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Japan's Pursuit of Meritocracy, Cosmopolitanism, and Global Rankings in Higher Education: A Bourdieusian Interpretation

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Abstract: Through the market-based conception of neoliberal performativity, an interlocking set of socio-economic agendas integrate higher education (HE) in state-level systems of production and accumulation. Within the scope of globalism, the capacity to develop competitive human capital emerges as a proxy indicator of achievement amongst institutions of higher learning. Through this elaborate symbolic structure, Japanese reforms aimed at bolstering “global” soft skills, including English, cosmopolitanism, and interculturality, function alongside an ideological arms race to enhance university rankings and individual investment in education. Invoking a Bourdieusian perspective, this conceptual inquiry suggests that stakeholders consider the secondary effects of asymmetrical efforts towards “élite” education, globalism, and world-class attainment, whereby accompanying policy reform propagates hegemony both locally and internationally. Additionally, the emergence of global soft skills as essential cultural capital challenges the supposed meritocracy of Japan’s HE system. Indeed, the “effort-based-reward” symbolic contract permeating much of the neoliberal discourse fails to account for the functional reality of class-distinguished *taste*. From this perspective, valuable cultural resources orientate towards a globally conscious, highly-credentialed middle-class privileged in social, economic, and cultural capital, thereby disadvantaging the majority of learners inevitably excluded from study at prestigious, brand-name universities.

Keywords: Higher Education; Internationalisation; Neoliberalism; Bourdieu; Japan

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Introduction

Interactions between the neoliberal model of economic growth and higher education (HE) reform are, in many contexts, increasingly discernible. Operating in conjunction with the global market order, expansion of the knowledge economy motivates HE systems to nurture links with industry, normalising performative criteria that, from the market-orientated perspective, reinforce social stability and state productivity through the development of globalised human capital. In this regard,

participation in HE represents both a civic and individual venture, with a theoretical increase in national output coinciding with an informal social contract presupposing enhanced economic opportunities proportional to a citizen's personal, rational, and *agentive* investment in education. Nevertheless, the meritocratic "freedom of choice" leitmotif permeating neoliberal discourse fails to account for the stratifying secondary effects of HE as an imperative of the knowledge economy; indeed, "the process of selection and stratification in education always produces inequalities that cannot be justified on the basis of merit" (Lauder et al., 2012, p. 4).

Within the context of global English as a foreign language (EFL) hegemony, for instance, there has emerged a distinct "English divide" (Cho, 2017, p. 69) following the perception of the language as *the* paradigmatic soft skill of global business, finance, and technology (Phillipson, 2009). Against this background, non-English-speaking states frequently encourage citizens to embrace English language learning (ELL) as part of state-wide endeavours to generate internationally-orientated labour forces for expansion within economic markets. The "globalised" knowledge economy thereby manifests per "the corporatisation of the state, but also the commodification of the individual subject" (Byean, 2015, p. 867), instrumentalising transnationalism and EFL alike as determinative factors in the "quantification of individual value per neoliberal discourses detailing 'appropriate' forms of citizenship" (Samuell & Smith, 2020, p. 57). Yet, consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of *social reproduction*, the neoliberal re-tasking of credentialism as an individual "responsibility", aids the class-distinguished reproduction of market-orientated skills, gatekeeping one's respective degree of access to high-status employment in economic terms.

As will be argued here, by consolidating globalism within the framework of "free" market education, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)

unambiguous prioritisation of brand-name higher education institutions (HEIs) as part of its internationalisation reform (i.e., the *Top Global University Project*) aligns coveted skills and competencies with an “élite” stratum of universities “able to afford to compete” (Poole & Takahashi, 2015, p. 97). Additionally, following MEXT policy rhetoric detailing the criticality of tertiary-level internationalisation, including an increased emphasis on study abroad participation to strengthen “Japan’s international competitiveness” (Shimomura, 2013, p. B1), expansions in global flows of people, cultures, and practice invite learners to view HE “as a desirable tendency immanent in a global world” (Igarashi & Saito, 2014, p. 224), conditioning graduates to accept, legitimise, and reproduce the capital and value of internationalism to distinguish themselves within a highly-competitive vocational market. Thus, while their intrinsic motivation to do so may be called into question, “nearly all students at university in Japan will need to study English” (Jones, 2019, p. 25).

Placing Japanese HE within a sociological register, there is a requirement to scrutinise the seemingly axiomatic dispositions driving the outwardly meritocratic participation structures theorised by the nation’s neoliberal economic paradigm, and how “global” capitals come to be framed and reinforced through market-orientated forces. Drawing on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and, to a lesser degree, Michel Foucault, this conceptual inquiry situates Japanese internationalisation reform in HE within the *neoliberalism as doxa* imaginary, which interprets globally-active human resources as self-regulating *entrepreneurs of the self* (Foucault, 2004). In doing so, this approach aims to address calls by local academics (Kubota, 2016) to clarify the socio-cultural and class-distinguished impact of international policy machinations in HE locally. With this goal in view, the present study interprets MEXT policy in terms of the hierarchical structures paradigmatic to Confucian social advancement, the emergence of internationalism as a

valuable yet class-distinguished cosmopolitan capital, and, finally, the seemingly unending pursuit of “world-class” status, in terms of both local and global ranking systems.

