

The Interconnection of Chinese and Western Cultures: The Policy, Development and Expansion of International Early Childhood Education in China

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Abstract

In recent years, the tight control of history narratives and censorship of school textbooks has made the universities suffered by the ideological crackdown from the communist Chinese government. Even though international schools in big cities, such as in Beijing and Shanghai, have been facing the prohibition of using liberal but non-government approved materials in their curricula. In November 2016, all private schools from grades one to nine were banned by the government. As a result, the only ground for the development of western-style schools in China is international early childhood education. According to the policy of early childhood education in China, there are three types of schools: Preschools or nurseries, kindergartens and pre-primary schools. More than ten percent of international preschools and kindergartens use non-Chinese traditional pedagogical approach or westernized teaching methods, and also they can choose any pedagogy of Montessori, Reggio or Waldorf, etc. The richest the parents are, the best and most expansive education for the only child will be. Parents, who have become wealthier or had high income after the rapid growth of economy in China, are willing to invest a lot of money for providing excellent early childhood education for their kids. In fact, the private international preschools and kindergartens are expanding, but they are different from others as the interconnections of Chinese and Western cultures. This paper investigates how Chinese Confucius rules meet the Western pedagogy in the booming international early childhood education industry in China from policy, development and expansion.

Keywords: Confucius rules, Western pedagogy, preschools, kindergartens, early childhood education, policy, development & expansion, Montessori

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1.0. Introduction

Education is one of the top three industries that Chinese government plans to develop and expand in the following decade, as the number of the private international schools has been increasing substantially. In recent years, the tight control of history narratives and censorship of school textbooks has made the universities suffered by the ideological crackdown from Chinese government. Even though international schools in big cities, such as in Beijing and Shanghai, have been facing the prohibition of using liberal but non-government approved materials in their curricula. In November 2016, all private schools from grades one to nine were banned by the government. As a result, the only ground for the development of western-style schools in China is international early childhood education.

2.1. Interconnection of Chinese and Western cultures

In fact, the private international preschools and kindergartens are expanding, but they are to certain degree different from others as the interconnections of Chinese and Western cultures. The distinct features of the early childhood education programs in China could be found in the teaching methods different from those in the Western countries, such as USA, and also much more involvement of Chinese parents than that of the Western ones. Based upon the traditions and philosophy of Confucius, as well as China's socialist ideals, preschools and kindergartens emphasize much more in teacher's authority and working in groups rather than individuality and self-expression.

Since the open door policy forty years ago, China has been changing rapidly economically and socially, whereas both the Confucius rules and socialism have been still deeply rooted in the nation's culture especially in education system. Based upon the Chinese culture, teachers have superior authority as a high-value occupation with expertise in their area, and they are dedicated to their students as well as loyal to the schools with long working hours but comparatively low salaries, therefore, they should be highly respected by the students. The teaching methods are teacher-centered as a teacher directing a large number of students working in groups and learning the same thing at the same time collectively. If any students do not perform well, then they will be seriously criticized of not working hard enough. Under the teacher's guidance, corrections are believed to make the students learn better and faster. Meanwhile, if any students do not follow the disciplines, such as students have to stand up to answer questions in the classroom, then the teachers will make the students lose face and do the behavior corrections in the public without any concern of the psychological damage of the children's self-esteem, which is an emphasis of kindergartens in Western countries. Early childhood education in China is the preparation stage for the more formal education of young children.

As Chinese parents highly value and respect education traditionally, they have large investments for their children's education since early childhood. They have higher expectations of the schools and also much more involvement in their children's education driving for excellence than those Western parents. Concerning the results of exams and tests seriously, Chinese parents emphasize most on efforts that their children put in learning. Since the birth of their children, Chinese parents plan, control and involve very much in their children's education even up to the level of choosing

courses in universities. As a result, Chinese early childhood education produces young children who study and work hard as well as obey and follow the disciplines.

