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The constitution of East Asia as a counter reference society through PISA: a postcolonial/de-colonial intervention

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dismissive characterisation of East Asian PISA success in Australia to extend the emerging conceptual work on policy learning/referencing, reference society, and projection in comparative and international education. By highlighting the constitutive roles of racialisation and colonial difference in the media construction of East Asian education, I expose the limits of the ongoing conceptual work and problematise its exclusive focus on stereotyping in the negative framing. I argue that the discussion of East Asian education as a policy reference must be placed within a global history of colonial difference and racialisation in Eurocentric imaginaries.

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1. PISA and East Asia

The rise of large-scale assessments (LSAs) has created a new context of education policy making. High-achieving countries and economies in those assessments are now recognised as reference societies: a key point of reference for domestic policy discussion in many countries. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has been instrumental in 'challenging historically based reference societies for many nations in respect of schooling systems' (Lingard and Rawolle 2011, 492; Sellar and Lingard 2013). The recent international attention to Finland, Shanghai, and Singapore are examples of a country or a city, known for educational commitment in its own regional context, suddenly becoming the 'mecca' for education policy makers and researchers around the globe.

Most notable among those that are now acting as new reference societies, particularly in Anglo-American countries, are East Asian countries and economies that topped the PISA rankings for the last three rounds of PISA (i.e. 2009, 2012, and 2015). Traditionally, East Asia has rarely been a popular source of education policy ideas on a global scale. According to Cummings (1997), any call to learn from East Asia meets 'the vehement defensiveness of Western educators and researchers,' which results from 'anxieties around their assumptions (about education) ... being challenged and even threatened by the often contrasting eastern Asian approach' (291). This defensiveness is underpinned by the widely-held dismissive view of East Asian society and education, which is that East Asia is authoritarian. The central government dictates what is to be taught and teachers dominate classroom discourse. Students study under enormous parental and societal pressure for academic competition and success, and engage in factual recall and rote memorisation. As a result, though students achieve well in standardised assessments, including international testing, they lose joy in

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learning and are weak in creativity, critical and independent thinking, and problem-solving skills (Takayama 2017).

This overwhelmingly negative appraisal of East Asian education has changed, to a degree, since Hong Kong, Japan, Macao, Shanghai, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan swept the top rankings of PISA 2006, 2009, 2012, and 2015. As they became the focus of intense international attention, policy actors and media in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (U.S.), to name a few, called for a 'Look East' to find ideas with which to reform their own education systems (Forestier and Crossley 2015; Sellar and Lingard 2013; You and Morris 2016). However, not all references to East Asian PISA success are positive (Waldow 2017; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014) and the positive appraisals are often quickly countered by dismissive and derogatory stereotypes (see Takayama 2017). East Asian jurisdictions' top rankings in PISA, therefore, have intensified the political contestation over the representation of East Asian education as a point of reference for domestic policy debates.

Set against this context, this study examines the negative and dismissive characterisation of East Asian PISA success – or its constitution as a 'negative reference society' (Waldow 2017, 7) – in the recent Australian media coverage.¹ I use the Australian case to extend the existing scholarship on policy learning/referencing, reference society, and projection in the field of comparative and international education. By bringing to the fore the constitutive roles of racialisation and colonial difference in the discursive constitution of East Asian education in the PISA-related Australian media debate, I expose the limits of the current conceptualisation of East Asia as a negative reference society and problematise its exclusive focus on the role of stereotyping in this negative framing. By tracing the processes of racialisation in the media representation, I argue that studies of East Asian education as a reference society must be placed within a long and global history of colonial difference and racialisation of Asians in Eurocentric imaginaries.

The following discussion unfolds as follows. First, I situate the Australian case within the comparative and international education literature on policy learning/referencing, reference society, and projection. Second, turning to the critical race and postcolonial/de-colonial scholarship, I provide the discussion of racialisation as a central analytical concept through which policy references to, and projection of images onto, East Asian PISA high performers are to be examined in the subsequent pages. Third, I look at three closely interrelated critical discursive moments in recent years where Asian as a racial construct was foregrounded in Australian education policy discourse. I examine various texts, journalistic writings, media reporting, and scholarly writings produced at these critical junctures to identify the operation of the racialising discourse around Asian educational success and aspirations. The first critical moment took place in response to the dominance of East Asian jurisdictions in PISA 2009 and 2012. Many Australian education scholars participated in the media debate over whether or not Australia should look to East Asia for lessons for its own education reform. The second moment refers to the media coverage over the problem of 'tiger parenting', strong (often construed as excessive) educational aspirations, and use of private coaching among Asian-Australians in Australian metropolitan cities. The third moment was created by two international quantitative studies: the secondary analyses of PISA data sets which looked at the significance of Asian cultural background in determining PISA results. Through examining these closely-interrelated critical moments, I demonstrate how the national and transnational policy discourses converge to racialise Asian academic aspirations and help constitute Asians as despised, un-Australian Others. In conclusion, I tease out the central contributions that this paper makes to the ongoing conceptualisation of reference society, policy referencing, and projection in the era of LSAs in the field of comparative and international education.