Background

Internationalisation Reforms in Japanese HE

From its earliest influences in the 1700s, the internationalisation of education in Japan has been viewed as a reactive force meant to ensure the nation’s global competitiveness and subsequent economic and physical security (Seiya, 1965). Contemporary reforms, however, began under Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro’s National Council on Education Reform (NCER) in 1984 (Gibson, 2011). The then Prime Minister aimed to cultivate programs promoting interculturality between Japanese and non-Japanese, whilst simultaneously promoting the capital and value of internationalisation, or *kokusaika*, to spur future economic prosperity (Gibson, 2011). To this end, Japan sought to improve English proficiency and increase the number of inbound study abroad (SA) participants ten-fold, to 100,000 by 2000 (Rivers, 2010). While taking three years longer than anticipated—and requiring significant adjustments to infrastructures supporting international students and immigration systems (Newby et al., 2009)—the strategy was ultimately successful. While ostensibly progressive, this initiative was criticised as part of the NCER’s protectionist agenda, which allegedly promoted nationalistic rhetoric embedded within educational policy. Moreover, Gibson (2011) notes that Nakasone was “less interested in the actual situations of students and schools than in how to position Japan’s advantage in the global economy” (p. 106). The context described here suggests that current policy machinations follow earlier, decidedly *reactive* initiatives seeking to strengthen Japan’s position within the global neoliberal hierarchy (Smith, 2021).

MEXT soon established a more comprehensive vision for internationalisation with the 2008 *Global 30 Project* (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Burgess et al., 2010). This initiative incentivised the diversification of university campuses, offering the equivalent of 1.4 billion yenⁱ in grants to 30 HEIs in the expectation that they increase international faculty, outbound SA, and research output (Aizawa & Rose, 2018; Burgess et al., 2010). Aiming to further enhance interculturality (an, by proxy, cosmopolitanism) through inbound SA, Global 30 sought to increase the total number of international students studying in Japan to 300,000 by 2020 (Rivers, 2010) and provide programs for which Japanese proficiency was not an entry requirement. This was soon bolstered by *Go Global Japan* in 2012, which placed greater emphasis on improving domestic students' capacity to compete in the global workforce (MEXT, 2014). Accordingly, Go Global Japan aimed to create globally competitive human resources (known as *jinzai* locally) per neoliberal policy manoeuvres emphasising bilateral SA partnerships and EFL proficiency (Rose & McKinley, 2017; Smith, 2021). Or, as stated by MEXT (2013a), “support universities to develop organised educational systems that thoroughly strengthen and promote the global capabilities of their students in order to develop human resources who can actively challenge the global stage and leap forward into the world”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Following mounting industry pressure for additional global *jinzai*, Global 30 and Go Global Japan laid the groundwork for the 2014 *Top Global University Project (TGUP)*, a ten-year strategy that aims to enhance the internationalisation of 37 of Japan's approximately 780 HEIs (MEXT, 2012). Specifically, TGUP categorises recipient universities in terms of *Top Type*, which intends to place 13 Japanese HEIs among the top 100 universities internationally, and *Global Traction Type*, comprising 24 HEIs with a focus on globalised human capital initiatives, including Keio University's “Enhancing Sustainability of Global Society Through *Jitsugaku* (Practical Learning)”

and Ritsumeikan University's "Bridging the World and Asia" (MEXT, 2014). Yet, as noted by Smith (2021), TGUP status is restricted primarily to HEIs placing "highly in domestic university rankings" (p. 17), thereby steering potential learners and, in consequence, *industrial hiring practices* towards a select few "world-class and innovative universities" (MEXT, 2014) through a "process of league table 'natural selection'" (Smith, 2021, p. 17). With this strategy in view, the OECD's (2006) claim that "Japanese tertiary education policies have been significantly affected by the developed internal labour market within corporations" (p. 25) is hard to ignore. MEXT's (2003) strategic reforms to nurture "Japanese with English abilities", for instance, were notably impacted by calls from the industrial sector for globally-orientated jinzai possessing the "paradigmatic soft skills of [English language] communication" (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212).

Indeed, a "crisis", impelled by a perceived lack of language and intercultural skills within Japan's labour force (Yonezawa, 2020), prompted drives for increased English proficiency from within the Japanese business sector. Kubota (2013), for instance, notes an increase in "English-only" policies amongst several multinational corporations, including the automotive giant Nissan, the e-commerce conglomerate Rakuten, and UNIQLO, a "fast fashion" clothing manufacturer and distributor. The perceived success of this approach has exerted a visible "trickle-down" effect throughout much of corporate Japan. Despite initially labelling Rakuten founder, Mikitani Hiroshi's, *Englishization* strategy as "stupid", for example, Honda CEO, Ito Takanobu, soon adopted a similar approach, phasing out Japanese in favour of English within three years (cited in Nixon, 2015, pp. 30-31). In all instances, standardised EFL testing (particularly TOEIC) is used to measure and, in the case of Softbank's (one of the world's largest technology-focused venture capital funds) bonus scheme, in which scores of 900 and above are rewarded with a 1 million yenⁱⁱⁱ bonus, *incentivise* English proficiency (Nixon, 2015). With the above in view, Kubota's (2013)

statement that “many [EFL] developments are influenced by a series of recommendations for education made by Japanese business associations” (p. 2) certainly holds water. Indeed, MEXT (2013b) reform from this period calls for an alliance between “universities, the business world, the government and local communities [which] must cooperate to make this an effort by the entire nation” (Shimomura, 2013, p. B1).

