist in Shanghai. Instead, the establishment of stronger governing structures and more robust modes of centralized regulation are consistent with the existing political ideology and disciplinary mechanism forms. (p. 115)

## Three manifestations and the implications of the East Asian education model

The second part of the book examines how Confucian habitus and educational harmonization shape the policies and practices of each system, leading to distinctive manifestations of the East Asian educational model. Tan frames Singapore as emblematic of pragmatism, Shanghai as correlative thinking, and Hong Kong as a confluence of East–West balance. Chapter Six discusses the prevailing ideology of strategic pragmatism in Singapore, which Tan suggests is visible in the case of critical thinking policy initiative.

Teachers in Singapore are faced with a conundrum: To solve the challenge of 'how to reconcile the production of hard evidence through high test scores with the cultivation of critical thinking in students that may not yield measurable outputs' (p. 132), teachers infuse critical thinking and other cognitive competencies into disciplines. In contrast, as shown in Chapter 7, Shanghai practices correlative thinking, or 'this-and-that logic', toward the harmonization of exam- and quality-oriented education. Nevertheless, with expanded inquiry and research curriculum and the New Green Indices that give greater weight to integration of theory and teaching, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission is trying to 'change the public view of the high performing school: from one that delivers unmatched exam results to one that values comprehensive and balanced growth in all students' (p. 145). Finally, in Chapter 8, Tan argues that Hong Kong represents an east–west balance, as it strives to cultivate its identity as a city of China *and* a global city. As a result, 'policy enactment in Hong Kong is clearly more politicised, unpredictable, and contentious' (p. 158). These characteristics of policy enactment were visible in the cases of two curricula initiatives, Liberal Studies and Moral and National Education. Moral and National Education never took root, and Liberal Studies is today facing a slow phase out. The curricula cases highlight the 'dilemma of cultivating critical and independent thinkers in students on the one hand, and producing patriotic citizens who are single-mindedly committed to the mainland on the other' (p. 167).

The final chapter reinforces the idea that systems of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai typify an *educational model*. In the East Asian educational model, Confucian habitus is the presiding ethos, educational (and social) harmonization is the vehicle through which

*li* and *dao* are realized, and education policies and practices strive for a balance of local-modern ideas and quality-holistic education. Furthermore, Tan contends teachers in these three systems share a moral vision of education as a public good and do not find tension in the aims of test-based accountability, social capital, moral purpose, and efficiency-driven education because '*li* guides policymakers to harmonize indigenous and foreign education philosophies' (p. 173). In turn, these systems focus on passion for learning, values, and life preparation because 'policy actors in Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong are not trapped in a false dilemma of having to choose between high test scores through GERM or a broad-based education at the expense of academic performance' (p. 181).

With these conclusions, Tan recommends three key implications for onlookers and researchers. First, she suggests we recognize the ways in which indigenous Confucian habitus undergirds academic excellence and exam stress and the frame through which policy and practice flows into schools. Second, she suggests we understand the complexity between the triadic (global, national, and local) eyes and how this complicates what policy actors do and policy enactment. Third, Tan asks policymakers to think carefully about policy harmony:

> How compatible are the underlying ideologies of ILSAs, the mechanics of performativity, and the governance of a global testing culture on the one hand, with the educational dreams, habitus, religious and metaphysical commitments and lived experiences of educators and parents on the other? … Policy enactment, through constant communication, negotiation, and collaboration. The education authorities and curriculum planners should consult and work closely with school leaders, teachers, and parents to ensure coherence of policy goals, contents, and processes. (p. 186)

## Policy analyses of education in East Asian systems: conceptual challenges and implications for future research

*Comparing High-Performing Education Systems* is an essential piece of research to make sense of how culture and habitus figure in three East Asian HPES – Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore. Tan rejects of an 'oversimplified, dichotomized, and sequential approach that overlooks the variations and nuances within a cultural community' (p. 183). From start to finish, Tan helps readers 'adopt [an] international perspective that 'takes seriously culturally specific determinants and the vocabulary through which they are expressed'' (Hall & Ames, 1995, p. 122 in Tan, 2018, p. 184). This perspective is at the core of her intellectual effort to pushback the dichotomous terms in which ILSAs and performativity debates are often framed in global policy debates. The monograph neither romanticizes nor demonizes these systems because this would continue to yield, in Tan's words, 'reductionist, truncated, and unwarranted generalizations that fail to consider specific cultural narratives in a particular site' (p. 183). Indeed, the notion that 'everyone is equal before exams (*kaoshi mianqian, renren pingdeng*)' (p. 68) has a particular meaning in Confucian Heritage Cultures. In these ways, the book provides much needed shift toward rich socio-cultural conceptualization of (high) performance, performativity, and of East Asian education systems.