2. Reference society and projection

The term 'reference society', first coined by the macro-sociologist Reinhard Bendix (see Waldow 2017), has been used to capture the normative roles that a given country comes to assume as a

point of reference for national policy making elsewhere. This concept has attracted the attention of comparative education and education policy researchers in the context of rising policy implications of PISA and its league tables. Drawing on this concept, many studies have examined how and why certain PISA high achievers become reference societies and to whom, what images are projected upon these reference societies and what lessons are drawn from their success (see e.g. Sellar and Lingard 2013; Sung and Lee 2017; Takayama 2010; You and Morris 2016; Waldow 2017; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). These questions have been explored in relation to the particularities of national contexts, history, culture, and political dynamics at the time of ‘reception.’

For instance, looking at the discursive construction of Finnish PISA success in Japanese text media, Takayama (2010) shows that Finnish education was represented in multitude ways, all of which were driven by the pre-existing political agenda of those who referenced Finnish PISA success. He conceives Finnish PISA success as a multi-accental signifier and demonstrates how it was accentuated differently to re-legitimise a range of – often conflicting – political discourses about education reform which were then losing their political currency. Finnish education, therefore, served as a projector screen upon which divergent preferred images were projected to reinvent the existing political discourses of education reform, including those images that had little to do with what actually went on in Finland.

A similar finding was reported in the subsequent studies of media representation of Finnish PISA success in Australia, Germany, and South Korea (Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013) and of East Asian PISA high performers in the same three countries (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). All of these studies distinguish policy referencing from policy borrowing and use the former to stress the highly selective and often politically motivated nature of media representation of PISA high performers. Various representations of those PISA stars and their reasons for success were presented by the media, largely guided by the ideological orientation of the media outlets. Likewise, You and Morris (2016) assess the UK government’s policy referencing to East Asian education systems; in particular, the authors note how the greater degree of autonomy supposedly achieved in top-ranked East Asian education systems was highlighted to legitimise existing reform agendas for decentralisation and marketisation in UK education. They conclude, ‘(r)ather than engaging in policy *borrowing*, the government has selectively *referenced* policies in East Asia in an attempt to promote and legitimate its long preferred policy agenda’ (900, emphasis original).

While these studies focus on the selectiveness of media and government references to PISA top performers, Sung and Lee (2017) study the referential status of U.S. education in South Korea and conclude that a PISA ranking alone does not determine whether a country becomes a reference society. Examining the South Korean media and government policy references to U.S. education, before and after PISA, their study demonstrates that the U.S. remains the most significant point of policy reference for South Korean education and that the U.S.’s referential power in South Korea has been unaffected by its mediocre PISA performance. Sung and Lee (2017) conclude that the choice of a reference country, at least in South Korea, is shaped largely by historical and political conditions, or what they call, after Raymond Williams, ‘the structure of feeling’ (13) constituted through the powerful roles that the U.S. has historically played geopolitically, economically, and culturally in South Korea.

Waldow (2017) extends this line of inquiry further. Examining German media reporting on East Asian PISA success, he attempts to conceptualise the constitution of reference society and the politics of projection in relation to East Asian PISA high achievers. His analysis shows that in Germany, East Asian education served as a negative reference society; it was depicted overwhelmingly negatively despite East Asian countries’ exceptional performance in PISA. This contrasted with the overwhelmingly positive media coverage of another PISA poster child, Finnish education. According to Waldow (2017), German media references to East Asian PISA success were framed by the existing negative stereotypes about East Asian students, parents, and education, which are characterised by the metaphoric language of ‘damnation and torture’ (10). Drawing on the Freudian psychoanalysis notion of projection, he further maintains that the kind of negative attributes that German

newspapers ascribe to East Asian PISA higher performers are actually the defects of the German education system that have been widely cited by critics. Hence, argues Waldow (2017), East Asian education serves as the discursive Other upon which German anxieties about their own education system are projected; that is, the externalisation of negative feelings towards one's own education onto others. Waldow's (2017) study suggests that the term 'reference society' can encompass both positive and negative reactions to the values and institutions associated with the source country. A PISA high performer can serve as a source of policy reference or counter reference, depending on the nature of the pre-existing perceptions associated with the referenced country or region.

3. Racialisation, Asians, and colonial difference in Australia

Postcolonial and critical race scholarship has long highlighted the socially and ideologically constructed nature of race. Historical scholarship on race relations reveals that racial categorisations are deeply embedded in shifting power relations and often deployed by state bureaucracies to justify inequitable resource allocations (Omi and Winant 2014 [1994]; Stratton 1998). Likewise, contemporary ethnographic research illuminates how racialised subjects perform identities in a way that exceeds stable categories such as race, culture, and ethnicity (Frankenberg 1993; Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001). This scholarship has amply shown that race is not real in any biological sense; race only assumes real consequences when the categorisation is mobilised towards particular ends and that racialised subjects constantly negotiate their subjectivities and engage in subversive acts that disrupt the neat categorisation of racial difference.

