

Exploring the Changing Pathway to Cultivating an Elite 'International' Child in China

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Abstract. In the context of globalization, upper-middle-class parents choose international schools as an educational strategy to prepare their children to become cosmopolitans through the accumulation of linguistic and cosmopolitan cultural capital that can be transferred and bring advantages in the future. This article examines how legislative changes influence the international school market in China, affect parents' choices while raising an 'international' child. In order to gain a competitive edge, this research hypothesized that parents might alter their school selection strategy and begin to accumulate 'start-up' capital for their children before compulsory schooling.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the number of accredited international schools in China has increased quite rapidly, with a continuously expanding market worth 46.2 billion yuan in 2021 [1]. As a tool for reproducing wealth and privilege, elite international schools employ internationally oriented strategies and frameworks to adapt to the shifting conditions of globalization [2]. However, the rigorous policies in 2020 and 2021 have accelerated the standardization of the international school market in China. The heart of the increasing global interaction is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural alienation [3]. This paper explores how policy reforms affect the international school market in China, consequently altering the paths parents choose when raising an 'international' child.

2 'TRADITIONAL' AND 'NON-TRADITIONAL' INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

The expanding number of international schools should not be seen as a homogeneous group. As with any established educational industry, there is now a stratified market in international schools geared at distinct customer groups, i.e., 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' international schools [4]. According to Hayden and Thompson's typology, 'traditional' international schools are mainly founded to accommodate the demands of internationally mobile expatriate families who deem the local education system unsuitable [4]. These international schools operate primarily to serve the expatriate community in the city or surrounding region where they are located [4]. This sort of elite schools have an idealized depiction of the type of

children or parents the school would desire to admit. Moreover, 'envisionment' is regarded as a crucial component for admissions publicity - elite traditional international schools have constructed a picture of the 'perfect' child or citizen of the future, which they use to shape children [5].

On the other hand, the 'non-traditional' internationalized schools have catered primarily for the socio-economically privileged elite of home country [4,6]. These families desire an international curriculum and credential for their children that is distinct from mainstream education in home country and consider it to be of greater quality to provide their children with a comparative advantage through capital accumulation [4,6]. In brief, this type of school is designed to meet the needs of local students who wish to study abroad. As a consequence of globalization, the middle class in developing countries has expanded to a size that is now adequate to sustain the shift of such a market from an elite to a more general position [7]. This phrase might embrace a wide range of variations of non-traditional schools in China, including public schools with international departments/classes, private international schools and branches of elite British/American institutions with curriculum ranging from kindergarten to high school. The integrated Chinese national curriculum and foreign curriculum, bilingual education, a student body that is predominately Chinese, and the presence of Chinese nationals in the majority of leadership roles are some vital elements of a non-traditional international school in China [8]. This is also defined as GEMIS (Globalized English Medium of Instruction Schools) by Bunnell [9].

Among GEMIS, Bunnell outlines a sort of educational institution that appears to be exclusive to the Chinese context, termed 'non-premium schools' [9]. These schools provide a hybrid of multiple curricula, such as combining foreign programme with the Chinese National Curriculum,

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demonstrating their targeted appeal to middle-class groups^[8]. They may label themselves as bilingual schools and seem to be partial or substandard counterparts of more typical traditional international schools, hence representing a departure from them. The critical characteristics of ‘non-premium schools’ are non-accredited, predominantly profit-driven, and numerous unqualified instructors were employed^[10]. Therefore, firstly, the value and quality are not uniformly distributed over the international school field in China. The fact that certain schools’ legitimacy has been widely challenged has resulted in a radical shift in the perspective of educators and experts towards the industry. One critical claim is that some GEMIS are only nominally ‘international’, with only locals and a few token expatriates as consultants providing English instruction.^[11]

Secondly, it can no longer expect the GEMIS industry to operate independently and free from political influence. Government scrutiny has become more robust due to the growth and formation of for-profit ‘non-quality schools’ that “lack authorization or accreditation certificates and standardized”^[9]. Additionally, in the context of a Socialist state with a Confucian legacy, China has maintained strict control over the educational system to develop and sustain a national identity. For instance, the government censors the content to guarantee that international and Western curriculum do not undermine national interests and national identity^[12, 13].

