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Customised Western Education?
A critique of a Chinese international Foundation course

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1. Introduction

In the past few decades, Chinese students' pursuit of international education has increased significantly and the United Kingdom has become one of their preferred destinations (Chu, 2021), mostly due to the globally constructed prestige of their universities and for the social and cultural offerings (Cebolla-Boada et al., 2017), both seen as a capital investment. At the same time, there has been an expansion of UK universities actively involved in entering China with a market-seeking internationalisation strategy, backed up by the UK government's aims to increase its education export value (Wu and Koh, 2021; Li and Roberts, 2012), and the Chinese government's interest in letting market forces partially replace state forces in highly profitable sectors (Liu and Crossley, 2010). To answer this demand of higher education (HE) and to compete with conventional international schools, new service firms presented as educational centres have emerged in China to prepare students to the international mobility pursued. Also known as private tutoring institutions (PTI), they are local-run businesses managed by Chinese agents with, in some cases, a partnership with UK universities to which they are affiliated through different contractual forms.

It is common that once Chinese students finish high school and before entering a university in the UK, they study a one-year preparatory course – known as Foundation – abroad or, according to more recent China-UK cooperative programmes, they have the opportunity to do the same course in their home country. The Foundation course based on the British curriculum is thus exported, replicated and delivered in China, the largest market of UK transnational education (TNE) (Yu, 2021). It is accredited by the UK to guarantee the quality control expected and later facilitate the entry of Chinese students in their universities' bachelor degrees. Such is the context of the Beijing-based tutoring institution discussed in this essay, who became the first Chinese partner of a renowned UK Art and Design university and now a strong national reference over the years for its international teaching environment. However, the different social actors within this for-profit Foundation course in Art and Design (FAD) – students, teachers and administrators – struggle to concur on the same aims and values as its hybrid identity between education and service in and outside the classroom, between Western and Chinese cultures, global aspirations and local realities, is understood rather differently. In this context, the way these different views diminish Western teachers' educational purposes is the main focus of this essay.

Therefore, between typical Foundation courses based in the UK, traditional and non-traditional international schools based in China, and market-oriented Chinese training centres immersed in the private tutoring industry, rises an attempt of a new model of education implemented by this Foundation course. Its hybrid nature and the context in which it resides, in interaction with the other models, will be discussed in the first part of this essay. The tension between education and its marketisation will be developed further in the second part while the cultural complexity of teaching and learning a Western curriculum in a Chinese context will be explored in the last part.

2. The Foundation course in the Chinese transnational education context

In the last two decades, most of international schools in China target Chinese students aspiring for a domestic international education – or transnational education (TNE) – as a transition towards a higher

education overseas (Wu and Koh, 2021), such as the UK with its highly valued universities degree in both material and immaterial forms (Yu, 2021). TNE that takes place in China seems “beneficial for Chinese students to gain the linguistic and institutionalised cultural capital that is necessary for future global mobility, as well as to imitate the educational habitus in the field of global education that is dominated by ‘the West’” (ibid., p.233). It is to say that regardless of school model divergences to be exposed later on, the Foundation course and its competitors all serve the goal to better place students in UK universities. Private tutoring institutions and international schools all market themselves as “offering a positional advantage to their consumers with the promise of increasing their competitiveness when applying to Western universities” (Wu and Koh, 2021, p.15). Such promise seduces a wealthier middle-class who has increasingly looked for follow-up services outside the traditional state-regulated school environment, which has constituted a highly profitable business niche for education agents (Xiang and Wei, 2009). To better analyse the characteristics of the Sino-British Foundation course discussed here, it first needs to be situated into the wider range of international pre-degree courses considered at some degree as equivalent models.

The first example to discuss would logically be the reference model existing in the UK. Traditionally, the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design is a one-year preparation course provided by most of universities and presented as an ideal bridge towards their undergraduate studies. It aims to broaden students’ theoretical and practical understanding of art and design disciplines while supporting a progression onto their BA course by building a broad portfolio of creative projects and preparing them for their interviews with the universities of their choice (Pearson Education Limited, 2020).