To denote the dynamic and relational nature of race, the scholarship on race relations has developed the term 'racialisation.' Though there is considerable debate over the definition of the term (see Murji and Solomos 2005), it is commonly used to 'draw attention to the constructed nature of racial categories and race thinking processes while rejecting the notion of race as fixed, natural, and real' (Murji and Solomos 2005, 5). Refusing the reification of race as an objective classification of humans, the scholarship on racialisation highlights the socio-historical processes whereby given phenotypical and cultural features come to be constructed as part of a collective's meaningful difference from the norm (i.e. Whiteness). Racialisation also highlights the processes by which those who are racially categorised appropriate the imposed categories to reject the negative ontology ascribed to them. That is, recognising oneself in racial terms allows a person to resist the very racial ascription, though this necessarily involves the reification of racial difference. Racialisation, hence, produces possibilities both for subjection and subjectivation (Fassin 2012); this 'double-edge nature of the process' of racialisation has been highlighted by many scholars (Murji and Solomos 2005, 18). In sum, the conceptualisation of racialisation is meant to highlight 'the power and influence of racial thinking without validating the idea of race itself' (Murji and Solomos 2005, 15–16).

Because of the heightened political sensitivities around race and racism in Australia and elsewhere (Ang 2003; Frankenberg 1993; Stratton 1998), the process of racialisation often proceeds without any explicit reference to phenotypical features of those who are racialised. Instead, culture – often intersecting with gender, religion, socio-economic status, and sexuality – drives the process of racial 'othering' (Murji and Solomos 2005). Here, culture, just like the conventional notion of race, performs the act of reification, fixing the socially- and relationally-constructed, and essentially dynamic nature of, differences between groups of people who are then constituted as homogeneous and mutually exclusive with each other. In the context of this study, the term racialisation is used to highlight the processes wherein: 1) the racial lumping of those who supposedly share similar physiological and cultural attributes representing the geographical area of Asia is naturalised, 2) a particular set of educational dispositions, values, and practices are ascribed exclusively to those who are racially categorised as Asians, and 3) those ostensibly Asian attributes come to assume undesirable, 'un-Australian' values, hence the racialisation of Asians 'as an utterly distrusted Other' (Ang 2003, 57) in the Australian education policy landscape.

Indeed, the collective consciousness of Australia as a White settler nation could not have been possible without its northern neighbours; public hysteria over internal and external Asians has played a central role in the historical constitution of Whiteness as the very foundational imaginaries of the modern Australian state (Ang 2000, 2003). This Asian anxiety reflects the particular geopolitical history of Australia. As Ang (2003) rightly argues, 'at the heart of modern Australia's sense of itself lies a fundamental tension between its white, European identity and its Asian, non-European location' (57). Hence, Australia has always been 'defined, foundationally, against Asia' (58).

This contradiction continues to shape the Australian public discourse even after the termination of the infamous White Australia Policy in the early 1970s. Asians remains 'both an object of desire and derision'; while Australia recognises 'Asia as inextricably linked to our (Australia's) critical and political objectives,' the country is 'unable to secure sufficient distance from the racial stereotyping' of Asians and Asian immigrants to Australia (Rizvi 1997, 19; Rizvi 2012). Underpinning this racial ambivalence is the colonial binary logic of self and other, or the presumption of 'incompatibility of Asian and Australian cultures' (Ang 2000, 126). The cultural, moral, and racial distinction of Asians, along with Indigenous Australians, from what is putatively Australian ('the Australian way of life') has been historically mobilised as the markers of racial and cultural bounded-ness of Australia. The term Asians, or Oriental people, was historically used in Australia to refer to a wide range of Asians, including those from West Asia (Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon, and the Middle East). Today, the term assumes a more explicitly racial meaning, signifying those with a single eye fold, with a particular focus on those from East Asia (Ang 2000). Therefore, in the words of Ang (2000), 'the issue of Asians in Australia is profoundly entangled in the continuing significance of race in the Australian cultural imagination' (117).

This particular racialisation of Asians in Australia sits within the broader intellectual tradition, which Said (1978) famously termed Orientalism. Building on his ground-breaking work, more recent studies have exposed the central role that social science has played in the historical formation of the colonial classification of difference (Mignolo 2000; Turner 1994; see also Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2017 in comparative and international education). The classification system has construed Asian societies as a land devoid of things that supposedly characterise the modern nation state and capitalism (Turner 1994). In the works of European writers such as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Hegel, and Marx, the notion of Asia was produced through a set of dichotomies; Asian multinational empires versus modern European or monarchical states, Asian political despotism versus modern European legal and political systems, and Asian nomadic and agrarian modes of production versus European urban and commercial life (Hui 2011, 15).

In particular, the absence of a civil society – and hence by extension the absence of political liberalism – has historically shaped the Orientalist view of Asiatic society (Turner 1994). Asia has been characterised by 'the absence of a network of institutions mediating between the individual and the state', the oppressive condition out of which the notion of 'Oriental despotism' emerges (Turner 1994, 23). The notion of civil society functions as a point of demarcation between Occident and Orient and as a criterion to assess the 'maturity (civility)' of given societies (Chen 2010). The extent to which liberal political principles are institutionalised in state apparatuses, including education, indicates the civilisational status and developmental stages of racialised others. As a corollary to this, child-centred and progressive pedagogic approaches, as well as the liberal-humanistic notion of childhood that underpins them, have been construed as a symbol of modernity and progress. Different pedagogic traditions (e.g. didactic teaching and rote-learning) are dismissed as authoritarian, oppressive, and hence 'backward' (Nguyen et al. 2009; Komatsu and Rappleye 2017). The constitution of East Asia as a counter reference society must be understood within this history of colonial difference and racialisation of Asians in Eurocentric imaginaries.