The concept of Confucian habitus, and related Confucian concepts, are the main analytic frame of the book. Tan uses notions of habitus and harmonization to reflect on how and why key stakeholders in East Asian HPES approach educational policies and practices

in the way they do. Because the main contribution of the book is conceptualization, we focus on two striking issues – the explanatory power of the synthesis of Confucian concepts, and the intersection of Confucianism and neoliberalism. We describe each of these challenges in turn below. We frame these challenges with provocations in hopes to support scholars to build on Tan's work in theoretically rich ways.

## The explanatory power of Confucianism: uncovering complexities using Confucian habitus, Confucian heritage cultures, types of Confucianism, and educational harmonization

Provocations: From a Confucian habitus perspective, how do we make sense of low performing students and historically marginalized populations in Shanghai (such as migrants), in Hong Kong (such as ethnic minorities), and in Singapore (such as Malay muslims and Tamilians)? Are there social groups in HPES that are not performing satisfactorily, from normative and from Confucian (li and dao) views on performance? Can we couple Confucian concepts with other theoretical lenses to fully unpack the complexity of inequality and ideology in these three education systems?

Confucian habitus, among other salient features, comprises achievement orientation, effort, and high expectations in education. The habitus, as a culturally-inscribed structuring structure, as Bourdieu would define it, organizes the way individuals and social groups perceive the world and behave in it. Despite the habitus notion being well established in sociological theory, it has been also widely criticized. When it is taken as a too deterministic category, it runs the risk of downplaying agency and subjectivity from explanatory schemas (King, 2000). Tan's book addresses this challenge quite successfully and neither portrays habitus as a totalizing category nor as a black-box. In fact, the book unravels in detail what are the specific policies, practices, and beliefs that configure Confucian habitus, at the same time that emphasizes the diverse expressions of political, philosophical, and popular Confucianism in different educational realities.

Nonetheless, one of the main drawbacks of the synthesis of habitus and related Confucian concepts in this book is that they do not help to capture patterns of social inequalities in education. Confucian habitus is a form of collective habitus that is shared by the members of a Confucian society or by people that share a Confucian heritage culture. Due to its collective and cultural dimension, the Confucian habitus is expected to cut across gender, ethnicity, and social class. This would not necessarily be a problem if Confucian habitus was simply one of multiple frameworks through which Tan interprets the educational reality in HPES. However, by relying excessively on the Confucian habitus framework, the book's perspective is touched by a sort of methodological culturalism that does not pay sufficient attention to existing processes of educational inequality and education stratification within Confucian societies.

Analyses of performance-based accountability force us to ask inconvenient questions that are perhaps not appreciated or challenging, particularly in cultures that are intensely focused on harmony. Unfortunately, the Confucian habitus and its associated concepts (*li, dao, ren*, educational harmonization) are not sufficiently equipped by themselves to address education equity and social justice related questions.

Provocations: Does the use of Confucian frames temper or elaborate the gap between sometimes stereotypical and oftentimes shallow representations of East Asian education? Can we

further enrich the application of Confucianism in ways that depart from Western representations and stereotypes of East Asian education?

The book appears to submit to Western representations of East Asian education while articulating how policymakers in these three systems have employed their own responses to global education reforms. This is presented as educational harmonization and thus as the main reason for the performance patterns of the three education systems. As such, what is missing is a critical examination of the ways in which the (stereotypical) Western representation of East Asian education is problematic. Accepting the ontologically problematic framing of East Asia at-large and East Asian education that frames educational scholarship and discourse runs the risk of (a) diluting the potential power of Confucian frames and (b) overlooking the complex and multilayered nature of reform initiatives in these systems.

For example, the idea of student-centered education is presented as an expression of broad context-local level performance in Singapore. In fact, student-centered education is a longstanding reform theme in East Asian education systems. From a Western perspective, which claims to be the owner of student-centered philosophy, the question of teachers vs. students is one of dualism, viewing teachers and students as holding with fixed roles. Whereas in Confucianism, interrelatedness, polarity, and ongoing transformation underpin all relationships and environments (Hall & Ames, 1987). However, at least on this issue, *Comparing High Performing Systems* seems to adopt Western-centered thinking in its articulation of East Asian pedagogy as a teacher-directed and student-engaged model.