In China, a conventional entry route towards higher education overseas is globally recognised and guaranteed by International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) schools, which have increased to 150 schools nationwide being authorised to offer the diploma according to the latest data (IBO, 2021). Although the IBDP schools in China remain elitist due to enrolment barriers for Chinese nationals and considerable high tuition fees (Wright and Lee, 2014), they are distinguished as a leading reference in preparing students for university studies in North America and the UK (Lee et al., 2014).

Outside the IB system, there is an increase of Chinese internationalised high schools that implement the national curriculum while drawing on international educational concepts, methods and standards; the desire and pressure of embracing cosmopolitan values in an interconnected world while recognising aspects of nationalism (Wright et al., 2021; Poole, 2019). According to Hayden and Thompson’s typology of international schools (2013), IB schools in China would be considered ‘traditional’ international schools for the globally mobile expatriate families while the local high schools would be considered ‘non-traditional’ international schools for host country nationals who seek a more globally oriented education.

Beside these last two conventional models of international schools, the TNE sector has diversified to cater the demand of portfolio and interview preparations at a pre-degree level through external education agencies – also known as private tutoring institutions – that follow a much more market-oriented and outcome-based curricula (Feng, 2021). These centres have become dominant actors in the private education sectors also known as the *shadow education* sector (ibid.). They see education as a commodity, providing tailor-made services and supporting students “as ‘customers’ of educational products who make their ‘purchase’

decisions based on their perception of the quality of the educational services and the quality of their delivery” (Liu and Crossley, 2010, p.330), which questions teacher-students relationship regarding the curriculum in the teaching and learning process. Shadow education is thus differentiated from schooling in individualised learning, cater for some rather than accessible to all, market-driven, more flexible and adaptive to change rather than conservative and stable, with tutors seen as service providers rather than professional educators (Zhang and Bray, 2020). The status of PTIs in China is ambiguous but often takes the form of “vocational-technical training institutions (minban peixun jigou)” (Liu and Sammons, 2021, p.2), therefore recognised as private educational institutions but regulated by local ministries as businesses (ibid.).

In essence, the Foundation course discussed in this essay is set in a private tutoring institution owned and managed by Chinese local operators but layered on the surface by foreign staff as a guarantee of British-style education in Art and Design. It is then made more attractive for students well supported financially, able to pay tuition fee of 300,000 RMB – 35,000 pounds – in an ‘all-inclusive application package’ and looking for “a mode of overseas service delivery” towards the best universities (Li and Roberts, 2012, p.1014). Further, as the institution has capitalised the brand name of its host university in the UK, it enhances its reputation and maximise its market value to become a respected brand, synonym of ‘excellence’. However, as discussed earlier, its status is not of a school or pre-degree course but of a training institution, which does not give the legitimacy that it could have if only based on the curriculum. From this pedagogical angle only, it could be seen as a China-based IB school, where the quality of the curriculum is assured by an international teaching team. If only scrutinised by its audience of Chinese students, some would consider it a ‘non-traditional’ international school where mainly locals attend, but with the particularity of having lessons totally independent from any Chinese discourse and state regulation due to its self-financed nature. Rather, its service-oriented status as a tutoring institution brings it closer to the fourth model discussed where operations outside the classroom are capitalised, shifting the school to a profit-driven business that aims to secure offers to UK universities.

3. The complex reality of a for-profit education

The economic understanding of what higher education is, follows what Chinese families pursue in mobilising “economic resources to access international schooling principally for its utility as a validated pathway to highly ranked universities abroad, which was complemented by aspirations for a more globally oriented and liberal education” (Wright et al. 2021, p.10). This choice is also a ‘way out’ for many to avoid the National College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*), which is well-known to be highly competitive in admissions to satisfying domestic universities (Liu et al., 2021). As Wu and Koh (2021, p.15) put it, the “consumption of international schooling as transnational positional good is a strategy parents from affluent families use to enhance the “positional competition” of their children”. Students may in turn expect higher incomes and a heightened social status by investing in overseas HE when later coming back to China (Xiang and Wei, 2009). It is to be noticed how essential is to grasp the cultural and social context in which students/customers are to face the current job market, as these utilitarian purposes may have an increasing strong influence on the content of professional education programmes (Liu and Crossley, 2010, p.324).