4. The first moment: Australian response to Asian PISA success

Since PISA 2009, East Asian countries and economies have dominated PISA top rankings. As East Asia became increasingly recognised as the new reference society for education policy discussion in Australia (Sellar and Lingard 2013; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014), a heated debate erupted over whether or not East Asian PISA high achievers could be a model for Australia to follow. On the one hand, the federal government at the time actively mobilised the discourse of an Asian threat and demanded that lessons be learned from Asian high performing systems. On the back of the considerable political hype around the ‘Asian Century’ and, by extension, the decline of the West (Rizvi 2012), this ‘Look East’ (North, to be exact) campaign was supported by the mainstream media (see Takayama 2017; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). In particular, Ben Jensen, a researcher at the Melbourne-based influential Grattan Institute, played a key role in orchestrating a federal-level shift towards learning from Asian PISA success, with the publication of the highly mediated report, *Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia* (Jensen et al. 2012; see Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014). By contrast, others, including many education researchers, rejected such calls, arguing that the call for policy learning from Asia was ill-informed. It is out of this debate that various dismissive accounts of Asian PISA success were generated to reject the federal government and mainstream media’s ‘Look East’ campaign.

Just to name a few, in an article titled ‘Our Asian schooling infatuation: The problem of PISA envy’, Australian education researcher Dinham (2012) criticises Australia’s Asian schooling infatuation which drove media and political figures to turn to top-performing East Asian education. In order to highlight the irrelevance of East Asia for Australian education, he discounts top performance of Asian PISA stars by suggesting that ‘most are not nations at all but cities or city states’ (Dinham 2012). Dinham (2012) goes on to suggest, ‘they are also predominantly authoritarian in their governance. Most have a tradition of rote learning, cramming and testing and all have placed a major premium on improving their PISA rankings.’ Elsewhere, Dinham (2013) goes as far as to maintain that the ‘Asian PISA powerhouses’ have built their industries ‘upon emulation and improvement of ideas and products imported from elsewhere rather than innovation,’ apparently another reason Australia should not look to Asia (97).

Likewise, in an article titled ‘Learning by rote: why Australia should not follow the Asian model of education’, another Australian education researcher, Yelland (2012), perpetuates a similar caricature of Asian education, based partly on her experience of teaching and conducting research in Hong Kong. According to Yelland (2012), East Asian PISA success is due to the excessive focus on content recall in tests and the emphasis these countries place on improving PISA rankings. Hence, Hong Kong students, for instance, excel in problem-solving because they ‘practice books full of the examples of “problem solving.” I can assure you that you can teach problem solving strategies like the ones included in PISA, and in fact, you can practice them day in and day out’ (Yelland 2012). In Yelland’s mind, East Asian students are deprived of opportunities to think independently; she explains, ‘I have been in situations where I have asked Asian students “what do you think?” And they reply “tell us what you think and we will think the same”’ (2012). Lastly, Morgan (2014), another Australian researcher, similarly dismisses the East Asian PISA success, warning readers that Asian PISA success comes with costs that Australians do not want, including a lack of creative and flexible thinking and other psychological and physical problems caused by excessive academic pressure. Hence, he concludes, ‘there is not a lot for us to learn from East Asia on educational success, despite the commentators and policy-makers who follow this line’ (Morgan 2014).

In their attempt to undermine the policy infatuation with Asia at the time, these researchers resorted to highly dismissive and derogative stereotypes of Asian education systems and students. The century-old notion of Asia as despotic and authoritarian is mobilised to stress the cultural ‘incompatibility’ of Asian and Australian education systems. Underpinning this construction of ‘fundamental difference’ is what these authors imagine as the key cultural characteristics of the Australian education system, which is supposedly non-authoritarian and non-despotic, but rather liberal-

humanistic, progressive, and child-centred. Lurking behind this dismissive caricature is the invention of the romanticised imagery of Australian students and the Australian education system, where students supposedly learn to be autonomous and creative under a nurturing and liberal-humanistic educational ethos.

5. The second moment: media reporting on tiger parenting and private coaching²

The same dismissal played out in the mainstream Australian media reporting on East Asian PISA success. Interestingly, the media discussion of Asian PISA high performers referred extensively to high educational aspirations and the extensive use of private coaching among Asian migrant parents in Australia. Central to this international-domestic intersection was Chua's (2011) *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. The media used the book to frame Asian PISA success in terms of the particular parenting practice attributed to Asian parents both in and outside Australia. This was most clearly exemplified in the national newspaper *The Australian* article titled 'Tiger mums the key to Chinese results' (Callick 2012). To raise a question about the policy focus on funding issues (as outlined in the Australian Government's 2010 Gonski Report³) and teacher professional support (as outlined in Jensen et al.'s 2012 report), Callick (2012) directs readers' attention to the role of Asian parenting, both in and outside Australia, in children's academic achievement. Callick presents a series of concrete examples attesting to the fundamental cultural differences between Asian parents and Australian parents, including:

In Australia, parents sometimes complain to teachers that their children are burdened with too much homework. By contrast, Asian parents moving to Australia often express horror at how little homework is given.