Philosophical Lens

“Genetic Structuralism”

Whilst the preference for structuralism within social inquiry has, since the 1980s, gradually declined (Flecha et al., 2001), Ritzer and Stepnisky (2017) note that Bourdieu’s work is compelled by an aspiration to bridge, what he deems, a false dichotomy “between subjectivism and objectivism, or between the individual and society” and towards a more reflexive, anti-dualist stance. In lieu of traditional readings of subjectivity and objectivity, Bourdieu interprets the latter in terms of relational constructs and the processes by which these elements are both generated and composed. In Bourdieu’s view, social arrangements are understood as mutually constituted or, more simply, as both structuring *and* structured. Bourdieu (1968) posits: “ultimately, objective relations do not exist and do not realise themselves except in and through the systems of dispositions of agents, produced by the internalising of objective conditions” (p. 705). From this perspective, institutions limit interactions and knowledge, and the processes through which agents interpret their social realities. The exchanges between subjective phenomena and objective structures, therefore, are *dialectical* (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017).

In reconciling agency and structure, Bourdieu (1977) suggests that practice is occasioned neither by unrestricted self-determination nor entirely by external coercion (Ryan, 2005).

Anchored to the notion of constructivist (or genetic) structuralism, in which agents negotiate fields per their social positionality, interaction is impacted by the structure of its respective domain, “which provides both the setting for and the constraints on the perceptions of actors” (Ryan, 2005, p. 5). Central to resolving the supposed antinomy of the subjective and objective is the *habitus*, or “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), developed by an individual in response to the conditions they encounter during the navigation of social fields (Bourdieu, 1968, p. 705). In theorising habitus, Bourdieu seeks to infuse external structures, including education and labour markets, within the subjective, cognitive-somatic dispositions of actors. The author’s “signature obsession” (Wacquant, 1992, p. 36) with reflexive social theory, therefore, reflects the structuralist position that “there are hidden or underlying structures that determine what transpires in the social world” while also addressing the constructivist viewpoint that “schemes of perception, thought, and action create structures” (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2017, pp. 184–185).

Conceptual Lens

Bourdieu and the Reproductive Function of Neoliberalism as Doxa

Following the foundational definition from Springer et al. (2016), neoliberalism constitutes the “political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasise market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility” (p. 2). With this understanding in mind, the intersection of knowledge production and market-coordinated policy is increasingly evident, with the former interpreted as enhancing individual and state efficiency, which encourages further neoliberal reform. Mediated through superficially meritocratic systems of competition-based reward, social actors function autonomously as *rational optimisers* (Olssen & Peters, 2005), free to form cost/benefit calculations in their efforts to maximise the individual yield of education. In

doing so, the state recontextualises citizens as *entrepreneurs of the self* (Foucault, 2004), whereby individuals “rationally” exploit HE to commodify themselves per market conditions. Success in the knowledge economy thereby demands a shift in disposition, from “‘homo economicus’ who naturally behaves out of self-interest and is relatively detached from the state, to ‘manipulatable man,’ who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be ‘perpetually responsive’” (Olssen, 1996, p. 340). In doing so, neoliberalism constitutes an elaborate symbolic structure, rewarding conformity with economically de-socialised and de-historicised logics emphasising “the responsibility of the individual to acquire the information and skills ... that are considered important for the new knowledge economy” (Horiguchi et al., 2015, p. 3).

To Bourdieu, however, socio-historical relations remain central to *social reproduction*, or “the maintenance and replication of hierarchical systems and structures based on certain preconditions” (Smith, 2021, p. 6). Thus, when exploring laissez-faire policy in terms of mediating inequality, an understanding of the various forms of *capital* (Bourdieu, 1986) is helpful when accounting for those “valued and exclusive cultural resources that enable one to signal, attain, or maintain a certain type of social status or position” (Kim, 2011, p. 111). Bourdieu notably developed the concept of capital beyond its strictly financial intention (economic capital), embedding the opportunities afforded by durable social networks (social capital) alongside the accumulated possessions, behaviours, and skills that one may call upon to distinguish oneself within the context of social class (cultural capital). This includes the determination of cultural competency through credentialism (institutional cultural capital), such as academic qualifications; the *transferable* material resources that may signal economic status and, indeed, enhance educational outcomes, including books, technological devices, and vehicles (objectified cultural capital); and the knowledge, mores, and tastes acquired both implicitly and explicitly through

socialisation (embedded cultural capital), including language and one's preference for, and openness to, internationalism.

Over time, these “mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation, and action” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16), inherited and reproduced through enduring social structures, become embedded *habitus*, or ways of viewing, conceptualising, and interacting with the world. Bourdieu (1989) notes that one's habitus is simultaneously durable and transposable given its potential to endure over prolonged periods and manifest within distinct social arenas or *fields*, each containing specific positions, practices, capitals, and the orthodoxies defined by Bourdieu (1977) as *doxa*. From this perspective, neoliberalism as *doxa* represents the unspoken and often unconscious rules that determine one's status and interactions within labour markets per the interplay between capital and habitus. To Bourdieu, laissez-faire ideologies promulgated by *cultural producers* within politics, education, and industry, reinforce stratification by erroneously situating the taken-for-granted economic, social, and cultural capitals requisite to social advancement within superficially meritocratic labour markets. This capacity to control the bounds of normalised participation structures thereby represents implicit *symbolic violence*, or “perpetuation of domination by means of the active complicity of the dominated” (Emirbayer & Schneiderhan, 2013, p. 145), that petrifies the “sense of one's place” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466) through the hereditary transmission of cultural capital, and reproduction of social systems through the cyclical conversion of capital between its various states.