After more trade and interactions with western countries, China is open to Western values and foreign ideas. A study found that the generation of single children is different from those with siblings as the previous ones were more self-centered, less uncooperative and less determined. These characteristics influence how the single children learn, play and communicate with others. Due to the transformation of western ideas for the Chinese parents and the significant change of single children's behavior, childcare practices have to be changed. The conventional forms of preschools and kindergartens could not satisfy all the needs of the parents who have only one child in each family under the "One-child Policy" in China. The richest the parents are, the best and most expansive education for the only child will be. Parents, who have become wealthier or had high income after the rapid growth of economy in China, are willing to invest a lot of money for providing excellent early childhood education for their kids. The swift shift to private and international kindergartens providing environment for fostering creativity, independence and critical thinking meets the expectations of the Chinese families. On the other hand, Chinese traditional values and strong disciplines have been demolished in early childhood education in China. More than ten percent of international preschools and kindergartens use non-Chinese traditional pedagogical approach or westernized teaching methods, and also they can choose any pedagogy of Montessori, Reggio or Waldorf, etc.

2.2. Policy

In 2010, China's Ministry of Education introduced the Outline of Medium and Long-term Programs for National Education Reform and Development from 2010 to 2020. According to the outlines, the international schools are classified into various types in the following table (Table 1):

Table 1. Types of International Schools in China

Types of international schools	Students	Private Owners / public schools
1. Schools for children of foreign workers (SCFW), also known as “Expat Schools”	1. International children from the expatriate community 2. Ethnic Chinese children with foreign passports 3. Ethnic Chinese children migrating from other Asian countries	Private owners: a foreign education company or school
2. Sino-foreign cooperative schools	Both expatriate and Chinese students (Restricted to secondary & higher education)	Joint ventures: a Chinese owner and a foreign education company or school.
3. Chinese-owned private bilingual schools	Mostly serve Chinese students	Private Chinese owners
4. Chinese public/ state schools	High school Chinese students	A few Chinese public/ state high school provide an international stream as an option

Based upon the above table (Table 1), there are four different kinds of international schools: Expat schools, Sino-foreign cooperative schools, Chinese-owned private bilingual schools and a few Chinese public/ state schools running international education in China. All international schools accept Chinese students and some for international students as well, but Type 1 schools only prefer those without Chinese nationalities no matter they are expatriates’ children or ethnic Chinese. However, Types 2 and 4 are restricted to secondary schools, high schools and higher institutes. When we concern the early childhood education in China, only Type 1 schools, which are owned by a foreign education company or school, and Type 3 bilingual schools, which are run by private Chinese owners, will be considered.

Most Chinese parents prefer private international schools rather than local public/state schools for their children mainly because they are worried about “The pressure-cooker effect”. Meanwhile some parents plan to send their kids to study abroad later in high schools, universities or graduate schools in Britain, America, Canada, Australia or New Zealand. Believing that western approach facilitates the development of students’ creativity is another reason why the Chinese parents send their children to international schools. As there were no specific teaching methods stated in the outlines, international preschools and kindergartens have to make their own choice of using the westernized teaching methods of Montessori, Waldorf or Reggio.

According to the policy of early childhood education in China, there are three types of schools: Preschools or nurseries, kindergartens and pre-primary schools. Under the guidelines, there should be 3 years for preschool education and the development of kindergartens was strongly encouraged. Children under 3 attend preschools or nurseries, while 3-6 years old children are in kindergartens. One year before the child

attend the first year of elementary school, there is pre-primary school attached to elementary school that he or she has to attend. Young students are classified into three categories based upon their age by the Chinese government including three-year-old juniors, four-year-old middle and five-year-old seniors.

2.3. Development

Under the impetus of the guidelines released by China's Ministry of Education in 2010, kindergarten industry has been developed considerably. The guidelines covered a wide spectrum of education including preschools and universities, public and private, as well as academic and vocational. Due to the initiatives for promoting services and skills-based economy, there are a lot of opportunities for private local and international education investors to develop in China to serve the increasing middle class.