Callick (2012) also discusses contrasting attitudes of Australian and Asian parents towards competition and class rankings, which, she argues, the former view as distasteful and damaging to students' self-esteem, while the latter embrace it. She then scales up this discussion of parenting to international policy learning; because of this 'unbridgeable' difference in values and attitudes towards education, she cautions readers about unthoughtful attempts to learn from Asia: 'what fits in Asian settings may not be easily grafted on here. Parents in Australia may choose other priorities'

The monolithic construction of Asian parents, informed by Chua's book, set the stage for the subsequent domestic debate over the increasing use of private coaching among Asian-Australian students, who academically dominate some of the most selective public schools in Australian metropolitan cities. This very issue had been hotly debated in the media previously, at the turn of the century (Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016), but this time the debate was informed by Chua's work and the media's reporting on East Asian dominance in PISA top rankings. The extensive use of private coaching among Asian-Australian families was presented as reflecting the particular cultural orientation of Asian migrants towards the value of education. In the Australian national magazine, *The Monthly*, for instance, Alice Pang (2013) explains why Chinese migrant parents pressure children to excel in schools and what motivates them to resort to private coaching for their children:

Raised in a culture that since 605 AD has employed a merit-based civil-service examination system to reward academic excellence with tangible, life-changing consequences, many Chinese-Australian parents understand education as a way to shift class.

A static notion of culture underpins Pang's discussion; Chinese migrant parents 'carry' the same cultural expectations from their home countries and apply them to the education of their children in Australia. Such a cultural expectation, however, is construed as 'un-Australian', because Asian-Australian children would miss out on the sort of things that Australian girls would 'normally' do, such as visit friends and hold slumber parties. Pang (2013) extends the imagery of Asians' 'illiberal' parenting practice and expectation beyond the geographical confines of Asian migrant communities in Australian metropolitan cities when she adds:

Asian cities such as Shanghai may top OECD charts for educational attainment, but many teachers in Australia are sceptical about whether the rigid, rote-learning techniques used there will create the sort of adaptive and flexible future workers and leaders needed in the decades ahead.

Here, seamless cultural continuity between East Asian PISA stars and Asian-Australians is invented through the racial lumping of Asians; Asians, regardless of their particular migration histories, places of residence, and other socially significant attributes, always possess a set of educational values and attitudes that are incompatible with what constitutes ‘the Australian way of life.’

The Australian distaste for the ostensibly illiberal Asian cultural and pedagogic practice is most succinctly captured in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article which discusses White-Australian and Asian-Australian parents’ contrasting views about education and private coaching (Broniowski 2015):

A second mum, an architect, asks: “Why would you take away your kid’s childhood to drill him every week? If he’s smart, and the test works, he wouldn’t have to cram.” Another, an academic, announces: “My daughter won’t go to a selective even if she gets in. They’re 98 per cent Asian, full of kids who rote-learn. I’d hate her to be [part of] such a tiny minority.”

In the minds of the – presumably White-Australian – parents quoted, Asian-Australian families’ use of private coaching is ‘un-Australian’, because cramming and test-preparation, which supposedly dominate private coaching sessions, are incompatible with much more relaxed attitudes towards children’s education in Australia. As Broniowski (2015) states in the *Sydney Morning Herald* article, ‘coaching, to most Anglo mums I canvass, is a crime that sends you straight to bad-mum jail.’ Once again, Chua’s book is drawn upon extensively to amplify the Australian-Asian cultural contrast:

Self-esteem is at the heart of the apparent split between tiger mums and their Western sisters. A Western mum will typically nurture her kids’ individuality and will preference “fun” over “work”; Chua’s tiger mum makes hers do Suzuki and algebra, to arm them with confidence.

Asian-Australian families’ widespread use of private coaching is construed as an extension of this particularly Asian, what Broniowski (2015) coins, ‘tiger parenting’ characterised by relentless pursuit for children’s high academic achievements.

Interestingly, what is normally valued in education – high academic drive, aspiration, and achievement – is reconstituted as a sign of cultural abnormality and deviancy from ‘the Australian way of life.’ These Australian media reports dismiss Asian-Australian students’ academic achievements; apparently students do not have to be intelligent to ace standardised tests or to get into selective public high schools in Melbourne and Sydney. As a private tutor, interviewed in the same *Sydney Morning Herald* article, explains, the New South Wales Department of Education’s selective exam only identifies those who are ‘coachable’ as opposed to ‘the natural bright’ (Broniowski 2015). Asian students who top the selective exam, therefore, are not naturally bright but simply learn to take the test. Needless to say, this dismissive account of Asian-Australian students’ academic achievement is almost identical to the way East Asian PISA high performers were rejected by Australian education researchers, as discussed earlier, where their PISA achievement was attributed to mindless drills and test preparation.

It is in these narratives that one sees the close articulation of the two different racialising discourses around Asian academic aspirations. Dismissive discourses around external Asians (overseas Asian education systems, students, and families) and internal Asians (Asian-Australian students and families) are seamlessly stitched together to constitute the quintessential Other, the Asians as rote-learning robots whose parents’ illiberal cultural expectations and parenting practices deprive their children of opportunities to develop real intelligence, independent and lateral thinking, and creativity. Asian culture is construed as a transnational ontological property that is biologically rooted in the bodies of those who are racially lumped together as Asians. Underpinning this notion of Asian-ness is the retrospective desire for Whiteness, what many wish to believe as the cultural essences of White-Australian families and schooling – or the mythic notion of ‘the Australian way of life’ – which can only be defined as a negation of what is presumed to be Asian.