Theorising the Relationship Between English and the Global Knowledge Economy

Consumption of institutional capital holds significant influence over the modelling of social fields, representing a form of civic participation through which HEIs expedite the formation and replication of individual and collective identities (Bourdieu, 1984). Within non-English-speaking

locales, international-mindedness as a signal for human capital development infers a necessity for multilingual graduates as states consolidate the relationship between citizenship and knowledge production within the scope of globalisation. From a structural perspective, Appadurai (1990) depicts transnationalism as the basis for intersecting *scapes* incorporating outwardly diverse yet increasingly homogenised economic, political, and cultural flows. The hegemonic expansion of ELL globally illustrates Appadurai's notion of the *ideoscape*, or those "ideologies of states ... explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it" (p. 299). The ideological-discursive assumptions justifying the transnational capital of EFL are both well established and widespread. Most notably, Pennycook (2017) notes the common perception of English as a "natural, neutral, and beneficial" (p. 9) agency of state-level durability. Given the corresponding recognition of EFL as fundamental to education, employment, government, finance, and late-stage capitalism as a whole, however, it more accurately symbolises "a value one identifies with for the social functions the language is seen as serving, its utility in the linguistic market" (Phillipson, 2009, p. 109).

In contextualising the learner as both consumer and commodity, the neoliberal conviction of merit-based reward establishes a link between individual effort in cultivating neoliberal skills and those *entrepreneurs of the self* "deserving" of admission to "élite" HEIs and "choice employment beyond them" (Ross, 2008, p. 7). Notwithstanding this supposedly meritocratic intention, the co-option of EFL and, more broadly, globalism as screening mechanisms for education and key industry advantages learners privileged in economic and social capital—those more likely to recognise and reproduce the possibilities of choice that parallel class-distinguished taste. Indeed, Cho (2017) notes that "English skills are often perceived as a sign of privileged backgrounds as such backgrounds tend to translate into better opportunities for English learning" (p. 20). Following the social, economic, and vocational incentives for those whose proficiencies

are perceived as nonpareil through these biases, this *system of mechanisms* (Bourdieu, 1977) constitutes a basis for social inclusion and exclusion, with neoliberal policy tied to ELL ensuring “the dominant class have only to *let the system they dominate take its own course*^{iv} in order to exercise their domination” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 190).

Discussion

“Survival of the Fittest”: Hierarchical Meritocracy in Japan

Japan is among several East Asian states, including China, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, whose enduring association with Confucianism shapes contemporary values and norms. As noted by Ying (2020), Confucianism holds a traditional emphasis on fostering “talent and virtue as the key argument for a hierarchical meritocracy” (p. 1017). Within the scope of HE, meanwhile, Marginson (2011) identifies centralised governmental control over funding and policy; a fixation on establishing “world-class” universities; high levels of tertiary participation financed by individual households; and high-stakes, one-shot entrance exams as fundamental to the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) educational model. From a Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest” perspective, the societal interconnectivity between HE and the economy is particularly conspicuous, as cultivating internationally-recognised HEIs is viewed as pivotal to the development of national strength through self-reliant, globally competitive labour forces (Samuell & Smith, 2020). Indeed, former MEXT head, Shimomura Hakubun, detailed the “paramount importance” of internationalisation reform in HE, including the Global 30 Project, to “foster[ing] highly capable people with a global perspective who can play active roles in many fields” (p. B1). However, while Shimomura describes MEXT’s intention to provide opportunities for

internationalised HE to “*all*” students with the desire and capability” (p. B1), the social cost of Japan’s ostensibly “meritocratic” system of HE remains substantial.

Similar to neighbouring CHC states, the criticality of tertiary education to Japanese social mobility ensures a willingness for substantial financial investment from the household (Marginson, 2011). Facing a decrease in public funding for HE—estimated at 1% annually (Smith, 2021)—individual families accept a significant economic burden, with 69% of school fees originating from private sources, compared to the OECD (2020) average of 24%. This liability is expedited by so-called *shadow education* entities—or private supplementary schools (known locally as *juku*) that aim to improve academic skills and entrance test performance. Consistent with the neoliberal doctrine of effort-based reward, *juku* are expected to facilitate enrolment at HEIs possessing institutional capital relative to a learner’s respective university entrance examination score. This practice, which sees more than half of Japanese middle-school students attend *juku*, not only reinforces the neoliberal agenda for *entrepreneurs of the self* (Foucault, 2004) but, in favouring households higher in economic capital, challenges the implicit meritocracy of CHC education (Fülöp, & Gordon Györi, 2021). Indeed, this exclusion system *deepens* inequality by affording students from wealthier backgrounds increased access to the cultural, social, and institutional capitals requisite to HE and, consequently, future success in labour markets (Ross, 2008).

Given the financial burden placed on individual households, universities in Japan emerge as the terminus of a corrosive system of social reproduction that begins as early as kindergarten. Here, middle-class families privileged in economic capital habitually place young learners in private education systems, including *juku* and international preparatory schools, with tuition fees at the latter costing “upwards of US \$10,000 per year per child” (Poole & Takahashi, 2015, p. 90). In this regard, the capacity to experience coveted educational paths is inextricably bound to the

child's hereditary social capital and, crucially, the “opportunities generated through the mobilisation of these connections” (Smith, 2021, p. 7). Indeed, many internationally-focused TGUP HEIs, including the highly-ranked Osaka, Ritsumeikan, and Waseda Universities, hold partnerships with—if not outright own—integrated primary and secondary schools, which provide clear, economically-inequitable pathways into “world-class” (MEXT, 2014) tertiary education. Nevertheless, given a noted decline in birth rates amongst CHC states, the sustainability of such systems remains at risk. For example, sink-or-swim decentralisation reforms promoting free-market competition provoked an increase in HEIs by as much as 35% when the pool of students declined by 39% (MEXT, 2013b; Yonezawa et al., 2012). With a further decrease in the number of high school graduates anticipated in the next decade, the ability of such institutions to remain financially sustainable remains precarious (Yonezawa, 2020).