By putting front and center the (mis)representations of East Asian education in Western-centered discourse, there would also be opportunities to more critically analyze the distance between rhetoric and reality of education reform in these systems. For example, Tan cites Shanghai's Green Indices and Second Curriculum Reform as exemplary of 'correlative thinking'. However, Green Indices and associated initiatives of inquiry-based thinking, information technology curricula, and project-based learning can also be understood as surface, superficial, strategic policy responses to international critique of exam pressure and Western stereotypes of Chinese education. As such, examinations of East Asian policies necessitate an interrogation of *both* Western framing of Chinese education *and* whether such ornamental policies are in fact exemplary of harmonization and correlative thinking.

## When Confucian civilizations meet neoliberal political projects

Provocations: Does analysis of East Asian education necessitate a multifocal frame in order to examine the sociopolitical and socioeconomic pillars of neoliberalism? How do we make sense of the fact that the school realities of these countries have been inevitably affected by test-based accountabilities and performative pressures coming from different sources?

Confucian habitus is a core analytical concept in the book, but is only part of the story. At a policy level, Tan interprets part of her data by making it dialogue with global neoliberal conceptions in education, 'in an era of international assessment and inter-country comparison, where governments increasingly place their faith on standardised testing as well as national audit and accountability programmes' (p. 186). The book argues that

Confucianism is conducive to test-based accountability and to performativity, and that this is reflected in the outstanding results of Shanghai, Hong Kong and China in international assessments. However, contrary to what many readers of the book might expect, the analyzed countries do not understand and approach educational performance in a narrow way. On the contrary, public authorities in these countries have actively promoted holistic education and a pedagogic approach that is alternative to the results-oriented formulas that international assessments and performance comparisons directly or indirectly promote or, at least, are conducive to.

When developing this argument and locating East Asian HPES within global education reform models the book is more ambiguous. On the one hand, Tan suggests that the analyzed countries have not been strongly penetrated by performance-oriented global reforms; in her own words:

> What is common among Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong is a rejection of an over-reliance on standardisation, testing, and accountability that are part of what Sahlberg (2011) called the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM). (p. 181)

On the other hand, however, Tan admits that the public authorities in the three countries have promoted some forms of school competition and recentralized decentralism (via standardized evaluations), and have mobilized other 'neoliberal strategies and logics such as … marketisation of education, and parental choice' (p. 174).

Tan addresses this apparent contradiction by resorting to policy mobilities literature (see Peck & Theodore, 2010) and arguing that neoliberalism does not manifest in a pristine form in any of the studied East Asian countries. In Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, following the argument of the book, decision-makers have not followed market orthodoxy in education unconditionally and, as a result, global neoliberal ideas have been markedly indigenized. However, someone could wonder if this has not been the situation in most places where neoliberalism has penetrated. The 'GERM' or the 'neoliberal education' agenda are to a great extent analytical concepts and theoretical models that do not necessarily have a total empirical correspondence in real education settings. When we think about neoliberal education reforms in their purest form, the reforms adopted during Thatcherism in England or Pinochetism in Chile come to our mind. However, in the last decades, neoliberal and test-based accountability reforms have mutated, evolved, and been combined with other reform agendas. Even in England and Chile, the current education governance approaches reflect a complex, hybrid and rich educational reality in which a broad range of policies, instruments, and ideas that go beyond or even against neoliberalism are assembled, not always in a harmonious way. Similar processes of recontextualization, translation and vernacularization have also applied to other countries and regions where the GERM and its main policy instruments have been adopted, including francophone countries (Maroy, Pons, & Dupuy, 2017), post-soviet countries (Gurova, Piattoeva, & Takala, 2015), Nordic countries (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013), or Southern European countries (Verger & Curran, 2014), to name some of the most well-documented cases.

Nonetheless, the recontextualization of the neoliberal agenda in East Asia is, as Tan emphasizes, a complex phenomenon with its own political, cultural and, especially, civilizational dynamics. On the one hand, performative pressure has its own endogenous roots and finds them in Confucianism and, on the other hand, the emerging culture of

performativity in East Asia is not alien to global dynamics, ideas and inertia. Confucianism is thus, again, portrayed as the main feature in the emergence and local adaptation of the global audit culture in East Asian HPES. In some aspects, Confucianism seems to neutralize the performative and competitive emphases of global education reforms by combating narrow understandings of performance, whereas in others it seems to reinforce such emphases. Confucianism is to a great extent an independent civilisational entity (cf. Robertson & Dale, 2015), but this does not mean that is alien to the forces of the global economy, marketization and consumerism. The borders around and between civilizations (such as Confucianism) and political projects (such as neoliberalism) are porous. Both types of entities interact in complex and dialectical ways and, despite their historical roots, they are constantly changing and becoming more heterogeneous in the context of globalization (Delanty, 2003). As a consequence of the complex interaction between Confucianism and neoliberalism, it is difficult to attribute performative pressure in East Asian education to one single source, or to distinguish whether one source matters more than the other.