Central to this constitution of the Asian Other is the reification of cultural difference between Australia and Asia. The specific histories and social contexts of Asian migration in the U.S. (i.e. Chua's book) and Australia, the specific socioeconomic and educational profiles of Asian migration, and the particular socio-historical context of Asian education systems are stripped out of the racialisation of Asians. In the U.S. context, studies on Asian-Americans' academic aspirations have shown how limited opportunity structures due to racism drive Asian-Americans' academic pursuits and selection of university majors (Lee and Zhou 2015). Likewise, in the Australian context, Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu (2016) view Asian-Australians' subscription to private coaching as their considered, strategic response to the tension inherent in the Australian education system, where Asian parents do not see primary schooling as adequately preparing children for high-stakes, selective secondary school testing. These studies foreground the particular institutional and socio-economic context within which Asian migrant parents exercise their educational choices and express their aspirations, and thus reject the culturalist account of 'excessive' educational aspirations of Asian migrants.

6. The third moment: PISA secondary analyses

The problematic racialising discourse of Asians was perpetuated not only by Australian media and education researchers, but also by a number of quantitative studies undertaken by international researchers, which were then used by Australian critics. Jerrim (2015) and Feniger and Lefstein (2014) published secondary analyses of PISA data sets to question some of the central assumptions of PISA. Notable of these scholars is that they are critical of PISA's ideology of a 'culturally indifferent world of education' (Tröhler 2013, 158), where the performance of education systems is measured, compared, and ranked irrespective of the particular historical and cultural contexts within which the systems are embedded. These studies use the exceptional high performance of Asian students in Australia and New Zealand to raise questions about the validity of the PISA logic: that learning from top performing countries' institutional features and programmes will help improve the quality of education in lower-performing systems, thus improving the lower-performing systems' PISA rankings.

Using the PISA 2012 mathematical data sets from Australia, Jerrim's study (2015) examined PISA performance of Australian children of East Asian heritage, namely second-generation Asian-Australians who were born and raised in Australia with at least one parent who was born in Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, China, Republic of Korea (South Korea), or Taiwan, i.e. the PISA high performing jurisdictions. The study shows that these students not only outperformed their native Australian peers but also performed as well as those in the high-performing East Asian countries and cities from where their parents came. According to Jerrim (2015), these findings suggest that high-level mathematical skills can be developed even within average-performing education systems such as Australia's. This leads him to conclude that the high performance of East Asian countries and Asian-Australian children has less to do with what goes inside the schooling systems they are exposed to and more to do with cultural factors; specifically, positive 'attitudes and beliefs towards academic achievements that East Asian parents instill in their children' (329). The attempts of Western countries to catch up with East Asian high performers is fruitless, warns Jerrim (2015), because it would require 'wide-spread cultural change, where a hard work ethic and a strong belief in the value of education is displayed by all families and instilled in every child' (330).

Likewise, Feniger and Lefstein (2014) compared the PISA 2009 math results of students in Shanghai with those of Chinese-Australian and Chinese-New Zealand students whose parents had emigrated from China or who had immigrated themselves to either of the countries before the age of five. Controlling for socio-economic status, the comparison shows that Chinese students in Australia and New Zealand perform just as well as those in Shanghai. This finding leads the researchers to the same conclusion as Jerrim (2015); cultural background is more consequential for the educational attainment of Chinese immigrant students than exposure to the Australian or New Zealand education systems. In particular, parental attitudes and practices are highlighted as possible causes for the Chinese PISA success irrespective of the national system of education to which they are

exposed (850). Feniger and Lefstein (2014) argue that this conclusion undercuts the central premise of PISA, or what they call the ‘PISA reasoning’: superior test performance is evidence of superior policies. High achievement in PISA, therefore, has little to do with specific policies and programmes and more to do with culture.

While these studies are important in challenging the very logic of PISA, they are also premised upon a set of problematic assumptions, particularly around the notion of culture. Underpinning Jerrim’s entire analysis and his conclusion is a static view of culture. He assumes that East Asian parents have brought ‘their culture and values with them’ (Jerrim 2015, 312). Hence, he argues that ‘a large part of the home and family environment experienced by these children will reflect their East Asian heritage (despite them being Australian nationals and attending Australian schools)’ (Jerrim 2015, 312). This assumption allows him to single out cultural beliefs and attitudes towards learning as the single most important variable and to explain PISA high performance of students in East Asian countries and second-generation Australian students of East Asian backgrounds in a single brush.

Unlike Jerrim, Feniger and Lefstein (2014) discuss the danger of drawing on the essentialist notion of culture upon which their analysis sits and of the lack of attention to the complexity around cultural change, hybridisation, and identity formation as a result of transnational migration. They rightly state,

it is problematic to assume that the Australian and New Zealand non-immigrant students engage in the same cultural practices, or that the immigrant students are wholly or even primarily “Chinese,” and that their Chinese cultural practices are shared by non-immigrant Chinese youth in Shanghai. (Feniger and Lefstein 2014, 852)

Their awareness of the problematic nature of their investigation leads them to call it an ‘ironic’ investigation. However, as will be discussed shortly, Feniger and Lefstein’s acute awareness of the ironic nature of their investigation is completely erased when their research is taken up by Australian-based critics.