In the Chinese HE context, Liu and Crossley (2010, p.331) claimed that “considerable dangers exist in transforming higher education organisational cultures in ways that are designed to satisfy the expectations of ‘customers’”, as the users of such educational commodities come to dictate a buying-and-selling relationship (ibid.), which could seriously damage the aims and values of education that teachers seek to disseminate throughout their curriculum. These pedagogical values based, for instance, on growth mindset, which refers to the belief that intelligence can be developed over time through challenges, effort and resilience to setbacks (Rattan et al., 2015), may have to face an education being turned into an effortless private good. In a student-as-customer model (SAC), students may not see themselves as co-producers of learning as teachers would require (Gillespie and Zachary, 2010). Every time our Foundation students do not understand the purpose of an activity or have failed to work as it was expected from them, they report discontent and are immediately attended through a preferential treatment rather than confronting their own impatience as part of any learning process. Although students’ needs have to be listened to when misunderstandings occur, this grows “a concern about the negative impact of the increasing power of students as customers as the School adapted to the market order” (Liu, 2009, p.216).

If education is seen as a commodity to sale and students are seen as customers, there are certainly gaps between their “expectations and their subjective perception of the actual experience” (Ng and Forbes, 2009, p.53), leading to their discontent and complaints if some of these gaps are opened. The core service of the Foundation course is not only embodied in the learning experience of the student – which is “emergent, unstructured, interactive, and uncertain” (ibid., p.48) – but in specific, tangible results expected by all, such as a UK university offer and the Foundation diploma at the end of the year. The vocational orientation where the student judges the institution based on the capacity to give them the expected offer to a top university seems, in most cases, to overcome the academic and personal orientations that their one-year study could bring them in learning about themselves through project making, trial and error experimentation, teamwork, among other lifelong learnings. As teachers who encourage the creative process over the outcome, this utilitarian need comes to question teaching methods at an ethical level as it demands adjustments to the profit of the students, who erroneously see the process as a burden rather than a transformative lesson.

Further, if students pay high tuition fees as it is the case in this Foundation course, they may feel entitled to the diploma and the university offer that they have *paid* for (Gillespie and Zachary, 2010), even more when it has been guaranteed by the marketing team of the institution during the enrolment phase. They may not always be informed explicitly that their desired education outcome – a good range of high-quality creative projects – must be co-produced and that the effort has to come from both sides in order to obtain an offer of study in a UK university. This gap between the delivery of the service by the teaching team through a curriculum that demands students’ active involvement and the institution’s external – and even internal – communication that is customer-oriented, may be problematic. This is reinforced by what Ng and Forbes (2009, p.54) call the *ideological gap* as “the difference between designing the service toward fulfilling students’ expectations and designing the service toward what the institution believes the students *should* experience”. In the Foundation course, this gap mainly isolates the foreign teaching team as they are the only ones focusing their curriculum on academic excellence rather than the vocational relevance that most of

students, parents, administrators and the marketing team would like it to become. However, a teaching staff that would fully comply to the market-oriented approach of the for-profit institution for which they work for would be in some way in contradiction with their pedagogical mission and educational aims, values and beliefs. As Liu (2009, p.217) argues against a too commercially-oriented education, it is “a sector that needs to resist complete adaptation to corporate values and market pressure because it should help to realise the demands of social movement for social justice, redress, and equity”. These values among precepts that demand reflection and engagement to create self-aware individuals and communities can be weakened in a business-centred sector where education is no longer seen as a public good.

As it happens regularly in the Foundation, financial pressures may force teachers “to admit unqualified students to increase tuition revenues” and administrators “to deal with complaints from parents and students when their experiences fell short of expectations” (Wu and Koh, 2021, p.11). The Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated this pressure as Chinese student application decreased by 21% for the UK (Chu, 2021), which ends up raising questions on whether students are enrolled in the course for their ability to pay or their academic merit. In this ambiguous knowledge economy in which the nature of the educational institution is discussed, teachers may also wonder what their role is, whether seen as professional educators or service providers that please their customers’ needs (Liu, 2009). In the SAC model, a positive behaviour would be “honouring office hours, responding promptly to students’ questions and increasing accessibility” (Gillespie and Zachary, 2010, p.277), which may subvert academic rigor to student desires, promote grade inflation and reduce student responsibility (ibid.). It is to be noted that teachers deal with difficulty with this dual reality as, again, students expect a service rather than education. Even a teaching approach that gives more personal attention to the student may be understood differently from different sides. From the teacher’s perspective, it is a child-centred approach focused on individual development, as defined by Bottery (1990) and applied knowingly through one-to-one tutorials but, from all the other social actors’ perspective, that may be perceived as a customised service logically expected from a tutoring institution.