These interlocking phenomena further convolute the role of meritocracy in Japanese HE, as private HEIs lower academic standards to attract potential learners as schools struggle to maintain their perceived institutional capital (Rivers, 2010; Horiguchi et al., 2015). Indeed, HE delivery locally rests chiefly on self-governing corporations, with these universities accommodating 75-80% of Japanese tertiary-level learners (Marginson, 2012; Smith, 2021). While TGUP internationalisation within the (overwhelmingly public) “top type” HEI cluster focuses on enhancing national prestige through institutional capital, the primary motivation for the private “global traction type” universities tasked with strengthening global jinzai remains financial, not only by way of tuition but through government subsidisation (Yonezawa et al., 2009). Accordingly, non-TGUP HEIs possessing lower institutional and economic capital are “less capable of overcoming institutional inertia and discarding educational norms that have been self-

evident for a sustained period” (Smith, 2021, p. 19). Thus, the prioritisation of TGUP universities as aspirational models has a knock-on effect that reverberates throughout the sector.

Against this background, Japanese HE presents as an economic arms race, with internationalisation positioned as a competitive “weapon” not only for the state regionally and globally but, on a local level, those HEIs subjected to a cyclical process of league table “natural selection”. In overcommitting financial resources and incentives towards strengthening HE through ELL, internationalisation, bilateral student mobility, and university rankings, there is a risk of building a dominant Anglosphere-orientated Centre within the Periphery, thereby contributing to the hegemony of prestigious universities both locally and abroad (Phillipson, 2009). Additionally, this approach disincentivises potential improvements to pedagogical practice at supposedly “world-class and innovative universities” (MEXT, 2014) by failing to consider less-quantifiable indicators of meaningful reform, such as the quality of learning outcomes and the respective accessibility of “international” learning experiences. It is argued here that, contrary to the neoliberal orthodoxy of increased strength through open marketisation, the continued economic, functional, and ideological precedence of TGUP-affiliated institutions maintains homeostasis within Japanese HE. In this manner, universities synthesise the ranking-based hierarchical structures imposed on them, despite the vast majority not actively participating in MEXT internationalisation reform. They similarly sustain the unique contradiction of being agents within the neoliberal order without access to free-market competition. Given this context, recent internationalisation efforts in Japanese HE may be interpreted as a “systematic, organised, and orchestrated policy” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 38), obfuscating exclusion as a natural outcome of “choice” and merit-based participation. Indeed, Japan’s Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest”

(Smith, 2021, p. 3) stratification of HE rejects OECD calls for “policies and instruments for stimulating a fitting internationalisation strategy of *all*^{vi} institutions” (OECD, 2009, p. 86).

Cosmopolitanism as Class-Distinguished Capital

Contemporary internationalisation reform in HE, including the Global 30 and TGUP initiatives, often reflects trends in “post-modern metanarratives of mobility” (Härkönen & Dervin, 2016, p. 42), whereby learners acquire the communication skills, global dispositions, and intercultural competencies interpreted as paradigmatic for involvement in global labour markets. Thus, the internationalisation of Japanese HE remains “part of the globalisation policy trend in general, which is tied to neoliberal ideology” (Kubota, 2016, p. 348). At the state level, this essentialist-culturalist reading of globalism presents a powerful tool for neoliberal character building, with MEXT (2003) positioning international student mobility as *the* path for “trustworthy global citizens” (Fritz & Murao, 2020, p. 520) to manoeuvre themselves into positions of global leadership. Indeed, while experiencing an understandable downturn in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, outbound tertiary-level Japanese SA numbers exhibited a sharp increase, from the 55,350 reported by MEXT in 2016 (two years after the commencement of TGUP), to 79,123 in 2017, before levelling out at 80,566 in 2018 (JAOS, 2019; 2021), pre-pandemic. However, when accounting for “students who do not use a university program to go abroad, junior high school students who study abroad, or working adults who go abroad for language learning purposes”, JAOS (2019) estimates “the number of outbound Japanese study-abroad students in 2018 to be around 200,000” (p. 2).

Given English’s status as a dominant lingua franca, the conflation of internationalisation and Englishisation is evident (Smith, 2021). By invoking the doxic image of globalised competency-based education as vital to future professional success (MEXT, 2003; Shimomura,

2013), MEXT rhetoric mirrors and reproduces a disjunctive cultural flow into which Japanese learners strive to be included. Specifically, “global” soft skills, including EFL, open-mindedness, and awareness of diverse cultures, contribute to one’s respective degree of *cosmopolitanism*, which emerges as a distinct embodied capital, “increasingly important in the struggle over social positions across various social fields, as they undergo globalisation” (Lindell & Danielsson 2017, 54). As demonstrated by the near-14,000 Japanese SA sojourns in the Philippines in 2019 (JAOS, 2019), MEXT HEIs do, in fact, form international cooperation partnerships with “low cosmopolitan” developing HE systems, for example, via the Japan International Cooperation Agency’s Partnership Program (2002–present), which supports the sharing of knowledge, physical resources, and manpower globally. Nevertheless, the draw of Western universities rich in economic and institutional capital appears hard to ignore. Highly-ranked Japanese HEIs regularly form bilateral SA partnerships with Anglosphere universities high in institutional capital—including UK Russell Group and US Ivy League institutions—reflecting Amano’s (1997) long-standing assertion that the culture of HE in Japan manifests not as a “‘what level’ credentialing society so much as a ‘what institution’ credentialing society” (p. 56). Indeed, JAOS (2019) survey findings demonstrate an overwhelming preference for dominant “inner-circle” Anglospheric SA locales, with the US, Australia, Canada, the UK, and New Zealand representing the five of the six most popular host nations for Japanese youths. For reference, the Philippines, itself an “expanding-circle” English-speaking State, was fourth (JAOS, 2019).