Table 2. Targets for Preschool education development

	2009	2015	2020
Preschool education			
Kindergarten enrolment (in millions)	27	34	40
Gross enrolment rate at 3 years prior to compulsory education (%)	51%	60%	70%
Gross enrolment rate at 1 year prior to compulsory education (%)	74%	85%	95%

Table 2 displays the major targets for preschool education development in China from the years 2009 to 2020. The numbers of kindergarten enrollment are supposed to go up from 27 million in 2009 to 34 million in 2015, and further up to 40 million in 2020. Gross enrolment rate at the three years prior to compulsory education are planned to increase 10% each 5 years as 51% in 2009, 60% in 2015, and 70% in 2020. Whereas Gross enrolment rate at the one year prior to compulsory education are estimated to have a rise from 74% in 2009 to 85% in 2015, and continued its upward trend to 95% in 2020. In other words, the China's Ministry of Education planned to expand early childhood education by reaching the number of 40 million of kindergarten enrollment and nearly 100% of gross enrolment rate at one year prior to formal primary education in 2020.

In China, the early childhood education industry is booming with a fast development in the number of preschools and kindergartens, especially private ones. The total number of kindergartens rose from 116,000 in 2003 to 219,000 in 2015 with a near to double growth, whereas the number of private kindergartens increased substantially from 55,500 to 143,500 with 2.58 times of growth. The average increase of preschools and kindergartens was 3,637 annually during the period of 2003-2009, whereas 16,044 from 2010 to 2013.

Between the years of 2012 and 2013, there was a considerable increase of early childhood education including kindergarten enrollment, new entrants of kindergartens and gross enrollment rate of children, as well as the number of preschools and private kindergartens in China. The kindergarten enrollment rose from 2,089,279 in 2012 to

38,946,903 in 2013 with 5.7% increase. Meanwhile, there was a rise of 581,117 new entrants of kindergartens equivalent to 3% between the years of 2012 and 2013. Gross enrollment rate of children aged from 3 to 5 years in preschools and kindergartens reached 67.5%, which went up 3% from 2012, whereas 16.6 % up from 2009. The number of kindergartens in China in 2013 was 198,553 with a jump of 17,302 or 9.5% from 2012. In fact, private preschools developed much faster than public ones recently. Across the whole nation, 133,451 private kindergartens were recorded as occupying 67.2% of the total number of kindergarten in 2013. Comparing to the number in 2012, there were 8,813 private kindergartens more and equivalent to 7.1% increase. At the end of 2013, there were 19,902,536 enrollments and 9,079,575 new entrants in private kindergartens, which dominated 51.1% and 46.1% of all kindergartens in China.

However, the development of education industry is unbalanced through over China as there are significant differences among well-developed provinces and cities, and under-developed areas varying from different economic levels. After open-door policy, many expatriates coming to China and Chinese parents with foreign passports living in municipality and economically developed provinces have a great demand of private international kindergarten options for their kids. On the other hand, the considerably increasing Chinese middle class with higher income working in big cities and rich provinces can afford and are convinced to pay more for their children's early childhood education which provides another pedagogical alternative of western style in private international schools. Consequently, the number of private international preschools and kindergartens in economically developed cities, municipality and provinces rose swiftly with very high enrollment rate. Embracing the overall conditions and development of private kindergartens, big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, etc, and Guangdong province are much more advanced than the western provinces.