Glossed over in these secondary analyses of PISA – particularly in Jerrim’s (2015) study – is the dynamic process of cultural transformation and adaptation whereby first generation migrant families engage in highly eclectic and intermixing cultural practices. Cultural values and worldviews that migrants ‘bring’ to the new context never stay the same, rather they continuously transform through mundane interactions with those in Australia (Rizvi 2012). Post-colonially-informed intercultural studies have developed a notion of identity based ‘not on a belongingness ... but on a style of self-consciousness that is capable of negotiating ever new formations of reality’ (Guo 2010, 38–39; see also Dimitriadis and McCarthy 2001). These scholars reject the static notion of culture as something to own and of people as those to be owned by culture.

Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that the cities where the second generation Asian-Australian students – the focus of Jerrim’s study (2015) – reside are multicultural and multilingual hotbeds. Multicultural interfaces and negotiations are part of daily life in such locations which not only shape and reshape identities of those who inhabit the social space, such as students, parents, and teachers, but also constantly renegotiate the culture of institutions such as schools. The two PISA secondary analyses reviewed here are premised upon the rather simplistic view of the social context of Australia, where schooling is construed as purely Western and Asian-Australian students’ homes as purely Asian. Hence, we are asked to accept the presumption of this clearly demarcated world and the equally problematic assumptions that Asian-Australian parents preserve their cultural beliefs and practices around education and that their children are happy to internalise them in an uncomplicated fashion.

Unfortunately, these quantitative studies have been influential in Australia and are often cited in Australian mainstream media coverage about Asian academic achievement in the country. For instance, Morgan (2014), whom I discussed earlier, draws on Feniger and Lefstein (2014) and Jerrim (2015) to talk about high commitment to education in East Asian countries, specifically, high parental pressure for educational outcomes and this pressure’s various physical and psychological effects

on children (e.g. myopia). After reducing the theses developed by these quantitative researchers to the singular issue of Asian parental pressure, Morgan (2014) rejects entirely any attempt to learn from East Asia and argues,

it may make more sense for East Asian countries to look at western countries such as Finland, Canada and even Australia and New Zealand. They manage to combine reasonably high educational outcomes with more rounded and balanced development of students, and without an epidemic of myopia.

Likewise, Cobbold (2014), a frequent media commentator on education matters in Australia, draws on Feniger and Lefstein's (2014) study to substantiate his claim that the PISA success of East Asian countries 'reflects the strong influence of Confucian culture about the importance of education as witnessed by the Tiger mother syndrome.' Feniger and Lefstein's noteworthy awareness of the inherently paradoxical nature of their own investigation is entirely erased from both Morgan (2014) and Cobbold's (2014) accounts of Asian educational achievement.

7. Conclusion: extending the scholarship on reference society and projection

What becomes evident through an examination of these three critical discursive moments is the racialised imagery of Asians as a symbol of illiberalism. Underpinning this racial construction is the Orientalist notion of Asian despotism, i.e. that Asian cultural values reflect the backward, pre-modern stage of development where liberal notions of individuality, rights, and civil society remain underdeveloped and where people remain exposed to the totalising power of the state. It follows that education in Asia is a means of the state's totalising rule, by which children's individuality and creativity are subordinated to the state's exigencies for economic productivity and political stability. The same account of despotism applies to Asian migrant parents in Australia; they remain committed to the same illiberal educational values and subject their children to the same 'unbalanced' parenting as in their home countries. This construction of Asian illiberalism helped reinforce the vision of Australian education and parenting as achieving the well-rounded and balanced development of children, a key ingredient of what constitutes 'the Australian way of life.' In the process of constructing Asian illiberalism, both internal and external Asians are lumped together as representing what is un-Australian, i.e. excessive academic competitiveness, aspiration, and diligence. This racial lumping was achieved through the intertwining of domestic and international discourses, which was facilitated by Chua's controversial book on Asian tiger parenting.

Ironically, this invention of the Australian self as liberal-humanistic and child-centric is out of sync with the changing institutional landscape of Australian education wherein a series of measures have been put in place to subordinate education to economic necessities. Studies have shown that various forms of high-stakes standardised assessment (e.g. NAPLAN, High School Certificate exams, and selective secondary school exams) exercise considerable control over Australian school curriculum and cause children and parents psychological stress (see e.g. Lingard, Thompson, and Sellar 2016). Waldow's (2017) earlier discussion of externalisation of negative feelings towards one's own education is relevant here. Much in the same way that Asian education serves as the Other in Germany, the dismissive characterisation of Asian PISA high performers in Australia is a projection of Australian anxieties about its own education system; it is telling that Asian PISA high performers were being dismissed at the same time that the Australian education system was being heavily criticised for the consequences of standardised testing (e.g. NAPLAN) and the publication of school-by-school comparative performance data (see the 'My School' website). The deficiencies that Australian critics identify with East Asian education systems (e.g. intense academic competition, excessive academic aspirations, test-driven pedagogy, and curriculum narrowing as a result of standardised testing, etc.) are already constitutive parts of the Australian education landscape today, thus the external projection of self-loath onto racialised Asian Others.