Calhoun (2008) attests that, similar to cosmopolitanism, cross-border education often manifests as an embodied capital, whereby “it is easy for the privileged to imagine that their experience of global mobility and connection is available to all” (p. 106). As noted by Singh and Doherty (2008), education as a middle-class strategy is under increased scrutiny “to understand

how educational opportunities become stratified through the proactive work of the middle classes' interests and their tactics to protect their relative advantage through strategies of closure or exclusion" (p. 119). From this critical perspective, internationalisation as an outcome of neoliberal HE policy may be interpreted as a platform for class solidarity in which "élite" schooling engenders a highly-credentialed middle-class conditioned to expedite state expansion. Indeed, when analysing EFL through the lens of national identity formation and disciplinary control through knowledge/power (Foucault, 2004), its value-laden nature soon emerges. Bourdieu (1999) describes how states co-opt social institutions in their efforts to fortify "common forms and categories of perception and appreciation [habitus] ... constitutive of (national) common sense [doxa]" (p. 68). Following Bourdieu's genetic structuralist ontology, this system of dispositions mediates the individual and society and, indeed, autonomy and control per "the internalising of objective conditions" (Bourdieu, 1968, p. 705), or *habitus*, that facilitate subjective identity formation.

Bourdieu's (1984) prediction of globalism inevitably driving an "evolution of class societies" (p. 157) remains, four decades later, uncannily prophetic. From this perspective, cosmopolitan as a form of capital presents an emerging form of distinction, "reproduced through habitus (embodied state) which mediates consumption of the international as 'high' culture (objectified state) and the credentialed resources (institutionalised state)" (Smith & Samuell, 2022, p. 6) required for success within the global knowledge economy. Accordingly, the degree to which learners engage with or, more pointedly, retain *access to* cosmopolitan capital is both heterogeneous and highly contextual. As highlighted previously, high-ranking HEIs in Japan regularly promote fee-paying subsidiary preparatory schools as pathways toward "world-class" tertiary education. In many instances, primary and secondary-level learners are afforded additional

exposure to the international, whether in terms of language, syllabi, study abroad, faculty, or multicultural classmates (Poole & Takahashi, 2015). Thus, children high in social capital are conditioned to recognise, and ultimately profit from, the possibilities of choice corresponding with class-distinguished globalism (Smith, 2021). Against this background, the potential for primary and secondary education to contribute to reproductive labour, in which the social, cultural, and economic capitals requisite to social advancement consolidate intergenerationally, is clear.

Ultimately, the image of a merit-based, borderless society populated by a transnational capitalist class diverse in social and cultural origin neglects the humanistic and historical complexities driving the knowledge economy. The consolidation of ELL, SA, and partnerships between “*élite*” institutions, vis-à-vis industrial and individual responses to this connection, establishes the capitals gleaned from costly international education paths not only as proxies of “cosmopolitan dispositions and competencies to excel in a global world” (Igarashi & Saito, 2014, p. 228) but, following the quasi-nationalistic ideoscape of global English as a prerequisite to the continued “development of Japan as a nation” (MEXT, 2003), “an expression of moral and civic worth” (Smith, 2021, p. 10). The potential outcome of such reform is the alienation of citizens who do (or, more pointedly, *can*) not adapt to a collectivist terrain by which “individuals and institutions must compete to be deemed meritorious” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 39). Cosmopolitan internationalism as cultural capital thereby emerges as a battleground in the ongoing tension between structure and agency, with the consolidation of social privilege through neoliberal educational markets underlining itself as a locus of stratification.

Indeed, Vickers (2018) ties official MEXT policy statements calling for a greater recognition of intercultural experiences amongst Japanese youths to the “mostly prosperous middle-class” (p. 5)—a claim that is hard to deny given the potential cost of SA sojourns, relative

to the institutional capital of the host HEI setting. A longitudinal, multinational study by Di Pietro (2020), for instance, found a quantifiable relationship between student mobility and increased social opportunity, with “students from more and less advantaged backgrounds account for a significant portion of this gap” (p. 12). More specifically to Japan, Entrich and Fujihara (2021) demonstrate a positive relationship between transmissible economic patrimony, pre-college study abroad intent (SAI), and their eventual participation (PSA), with “Japanese children from wealthier and well-educated families show[ing] a significantly higher likelihood to develop SAI and experience PSA” (p. 21). Further, the authors tie privileged socio-economic status directly to cosmopolitanism, with middle-class Japanese families “generally better fitting into the category of ‘rooted cosmopolitans’: a group of people usually fluent in at least two languages and with working/living experience in foreign countries” (p. 9).

The Enduring Pursuit of “World-class”: Achievable Goal or False Hope?

Following MEXT’s pivot toward asymmetrical neoliberalism, questions remain over whether Japanese endeavours to advance HE in terms of international ranking systems—for instance, through TGUP *Top Type* institutions—have borne fruit or simply reinforced the prevailing global hierarchy and domestic homeostasis. Providers of global HE analytics, notably the *Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)* and *Times Higher Education (THE)* systems, are frequently challenged for their emphasis on research over teaching and the self-perpetuating dominance of wealthy (particularly Anglospheric) HEIs (de Wit, 2018; Marginson, 2017; Yonezawa, 2010). From a neo-Marxist perspective, academic ranking systems present as a technology for securing hegemony (Welsh, 2021), serving to codify the supremacy of “Centrist” Western institutions but also complicit “Periphery” Japanese HEIs that, through the unequal allocation of priority and funding, are better positioned to attract and *reproduce* cosmopolitan learners privileged in social and economic capital

(Bourdieu, 1986). Against this background, one must ponder whether MEXT's enduring pursuit of institutional capital through external ranking systems parlays into pedagogy or, indeed, learning outcomes befitting its broader educational field?