3 POLICY REFORM

The Chinese government’s policy reform has been a main measure to maintain control over GEMIS, especially in the last three years. Private schools have boosted Chinese education supply and led to the diversification of educational growth. However, the expansion of private education autonomy and public competition for high-quality educational resources have led to a high-level screening mechanism for compulsory education that violate children’s demands for educational fairness. In the past, Chinese private schools had nearly unlimited authority in selecting pupils, but this has changed dramatically. Starting from the 2020 school year, the policy of ‘simultaneous admission to public and private schools’ was implemented. This policy mandated the integration of private primary and secondary school enrolment into the approved unified administration^[14]. If the number of applications exceeds the planned enrollment, computer-generated random admissions will be implemented. It is also worth noting that the policy prohibits private elementary and middle schools from selecting students through any test or interview. The ultimate purpose of this policy for private schools is to remove their former privilege of selecting students, and this applies to all private GEMIS.

The intensive policy introduced in 2021 has accelerated the process of standardization of GEMIS. The revised *Regulations on the Implementation of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of Private Education* was a transformative change for the

Chinese international school industry - stricter private compulsory education market investment and market access policy, as well as school-running and operation norms. The impact of the policy on GEMIS is briefly described as followed. First, private schools implementing compulsory education (K1-9) must thoroughly apply the Chinese National Curriculum and are not allowed to use foreign teaching materials and curriculum^[14]. In addition, foreign investment in compulsory education is forbidden - private schools implementing compulsory education are not permitted to negotiate with interest parties, and the legal personality of international schools, as well as the usage of instructional materials, are more strictly regulated^[14]

In the past, importing curriculum and instructional materials from Western nations was a frequent tactic for enhancing the ‘international’ reputation of GEMIS. The new legislation was then regarded by school administrators as an intentional blow to the rapidly expanding international school industry. Some GEMIS with primary or secondary sections might switch to the Chinese National Curriculum and used government-mandated textbooks rather than imported Western materials^[13]. Therefore, those who relied significantly on foreign curriculum and instructional materials among GEMIS had been hit the hardest. Under multiple policy constraints, GEMIS at the compulsory education level has begun to explore transformation, with some offering integrated quality classes and unique bilingual electives to maintain their ‘international’ attributes and to set different tuition fees to respond to the needs of different parents and students.

It is also worth noting that the daily norms and rituals implemented by GEMIS, including the raising of the flag and the singing of the national anthem, have led to the perception that they are imparting a new politically expedient form of international education, i.e., ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’^[10, 12]. The idea of ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ acknowledges that national-local settings, where nationalism persists and occasionally reemerges, continuously interprets and adopts global schooling trends^[12]. It could be utilized to comprehend how GEMIS intertwine and integrate cosmopolitan and patriotic inclinations and how this practice produces new manifestations of individual identities.

4 THE DIMINISHEDMENT ‘INTERNATIONAL’ ATTRIBUTES OF GEMIS IN COMPULSORY EDUCATION

It can be recognized that the ‘international’ attributes of primary and junior GEMIS have diminished after the policy was implemented. This policy change could alter school choices for new middle-class parents - with the shift from the Anglo-American curriculum to the Chinese National Curriculum, GEMIS may no longer provide advantages for their children at the compulsory level. In particular, the accumulation of linguistic and cosmopolitan capital.

Firstly, linguistic capital can be developed via language acquisition in a globalized economy, which is

frequently used to assess globalization and cosmopolitanism^[15]. In this setting, non-native speakers learn English for broad reasons. First, they improve their English with the expectation that it will provide benefits and opportunities for a wider life path. Language education affects language behaviors in schools based on political, cultural, and ideological circumstances. In terms of social stratification and mobility, this suggests that people with insufficient competence would be marginalized^[16]. The accumulation and utilization of cultural, social and economic capital are connected to the ownership of linguistic capital, which ultimately gives those who possess it more power in the pursuit of social position and respect^[16]. Notably, children not only have fewer advantages while building up their linguistic capital in the GEMIS after the school transformation, but they also do not have the option of doing so through extra-curricular tutoring services. Another major policy shift in 2021 was the announcement of the *Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework and Off-campus Training on Students in Compulsory Education* ('double-reduction policy'). The 'double reduction policy' has accelerated the reconfiguration of the Chinese public education system, which has banned academic training in all extra-curricular institutions^[17]. This is another obstacle for parents who want their children to develop a linguistic advantage.