As we have seen, the tension between marketing and education may crumble the purposes of education and the appreciation of knowledge for its own sake (Natale et al., 2015), but at the same time marketing has become “an important tool in adult and continuing education to make the public aware of the existence of the institution and its various programmes” (Liu, 2009, p.215). As Ng and Forbes (2009, p.58) insist, “good marketing and a student orientation do not need to be at the expense of good higher education” as an educational institution has to reach out and understand students’ needs to improve the cocreation of the learning experience. An ideal environment would demonstrate high standards of quality in both teaching and student support services (Liu and Crossley, 2010, p.330), but again, the danger lies to have a greater focus “on the financial gains to be obtained from running such programmes, at the expense of core academic values” (ibid., p.329). As such, it is exactly where the Foundation is heading as its private tutoring status requires it, and its educational orientation is highly dependent on Western teachers’ personalities and professional aims, which makes us wonder how it would evolve without them. Hence, if the heads of the institution continue insisting on the customised service to be provided while not officialising specific

educational aims and values in a clear social contract, it is not surprising that confusions arise as everyone interpret what sort of education the programme should respond to according to their own interests.

4. The Western educational model questioned in the Chinese context

Outside the classroom, the Foundation course deals with the service paradigm as discussed previously, but inside the classroom, it is perceived as a Western education environment as “the curriculum is designed by western educators and implemented using western pedagogy” (Mast, 2016, p.41), as if students were in a Foundation based in the UK. The presence of seven international teachers mainly from European countries predisposes students towards international-mindedness (Haywood, 2007), an educational openness seen as a positional advantage widely promoted by the marketing team. However, some difficulties may arise when students and teachers are confronted to the cultural perspective and knowledge system other than theirs. For example, when Western teachers ask students to give their opinion, to question and evaluate beliefs as hold in the Socratic tradition, it differs from Chinese students’ attitude towards knowledge and authority, deriving from their educational Confucian traditions and hereby culture (Mast, 2016; Holmes, 2004). Further, Chinese students also seem to struggle with time management and independent learning when studying in a Western environment as they are used to more didactical approaches (Yu, 2021; Mathias et al., 2013).

Therefore, it seems that the confluence of the country’s socialist philosophy at a political level and the bottom-up micro-level Confucian behaviours have come to shape the moral values of today’s Chinese students and play a hidden role in their learning (Li and Rivers, 2018). As examples of culture influencing education, the Confucian notions of Lǐ and Chǐ underpin power distances between teachers and students, which emphasise conformity and may dissuade them to question their teachers as a matter of respect (ibid.). It does not necessarily discourage reflection but it may not be perceived by Western teachers as the verbal participation they would expect from their students. Rather, in the modern Western classroom, “knowledge is co-constructed through student-student and teacher-student communication, instead of being passively absorbed by students as in the dialectic model” (Holmes, 2004, p.296). This perceived passivity already discussed earlier when students see their education as a service, and therefore do not pretend to co-construct meaning, seems to be reinforced by a cultural factor. Also, Western teachers traditionally put a great emphasis on critical thinking as “the tradition of questioning, challenge, criticality and transformation” against a model that would advance “absolute truth, fixed knowledge, conformation, obedience, following and submission” (Sellars et al. 2018, p.4). If these contrasting learning differences are not managed appropriately, they “can lead to student dissatisfaction and underperformance” (Zhuang and Xueying Tang, 2012, p.227) and, in extreme cases, leaving the institution for not being able to adapt.

