

The Rise of International Schools in China: Critical Perspectives on Trends and Issues

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Background

In the present context of intensifying internationalisation of education at the pre-tertiary level, schools that are identified as ‘international’ have proliferated in diverse geographical locations. According to the ISC Research (2019a), a widely cited UK-based data provider on the English-medium K-12 international school market, there were over 10,400 such schools globally by March 2019. This number is about a double of that ten years ago (Brummitt, 2009). Besides the sheer volume of market expansion, there have been profound, qualitative developments that make international schools more complex than previously understood. These changes are most notable in terms of a more localised student body, new forms of school ownership and governance, diffusion of school locations in more commercialised and popularised settings (Bunnell, 2014, 2019).

In recent years, international schools have created a major growth point in mainland China, at an annual growth rate of around 10%. ISC Research (2019b) estimated that there were 857 English-medium international schools in China by mid-January 2019, more than any other country in the world, while the number stood at just 22 in 2000 and 260 by June 2010 (Brummitt & Keeling, 2013). These schools in China have gathered increasing spotlight, especially in the media and reports about what has evidently become a global industry of international schooling.

In China, the international school sector is very loosely structured and comprises three main types of ‘international schools’:

1. Schools for non-Chinese passport holders, legally named ‘schools for children of foreign personnel’ (SCFPs);
2. International divisions/programmes at local public high schools, often in the form of Chinese-Foreign joint ventures.
3. Private (*minban*) Chinese international schools, including a wide range of bilingual schools that adopt integrated Chinese and international curricula.

Table 1: Types of international schools in China

	Schools for children of foreign personnel (SCFPs)	International divisions/programmes in public schools	Private Chinese international schools
Student composition	Foreign only	Mainly Chinese*	Mainly Chinese
Founder	Legitimate foreign bodies registered in China, or foreigners with residency permit	Domestic public schools in cooperation with foreign institutions and/or third parties	Chinese citizens, or legitimate Chinese-owned social organisations
Curriculum	Compulsory education (G1-9)	N/A for Chinese students	Chinese national curriculum blended by more English and/or international modules**
	Senior secondary education (G10-12)	Chinese core high school courses + international curriculum + related courses (e.g. TOEFL, SAT)	Chinese core high school courses*** + international curriculum + related courses (e.g. TOEFL, SAT)

* A small number of international divisions are set up independently within local public schools and enroll foreign students only. They are similar to SCFPs.

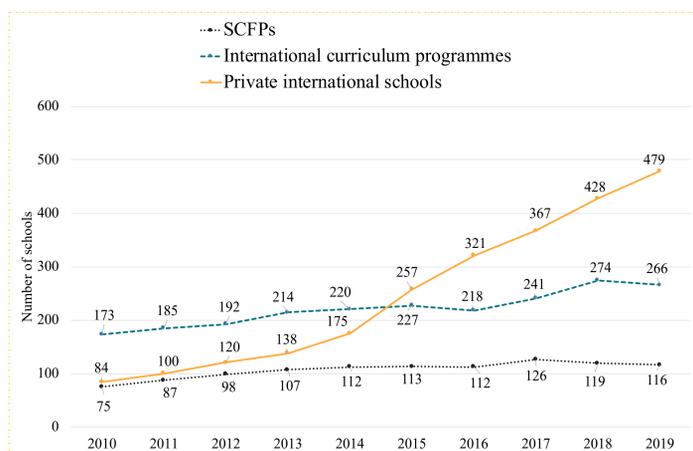
** At the compulsory education level, all Chinese students must complete the national curriculum.

*** Private schools are more flexible in providing Chinese curriculum at G10-12.

Table 2. Phases of development of international schools in China

Phases	Contributing factors	School characteristics
1980s – mid-1990s: ‘Foreign schools’ as ‘international schools’	Reform and opening-up in political and economic spheres; increasing numbers of foreigners working in China	Providing curriculum based on the home country system; a high degree of autonomy in school operation; enrollment of Chinese students strictly forbidden
Late-1990s – 2000s: Growth of international schools for Chinese students	Globalisation; China joining the WTO; economic development – an emerging wealthy class; demand for improving education quality through looking West	International programmes at public high schools as joint ventures with partners in specific countries (students’ destination countries); fewer stand-alone private international schools
2010s – present: Dominance of the private sector	Rising middle class; popularity of overseas study at an earlier age; demand for English learning; increasing educational marketisation and corporatisation	K-12 schools; private, corporatised, franchised, accredited, profit-oriented; involving school investors and shareholders from non-educational sectors

Figure 1. Growth of international schools in China by category (2010-2019)



Source: NewSchool Insight (2019)

Critical issues related to international schooling

The Anglo-American-led monopoly of global quality standards in international education programmes

For English-medium international schools in China, there is a tacit agreement to adopt the educational products provided by a few international educational organisations (particularly the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge Assessment International Education, and the College Board) that are believed to be the makers of a world standard for international education. Students at international school in China also must take the tests and engage in the activities designed by these organisations to prove their academic competence to overseas universities. A high degree of uniformity of curriculum and assessment standards is likely to induce the adoption of criteria of limited dimensions for appraising the ‘best practice’ in education, making alternative criteria less noticeable. If existing standards prevail and remain uncontested, there would be fewer opportunities for critical inquiry during the process of knowledge construction, shrinking the space for innovating traditional and more locally-oriented educational practices.

Social-cultural reproduction in a transnational learning space: choosing the ‘right kind’ student?

International schools in China have acted as sifting machines that select students with not only the economic capital but also the economically valued cultural and intellectual capital. These privileged forms of capital have generated imbalances of power among schools, educators, students and their families through the production and normalisation of specific cultural scripts or imaginaries in education. In international schools, since most courses and examinations that are key to the students’ university admissions are derived from Western education systems, the English language and Western-style pedagogies have naturally become the norm of the classrooms. Students who are in a better position to learn English and who are more accustomed to Western education models (such as presentations and group discussions) are more likely to benefit from the international schooling environment; whereas those who lack these traits would find it more challenging to participate and stand out in the learning process.

Export-import Win-win? Unequal Powers in Disguise

The development of China’s international school market is based on a growing asymmetry between export and import of educational and human resources. The strong market potential of international schools in China is about to expand the arena where culturally dominant countries in the world promote and transmit established brands of knowledge as a means to maintain competitiveness at both political and economic points of vantage. This vantage will, in turn, sustain the continuous morphing of the global international education industry by similar patterns. Moreover, when there are signs from the receiving countries that seem to hinder the exportation practices for the purpose of safeguarding their national educational sovereignty (a case in point being the Chinese government’s recent restrictions on international curriculum and foreign capital in compulsory education), these non-dominant societies are likely to be accused of being somehow ‘un-international’ or ‘illiberal’. Even in the realm of international education, the values and ideologies may not be as inclusive and internationalist as generally conceived.

The excessive marketisation, inequalities in educational opportunities, and the race for national educational interests associated with international schooling are prominent issues demanding deep considerations. As this premature sector evolves daily, education policymakers and researchers are under the imperative to search for ways to properly guide and support international schools in China and other countries facing this new wave of international schooling movement.

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