In reality, there is scant evidence to suggest that Japanese investment in globally competitive HE has proven successful, with the rankings of flagship institutions (e.g., the Universities of Tokyo and Kyoto) lagging behind international and regional competitors (Lee et al., 2020). Indeed, based on QS and THE rankings, institutions in mainland China and neighbouring Hong Kong and Singapore significantly outperform their Japanese counterparts (Times Higher Education, 2020; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021). The ascendancy of Chinese HE, in particular, coincides with an increased focus on domestic research output, which nevertheless outpaces the nation's ability to ensure academic integrity (Tang, 2019). This example suggests that, rather than strengthen HE, the highly-competitive neoliberal pursuit of institutional (and, by proxy economic) capital regionally has compromised it. More pointedly, the ideological arms race to ascend the globally performative hierarchy emerges as a "contested terrain" (Amsler, 2013, p. 160), explicitly oriented toward capturing resources and regional power (Appadurai, 1990), somewhat irrespective of academic outcomes.

From a strictly Bourdieusian position, the exercise of neoliberal governmentality through hierarchised systems of education manifests as *symbolic violence*, wherein the domination of highly-ranked, brand-name institutions (and, by association, "rational" pathways for *entrepreneurs of the self* to attend such institutions) are constituted and maintained as doxa, despite the absence of tangible forces of oppression. In this sense, ranking systems occupy positions of undue influence, serving as cultural producers (Bourdieu, 1986), not only in terms of academic but societal knowledge, too, constructing "what become common categories for defining a power

relationship as natural and good” (Amsler, 2013, p. 156). Through the conversion of capital between its various states—for instance, from the social (middle-class upbringings), to institutional (brand-name credentials), to economic (high-paying employment)—valued knowledge and ways of being are rewarded, becoming embodied as “common sense” within the habitus. Thus, the *entrepreneur* against whom this domination is practised is complicit in its legitimation (Smith, 2021). Yet, the hegemony of ranking scales remains violent in the non-physical sense as “it unjustly limits, denies and revokes human possibility, legitimises even more economic and political forms of injustice, and arbitrarily presents an accomplished and contingent version of reality as inevitable” (Amsler, 2013, p. 156).

Briefly returning to educational credentials as dominant forms of class-distinguished institutional capital, for example, such is the strength of HEI brand-name hegemony to corporate Japan that the nation presents as an exemplar model for the corrosive power of shadow education. Indeed, recent data published by the Yano Research Institute (2016) estimates Japan’s supplementary education industry to have totalled ¥2.5 trillion (approximately US\$20.3 billion) in 2015, with ¥957 billion (around US\$7.8 billion) spent on university preparation tuition alone. In this regard, *yobikō*, or a private, pedagogically deregulated variety of *juku* emerge as *the* “rational choice” for those enterprising citizens who seek to navigate Japan’s highly-competitive culture of “exam hell”, whereby future vocational success is largely contingent on acceptance to one of the nation’s highly-ranked HEIs. This path is as well-founded as it is well-trodden; findings by Ono (2007), for instance, found a quantifiable relationship between *yobikō* investment, perceived college quality, and increased future earnings (p. 282). Considering learners from “from advantaged family backgrounds (at least one of both parents holds a university degree) are significantly more likely to enter *yobikō* (+19%)” (Entrich, 2018, p. 235), however, it is hard to

argue against Brinton's (2010) contention that such learners typically belong to middle-class households possessing the requisite economic resources to support tuition and living expenses (Brinton, 2010).

Notwithstanding the ideological connection between inequitable neoliberal marketisation and academic performativity, however, it has been argued that the pursuit of "élite" HE through unconscious modes of social domination fails to incentivise high-level pedagogy, with corporate Japan continuing to consider the name-value of institutions as indicative "of applicant trainability, rather than emphasising the acquisition of skills, knowledge or competencies of future employees" (Yonezawa & Meerman, 2012, p. 58). Despite Japan's push for globally-competitive jinzai, evaluation by the Institute for Management Development (IMD) indicates that Japan's HE system ranks 54th out of 64 nations in terms of its ability to reconcile the needs of a competitive economy, and 62nd for fostering sufficient language skills for global integration (IMD, 2021). Subsequent studies identifying the roots of this discrepancy found sub-par learning environments in which faculty failed to structure engaging pedagogy, further demotivated students pushing them towards non-study related activities (Ito, 2014). Against this background, there is little impetus for "élite" HEIs to improve their quality of instruction, as the respective name value of the institution helps maintain student enrolment. Thus, greater scrutiny should be given to whether ranking systems engender higher quality learning outcomes and innovation or simply trap the majority of domestic HEIs in a recurrent system of hegemonic "competition" weighted heavily against them.