Another important conclusion of the book is that exam and performative pressures have advanced in the three East Asian countries, despite the absence of a policy agenda at the national level advocating this form of pressure, and despite the emphasis of public authorities on student-centeredness and holistic education. According to Tan,

> … the implacable pursuit of academic excellence, embedded in and powered by the Confucian habitus, has sowed the seeds for a pressure-cooker environment in Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. (p. 181)

This is something that has been observed in other contexts where policies or existing instruments have effects, despite the policy intentions. French policy sociologists such as Lascoumes, Kassim or Le Galés have shown that policy instruments tend to create their own structures of opportunity in ways that were unforeseen when first adopted, and 'have an existence independent of the decisions that created them' (Kassim & Le Galès, 2010, p. 11; Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). This premise applies especially to data-intensive policy instruments such as external evaluations, standardized tests or result-frameworks, such as those being enacted in Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. In East Asia, but also in many other world regions, it is difficult to predict the form that these instruments will end up assuming, in part, due to the unpredictable way key stakeholders – families, students, local authorities, teachers and school principals – will end up perceiving and reacting to them. Nonetheless, there are also important differences in how stakeholders interpret and enact national assessments and standardized tests in different regions. As Tan shows, in East Asian HPES, families, whose high expectations in education are shaped by Confucian habitus, are encouraging national assessments generating high performative pressure on children and schools, and they apparently do so more intensively than educational authorities. This is something diametrically opposed to what we observe in several Western countries such as the US, Chile or Spain, where numerous families have organized to boycott national assessments due to their perceptions of these instruments undermining holistic education and democratic participation in schools and districts (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2020; Lingard & Hursh, 2019; Montero, Cabalin, & Brossi, 2018).

Overall, despite the attempts of Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore to promote holistic education and child centered pedagogies, the school realities of these countries have been inevitably affected by test-based accountabilities and performative pressures coming from

different sources and generated at different scales. Despite the author's emphasis on how teachers are able to neutralize the pressures that test-based accountabilities generate in the classrooms, the way performative pressures are affecting school practices and the micro-politics of the school is something that the book cannot cover in detail.

In fact, the evidence included in the book in this respect is mainly anecdotal or based on secondary sources, but illustrates the importance of paying more careful attention to these dynamics. Whether and under what circumstances school actors in HPES are more or less focused on literacy and numeracy and/or on teaching to the test, or whether the schools' logics of action in East Asian countries are more or less conditioned by surveillance mechanisms and external assessments are open questions that, as Tan insinuates, future research should attempt to address. As she rightly reminds us,

> … we must understand in policy enactment the tactics advanced by national and global authorities and also the counter tactics, habitus, and capital originating from local educational stakeholders – teachers, principals, parents. (p. 185)

## Closing words

To wrap up, *Comparing High-Performing Education Systems* is a must-read for scholars interested in educational reform from a comparative and global perspective. The book might be of special interest for educationists who are genuinely interested in understanding the complex and profound historical, cultural and political roots behind the performative approach of East Asian education systems. This robust review of education policies and practices in three East Asian HPES moves forward performance accountability literature with Tan's conceptualization of the interplay of global-local spaces and formal-holistic assessment. Tan's work invites scholars to put local culture – and the habitus, prejudice, and capital that flow from culture – front and center in our analyses of education policy and its effects.

*Comparing High-Performing Education Systems* points to fascinating areas for future research in East Asian education. Future research could try to understand, on the one hand, whether schools are effectively able to harmonize the goals of test-based accountabilities and holistic education (as Tan hypotheses). In addition, future research can examine how and to what extent social class, gender, language, and ethnicity interact with Confucian habitus in the production of different levels of quality and equity in education. Perhaps most importantly, future research can build on the seminal contributions of *Comparing High-Performing Education Systems* in ways that fundamentally depart from Western thought and use Eastern lenses to further unpack the complexities of East Asian Education Model(s).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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