

Local cultures and global developments in moral and citizenship education in East Asia

Wiel Veugelers & Meiyao Wu

Keywords

Moral Education, Citizenship Education, East Asia, Historical-sociological, globalization

Purpose

In a special issue of the *Journal of Moral Education*, we address how a certain part of the world, East Asia, positions itself in local, regional, and international educational developments (Wu & Veugelers, 2026). Within East Asia, there are differences between and within countries due to different histories (for example, parts of different colonial powers) and to different dominant religions and ideologies. The special issue analyses how East Asian countries have dealt with moral and civic issues, and how education has contributed to the identity development of their young citizens. It tries to show changes made in recent years, but also more long-term developments. It asks how people, in an active way, try to combine local cultures and international developments.

Research Overview and Methods

Each article describes and analyzes the historical, political, and ideological developments in a country, especially regarding its policy, textbooks, and classroom practices. The articles offer a historical-sociological perspective on political, cultural, and social influences on education and on identity development. For each of the articles, we invited experts in the field of moral and citizenship education to analyse the interaction of local and global developments in their country in moral and citizenship education. We included different parts of East Asia. In the north: Mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan. In the south: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, and Sri Lanka.

Results and discussion

We, as guest editors, made some further analysis. In particular, we focused on similarities and differences between the countries and on the influence of local histories and global

developments. What these East Asian countries have in common is a strong policy on moral and citizenship education, a link with the national heritage, influence of religion, and a focus on nation- building.

- The strong *policy* is in most countries quite explicit, linked with the dominant ideology in the country with firm control by the government. The policy on moral and citizenship education can change when the political power relations and the political system change.
- The involved countries are aware of their *history*, their cultural heritage. This national view on morality and citizenship is useful for bringing together and enforcing social cohesion.
- More than we expected, *religion* is very relevant for moral and citizenship education in these countries. Often there is a dominant religion that is influencing the thinking and sets the limits for what is considered as normal, moral, and good citizenship. In North East Asia, in particular China, Confucianism is dominant. In South East Asia, the countries are often more multicultural.
- The *nation-building* is very important for all countries. For ‘younger’ nations, it plays a crucial role in building social cohesion as newly independent states. For the countries that have suffered from World War II or military coups, nation-building supports the development of civil society and government, sometimes incorporating elements of democracy.

There is a strong policy direction of moral and citizenship education that really influences practice. In this pedagogical guidance, values such as harmony, adaptation and contributing to society are central. Autonomy-development is less emphasized, but there are some initiatives, in particular expressed by scholars who are more internationally oriented.

The studies not only show similarities but also differences, in particular in the global orientation, in supporting democracy, and in spirituality:

- The *global orientation* is clearly visible in a market orientation; nations seek to be competitive by strengthening their position in the world economy and acquiring the resources to give their population a better life. This market ideology supports selection and inequality in education as a ‘hidden’ curriculum. The countries in the extent to which market ideology influences all aspects of social life.

- The moral aspects of global citizenship are expressed in a concern for humanity. In most countries, but less so in mainland China, there is some attention to *democratic* development. The concept of democracy is strongly connected with the ‘Asian values’ of harmony, adaptation and concern for the community.
- An important difference exists in *spirituality*. In particular, within Buddhist and Confucian traditions the cultivation of morality and character is towards an inner-orientation, i.e., self-reflection, meditation, self-awareness. This is often not an open orientation, but is framed by social and political conditions of adaptation.

The ‘West’ can learn from the ‘East’ to positively value the social aspects of a way of life, of the benefit of communities, and of building a nation that values diversity and supports inclusion. The ‘East’ can learn from the ‘West’ that autonomy gives voice and agency to human beings and can give a sense of efficacy to individuals. Both the ‘East’ and ‘West’ should constantly link autonomy and social concern. This requires a new view on identity with a more socially embedded autonomy, and an agency that is part of a dynamic community.

Wu, M. & Veugelers, W. (Eds.) (2026). Moral and citizenship education in East Asia. *Journal of Moral Education*, (55),1.