Outwardly, one could interpret Japan's failure to reconcile its system of HE with the linguistic and, more broadly, human capital requirements of its economy as contradicting arguments detailing the significance and asymmetric prioritisation of market-orientated skills and outlooks within Japanese industry. Nevertheless, such readings remain simplistic insofar as they

disregard the contextual factors lurking beneath quantifiable metrics. While IMD rankings do, indeed, reflect all-too-real concerns over Japan's ongoing struggle to integrate its educational sector with the neoliberal knowledge economy, the fact that Japan continues to attempt such endeavours is without question. From MEXT (2003) linking "the progress of globalization in the economy and in society ... [to] ... the further development of Japan as a nation", to Simomura Hakubun's (2013) calls for bilateral student mobility in order for Japan to increase its international competitiveness, and TGUP's intention to "lead the internationalization of Japanese society" (MEXT, 2014). In all instances, policy rhetoric stresses the criticality of global jinzai to Japanese society and its future economic success; yet, former MEXT head Shimomura's (2013) assertion that "many important issues to be resolved still remain" (p. B1) remains, to this day, pertinent—not least of which is the reproductive function of the nation's internationalisation reform. Indeed, considering that IMD statistics reflect *the entirety* of Japan's HE sector, its is wholly unsurprising that it ranks so low relative to its competition given TGUP accounts for only 37 of Japan's approximately 780 universities (MEXT, 2012).

Additionally, with a cyclical process of league table "natural selection" in view, it should be noted that the prefectural university ranking systems driving prestige status and, by proxy, corporate hiring practices locally do not necessarily reflect the qualities of functions of the HEI but its respective strength of "brand". Conducted annually by Nikkei Business Publications, the annual *Brand Rankings of Japanese Universities* system surveys approximately 25,000 citizens, classifying each HEI in terms of six broad categories: "first-class status", "dynamicity", "creativity", "global outreach", "community contribution" and, somewhat enigmatically, "elegance and sincerity" (Nikkei Business Publications, 2020). In steering broader subjective positions of HEIs towards brand power, the connection between tertiary education and competitive

markets is evident. Indeed, terms such as “dynamic”, “creativity”, “global”, and “community” directly reflect calls from the Japanese corporate sector for educational reform during the 1980s (JCED, 1993, p. 285). Notwithstanding broader pushback against the neoliberal forces shaping academic ranking systems (Clegg, 2008), calls to ensure clear paths towards meritocratic social mobility for future graduates remain (Webber, 2016). Indeed, this duality is particularly ubiquitous in CHC contexts where individual households assume greater economic responsibility for tertiary education, thereby ensuring access to social mobility is restricted to those with adequate resources to do so (Marginson, 2011). Nevertheless, Welsh (2021) argues against the “market myth” of academic audit regimes, noting that ranking systems contribute to social stratification that “neither engenders market-like behaviours nor an equitable and efficient distribution of resources based on free-market competition” (p. 908).

Japanese HEIs and by extension, Japanese institutions and companies more broadly, have achieved remarkable success historically by carving a unique path which aligns with Japanese cultural values and perspectives. As indicated here, the adoption of Neoliberal (and, by proxy, *Western-centric*) HE policy reforms has achieved mixed results, with grant-funded Japanese HEIs able to achieve *some* of the goals prescribed under successive internationalisation initiatives from a quantitative perspective, if ultimately failing in others. However, this paper has argued that the appropriation of policy frameworks from other contexts reproduces the hegemony of the global order of HE, while simultaneously reinforcing anti-meritocratic, cosmopolitan educational practices within Japanese education. For this reason, it is the authors’ assertion that these initiatives be reassessed with input from the relevant stakeholders.

Conclusions

Following Bourdieu's genetic structuralist ontology, the present inquiry holds that one's deeply ingrained skills, habits, and dispositions are best understood in terms of their dynamic and recursive relation to external cultural flows. In the present context, a noticeable link emerges between Japanese society, internationalisation reform, and the assumption that neoliberal soft skills, including foreign language proficiency, "global" mindsets, and interculturality (Smith & Samuelli, 2022), precipitate meritocratic access to "élite" HE and coveted forms of employment beyond it (Ross, 2008). Nevertheless, the de-historicised logic undergirding selection and hierarchisation within education reproduce inequities that cannot be legitimated based on merit (Lauder et al., 2012). Indeed, following Japan's Confucian model of hierarchical meritocracy, the race to establish globally competitive HE systems actively excludes the majority of learners via its strict yet inherently asymmetric adherence to "effort-based" reward. Thus, the emergence of international cosmopolitanism as a class-distinguished capital mediates inclusion and exclusion during the struggle for social mobility, severely disadvantaging those who are unable to adapt to competitive market conditions. This, in turn, exerts a knock-on effect throughout Japanese HE. Through covert mechanisms for social domination, the pursuit of "world-class" status within the globally performative hierarchy strengthens hegemony while concurrently stifling academic standards and the equitable distribution of resources.

Japan's pursuit of "world-class" HE, vis-à-vis performative criteria dictated through neoliberal orthodoxy, demonstrates that, in reality, contemporary internationalisation reform in HE serves few stakeholders. This realisation signals that states wishing to adopt a neoliberal framework to promote the successful transformation of HE should pause to consider the practicality and, indeed, broader sociological impacts of laissez-faire governance in education. If Japan—home to a robust economy and the first state in the region to massify its HE sector—cannot

succeed in its approach, can less established sectors do so? Additionally, this paper suggests that the appropriation of internationalism as cultural capital, in conjunction with the utilisation of quantitative metrics prescribed by global rankings systems, offers little benefit to students, educators, and institutions as it is presently leveraged. HE sectors should thus shape internationalisation reform to benefit their localities, rather than vice-versa. In doing so, such processes may better ensure that global currents flow in favour of *all* stakeholders, ultimately improving the quality of education outside the Anglosphere and the inherent meritocracy of HE regionally.

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ⁱ Approximately \$135.6 million USD using rates of exchange accurate to 2008.

ⁱⁱ Original source in Japanese. Text translated by the authors.

ⁱⁱⁱ Approximately \$10,000USD,

^{iv} Emphasis present in original text.

^v Emphasis added by authors.

^{vi} Emphasis added by authors.