In addition, it is believed that 'international' experiences will instil particular information, mindsets, capabilities, and experiences to people^[18]. These combinations of abilities are referred as 'cosmopolitan capital' that are valued in the competition for privileged positions in a social arena that is becoming globalized^[18]. In particular, for previous GEMIS at the compulsory stage that provided an Anglo-American curriculum, the accumulated cosmopolitan capital might include engaging with teachers of different nationalities and diverse cultures, reading books and periodicals for a global audience, and possessing near-native English abilities. Koh and Ziqi found that to educate pupils to comprehend and accept cultural diversity, the contents should cover history and heritage, customs, and life experiences from other nations^[19]. Cosmopolitanism is a focus on the globe as a whole, rather than on a particular region or group^[20,21]. It also involves being inclusive with multiplicity. Consequently, cosmopolitanism can function as a form of cultural capital, promoting social stratification and social mobility. However, GEMIS has undergone an institutional transformation due to the influence of local authority structures, legislation, and control systems on global mobility and internationalization. It is argued that an emergent local model was shaped and customized in terms of curriculum, events and school management^[19]. At this level, cosmopolitan capital becomes more challenging to access.

5 THE POSSIBLE CHANGING PATHWAY TO CULTIVAING AN 'INTERNATIONAL' CHILD

The impact of 'double reduction' and private education policy reforms on GEMIS in compulsory education can cause Chinese upper-middle class parents to reconsider the school choice and educational pathway for their children. Parents used to believe that such a schooling experience would strengthen their children's linguistic capital, awareness of diversity, and appreciation of different cultures^[12]. However, the bilingual/international schools they once thought would provide their children with a competitive edge are undergoing a transformation. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that parents' eyes may focus back on pre-school education since they are relatively independently operated, which still allows using the foreign curriculum, such as the British Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Early childhood investment in education is now considered an upward mobility tactic for the elite class. The 'start-up' capital accumulated in the early years consists of various capital with exchange value for pupils to establish a competitive edge. Koh and Ziqi's study defines 'start-up' capital as "the early foundational knowledge and skills whereby students acquire and begin to accumulate a composition of categories of capitals" (p.5)^[19]. By hiring English-native instructors and incorporating international and intercultural activities into the curriculum, these kindergartens embrace 'international' components to elevate the kindergarten to an 'elite' status. Another feature is that this type of kindergarten is selective - parents who wish to send their children to an international kindergarten should attend an admissions interview, which is not currently subject to the policy mentioned above of simultaneous admission to public and private schools. Given that symbolic capital can have an advantage, some parents may view the screening process used by elite international kindergartens as 'different from others' and providing a 'positional advantage'^[19].

According to Koh and Ziqi's findings¹⁹, firstly, elite international kindergarten's 'start-up' capital aptly emphasizes the linguistic capital sought by parents who want their children to have a solid start in English, as it is a capital that is transferable and brings advantages in the future. Secondly, play-based learning is employed to foster children's curiosity and creativity, encourage self-assurance, and promote oratory and presentation abilities - English is utilized here in elite international kindergarten^[19]. Moreover, the observed kindergarten aims to expose children to global citizenship education and become prospective leaders at a young age by conducting cultural lessons to obtain cosmopolitan capital^[19]. Looking at citizenship education from a global perspective, training students to understand their own country in a global context and to use the cultures of other countries to enrich their own lives is a strategy for coping with economic globalization^[22]. Therefore, the disparity in education between state public kindergarten and market-driven private elite international kindergartens would have far-

reaching consequences for the reproduction and stratification of social classes within Chinese social structure.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper highlights policy changes regarding GEMIS over the past three years and possible changing pathways for raising ‘international’ children in China. For example, by enrolling children in elite kindergartens to build up so-called ‘start-up’ capital in the early years^[19]. The key arguments are below: firstly, international schools should be viewed as heterogeneous groups with stratified classes rather than homogeneous groups. Secondly, China has tight control over the international education system to develop and maintain its national identity. The term ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ can be adopted in explaining global-local interactions – as the GEMIS industry cannot operate independently from political influence. Additionally, after the implementation of the policy, the ‘international’ features of primary and junior GEMIS have diminished, which may lead Chinese upper-middle class parents to reconsider the school choice and educational pathway for their children. Finally, this paper hypothesized that parents might change their school choice strategy and start to build ‘start-up’ capital for their children before compulsory schooling to develop a competitive advantage.

Despite the value of ‘start-up’ capital for future schooling, a pivotal point to explore is the type of primary schools that children attend after kindergartens, for example, national public/private/traditional international schools. If children choose to study under the mainstream Chinese education system at the primary school level, which is exam-oriented, selective and highly competitive. In that case, children may not benefit from the elite kindergarten schooling experience, and more research is needed in future.

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