As exposed by Dai et al. (2020), cross-system tensions and contradictions are more likely to happen in a hybrid space that gathers two different systems with different learning approaches. Beyond the contrasted learning traditions exposed before, there are other aspects that may contribute to a possible culture and learning shock within the Foundation course. The atypical layout of the classroom suggests that knowledge is not fixed and can be produced and challenged by the students, at the opposite of a frontal, lecture-based layout in which all attention is focused towards the teacher’s desk (Bourne et al., 2004). Further, the

autonomy of the curriculum allows teachers to be more involved and in control of the pedagogical choices made in the classroom, which encourages initiatives and brings local responsibility (Mausethagen and Mølstad 2015), as they are the only ones ensuring learning quality together with the occasional involvement of external verifiers from the UK. Although an attempt of promoting international-mindedness is made here, the knowledge is situated in China and not in the UK, which requires contextual factors to be taken into consideration by all parties as they may have a strong impact on the learning process pursued. Failure in understanding the need of a planned transition in the first months of the course may lead to a greater culture and learning shock that might seriously affect students' performance along the year.

Further, the Confucian and Western pedagogical labels presented earlier have to be considered cautiously as they may be stereotyping and misleading when interacting with students in a classroom. Ryan and Louie (2007) insist that repetition, memorisation or *rote learning*, usually attributed to Confucian values, can also lead to Western's *deep learning* over time. It is even more apparent in Art and Design studies where one needs to master its craft before being able to bring it to high levels of conceptualisation. However, these apparent contradictions between learning goals are more questionable when impatient students request to their administrators to be taught technical and vocational skills rather than methods and concepts that they usually fail to understand. But if Chinese students want to be competitive and be offered a place in the UK, they need to develop critical thinking skills in only a few months, which may suppose surface learning for those who struggle the most to adapt to such educational changes. It is students' responsibility to make such effort and teacher's mission to orientate them towards this change, which will inevitably be faced by students once overseas. It is only regrettable that Western teachers are the only ones to anticipate this for-coming challenge by focusing on international learning early on while all other actors consider that 'still' being in China predominates over any attempt of imposing such ethos and challenging student's assumptions.

Besides trying to understand widely studied cultural differences, Western teachers have also to be aware of the processes contributing to their perception of these differences. For instance, as foreigners in China, in an educational field dominated by Western knowledge (Yu, 2021), they may be convinced of the efficacy and rightness of their model in a self-enhancement strategy, highly ethnocentric, and judge their students not only as individuals but based on their cultural ties to a group (Savva, 2016; Holmes, 2004). Teachers need to understand these intercultural complexities and avoid internalising assumptions while also creating the right transition for their students to face the global learning and awareness sought. Thus, this dual stance calls for adaptation to contextual circumstances while staying true to one's teachings. It is well known that a successful intercultural development is a two-way exchange but, in a context with strong power relationships, a teaching staff that would fully comply to the cultural realities of the Chinese institution for which they work for would be weakening the Western ethos that constitutes their own identity as teachers. As we have seen, the idealised humanitarian education that they convey can be easily isolated by the utilitarian culture predominant in Chinese society and the market-oriented approach of the institution (Yu, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Both social and cultural factors – the marketisation of education and the questioned Western teaching and learning approaches – weaken the Foundation course in the ethos constructed by its teachers. In this frame, educational values compete with high levels of customisation while Western values are negotiated within Chinese cultural reality, thus constituting a model of schooling with a hybrid identity. This confusing self-construction may lead to tensions and unethical reactions to be repeated year after year as every member interprets the institution's aims and values from a different perspective. In response to this confusion, these complexities must be recognised and analysed as such awareness is a first step towards improvement.

As Haywood (2007, p.86) argues, “no matter how appropriate and successful Western educational models are in their own contexts, we cannot expect them to be accepted uncritically as models for the organization of teaching and learning in other cultural settings”. This supposes that the international-mindedness advanced by teachers in the Foundation course has to be adapted and located to the socio-cultural circumstances described along the essay. At the end, one cannot negate the service status of the institution and the fact that it is situated in Beijing, China. However, it is also students and administrators' responsibility to accept the educational value and requirements that come along a Western team and curriculum as it is the reason of why they chose this institution instead of conventional Chinese tutoring centres.

This essay has aimed to critique a model of schooling from the educational perspective and from the author's Western mindset, but it could raise further questions on how the same model would be discussed from a service perspective and from a Chinese mindset. This leaves room for further field research that would capture students voice and expectations in this type of environment as well as those of teachers and administrators. Understanding their stance towards the institution may have a thought-provoking impact on the construction of the course's image and its underpinning aims and values.

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