My analysis also identified the limits of the existing scholarship that identifies pre-existing stereotyping as framing the constitution of Asian high performers as a negative reference society

(Waldow 2017). I have shown that the dismissal of Asian academic achievement both in and outside Australia reflects a historically-constituted sense of racial anxiety about the success of Asians. As discussed earlier, the contradiction of Australia as ‘a white settler nation in the far corner of Asia’ (Ang 2000, 119) has placed the country in a state of constant racial anxiety; the mass migration of Asians means that Asian-Australians will soon outnumber White Australians and ‘White Australia would one day suffer the same fate as Aboriginal Australians’ (Ang 2003, 60). Asian (Chinese) migrants’ diligence, efficiency, and competitiveness were perceived as a threat to White Australians, which resulted in the formation of racially exclusionary immigration law in the early twentieth century (Ang 2000). Today, Asian-Australians’ educational aspirations, diligence, and competitiveness are felt to be threatening the opportunity structure which has traditionally served the interests of White middle-class Australians. To put it simply, Asians are too successful in gaining placements in the best government secondary schools and universities (Ang 2003; Sriprakash, Proctor, and Hu 2016). This sense of racial anxiety vis-à-vis internal Asians intensifies when joined by the fear over the rising economic power of Asian neighbours in the current ‘Asian Century’ where Australia’s place in the world depends increasingly on its relationship with rising economies of Asia (Rizvi 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2013). Therefore, the constitution of Asian PISA high performers as a counter reference society was profoundly raced, being shaped by historically- and geopolitically-informed racial anxieties about Asians.

Indeed, this study’s explicit drawing from the postcolonial, de-colonial, and critical race scholarship has pushed the existing scholarship further. Most importantly, this study has raised a question about the universalising tendency of the current conceptualisation of reference society and policy projection in the scholarship. The discussion of stereotyping as shaping the constitution of Asian PISA success as a negative reference society (Waldow 2017) tends to accommodate the highly dismissive and derogatory representation of Asian societies within the universalist discussion of the central role of ‘context’ in shaping the pattern of policy referencing and projection (see Waldow 2017). This scholarship reinforces the central thesis of the culturalist approach to understanding the processes of policy transfer, borrowing, and referencing; that the process of policy borrowing and referencing is an internally-driven process, hence the importance of understanding the context of ‘reception’ that drives the process (see Waldow 2012). Of note here is that ‘context’ refers almost exclusively to a particular socio-historical, institutional, and political context of a given nation-state. Indeed, the same nationalistic framing of ‘context’ is evident in other relevant studies where researchers limit the discussion of context to domestic political struggles (Takayama 2010; Takayama, Waldow, and Sung 2013), cultural stereotyping (Waldow 2017; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014), and the structure of feeling (Sung and Lee 2017), all developed within a particular nation-state.

By identifying the global history of colonialism as the key contextual backdrop, my study problematised this very framing of context itself in the existing scholarship. The nation-state-centric framing obscures the transnational history of colonialism, racialisation, and classification of difference pertaining to Asians and how this long and planetary history continues to set limits on the referential authority of Asia in education policy making. Sung and Lee (2017) attributed the continuing referential power of the U.S. in South Korea to ‘the structure of feeling’ (13) that they seem to assume to be nationally specific. But this structure of feeling is widely shared among East Asian countries for whom the U.S. has exercised immense geo-political and cultural hegemonies during the Cold War period and beyond (Chen 2010). Sung and Lee (2017) hint partially at the operation of similar colonial legacies that my study highlighted; particularly, how the deep-seated residual power of colonial hierarchy of difference not only shapes the point of reference against which Asian countries and cities make sense of where they are in the linear historical progression – but also sets limits on what Asian PISA success can signify for Anglo-American countries such as Australia. PISA has hardly altered this broader structure of feeling developed over a few hundred years of Western imperial geopolitics of difference. At least from the distinct epistemic standpoint of Asia, the attempt

to conceptualise reference society and policy projection cannot be divorced from the understanding of global history and politics of difference around ‘race’ and culture.

My findings, then, echo the emerging critique of methodological nationalism in the existing scholarship on policy transfer and borrowing, reference society, and projection (see Larsen and Beech 2014). As reviewed earlier, the large majority of existing studies focus on the ways in which PISA high performers are picked or unpicked to become the point of policy reference within a given national context. While the present study also focuses on the uptake of Asian PISA high performers within a given national context, i.e. Australia, it distinguishes itself from other studies by tracing the complex intermixing of domestic (national) and transnational discourses in the racialisation of Asians in the Australian education debate. By highlighting how transnational policy discourses of Asian migrants’ academic success and aspirations (i.e. Chua’s book and two quantitative PISA secondary analyses) were integrated into the national racialising discourse of Asian-Australian’s particular parenting style, the study draws attention to the blurred distinction between the global and the national. It has showed how the global is already a constative part of the national (Sassen 2010). The racial lumping of Asians – the seamless articulation of internal and external Asians as a monolithic collective – was both enabled by and enabled this global-national assemblage against the backdrop of deeply ingrained racial anxieties over Asians in Australia.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that all of the references to East Asian PISA success were monolithically negative and dismissive. The debate over the appropriateness of East Asia as a reference for Australian education were diverse, including some thoughtful discussion on this topic (e.g. Sellar and Lingard 2013).
2. I use the term ‘coaching’ to refer to private educational service providers specialising in extracurricular academic supports. The term is commonly used in Australia and is interchangeable with ‘tutoring’ which is more commonly used in other contexts.
3. Commissioned by the Government of Australia in 2010 and chaired by businessman David Gonski, the Review of Funding for Schooling or the so-called Gonski report, was touted as the biggest review of funding for Australian schools in more than 30 years (see Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014).

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