China Preschool Education (Kindergarten) Industry Research Report, 2016 by ResearchInChina demonstrates the gross enrollment rate of main provinces and municipality in China in the years of 2010 and 2015. The report shows the different development of education industry in China as follows. In 2010, the top five gross enrollment rate in China's preschool education industry in economically developed municipality and provinces are 100% in Shanghai, around 95% in Zhejiang and Jiangsu, 90% in Tianjin, and 85% in Beijing. Five years later, there was a slightly change of the order for the top five. In 2015, 100% for Shanghai remaining the top of the gross enrollment rate of 3-year kindergartens. Followed by Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangdong, all are over 95%. Overall gross enrollment rate of kindergartens in economically developed regions and municipality such as Shanghai, Beijing, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangdong and Tianjin provinces reached more than 95%, whereas Guangxi, Yunnan, and Tibet in the central and western regions were 60% only. Having the same upward trend, the gross enrollment rates of kindergarten in all provinces or municipality increased from 2010 to 2015 with different degree.

Concerning the characteristic of Chinese early childhood education market, the kindergartens are scattered with very low concentration, and few nationwide brand preschool education companies exist. Thus, a large number of listed companies invest in the attractive Chinese preschool education market by building their own kindergartens or advocating "Whole Person Education", etc., such as Vtron

Technologies Ltd. and Jiangsu Xiuqiang Glasswork Co. Ltd. Furthermore, development of technology advances preschool education. Most kindergartens relies much heavier on internet than a decade ago by building their school websites for online teaching and learning, using Wechat for group discussion, sharing and interactions between teachers and parents, carrying out orientation or even student enrollment.

2.4. Expansion

For the expansion of early childhood education industry in China, the policies and support of the central and local government are the major concerns. In 2012, only 64.5% of young children at or under 6 years old are recorded in 181,300 kindergartens through the whole country. This historical phenomenon indicates the lacking of preschools. The Chinese government has planned to increase the enrollment rate of young children aged from 3 to 4 attending 3-year preschool to 70%, and 2-year to 80% covering 40 million children by 2020. A series of reform for the preschool education has been implemented, particularly the development of kindergartens in those rural areas lacking schools. The central government shows their favor for the expansion of preschools and kindergartens in China. A large amount of money has been invested in early childhood education including 40 billion RMB from central government and 100 billion from local government. Between the years of 2011 and 2012, around 800 million RMB was distributed to 1.8 million families as a government education subsidy for their young children. Meanwhile, the central government contributed 4.7 billion RMB to 30,000 local preschools and kindergartens. On the other hand, 1.2 million principals and teachers received professional training and upgrading their qualifications under the programs arranged by the central government.

Besides, early childhood education industry attracts more and more investment from foreign companies and private enterprises annually even without any negative effect from economic crisis in 2008. While the amount of money pledged by corporate funding went up steeply, the investment in preschool education in 2014 was 204.876 million RMB, which was 8.37 times of that in 2009. The broker, CLSA, predicted that the enrollment rate of students in private international schools rose 14% in the 315 million RMB private education market through the year 2018. Although there has been a huge amount of money investment for the expansion of preschools and kindergartens from both the government and private sectors, we have to consider whether it solves the existing education problems in early childhood education.

The competition of kindergartens is fierce, so what should the preschools do to improve? The general trend of Chinese parents prefers to send their kids to school as early as possible for preparation of future success in later education with a competitive advantage. Therefore, some preschools provide detailed academic programs preparing for formal primary education, and learning foreign languages, such as English. Shifting of the role of childcare from the grandparents to kindergartens, some nurseries started as daycare centers for the working parents. Although the number of preschools has been growing rapidly in the recent year, there is a wide range of variation in school fees and quality through the country. Some kindergartens closed down after the education reform due to the lack of financial supports from corporate. Private international preschools and kindergartens are luxury

in China with very high school fees. However, the number of private kindergartens overran the public ones and the number of private schools in China rose from 3% to 10% in less than 10 years as recorded by McKinsey report in 2015. Chinese parents believe that private international education in early childhood not only pave the way for international curricular, but also increase the chances for studying universities aboard resulting in getting well-paid jobs for their children in the future. Based upon a study from Hurun publishing the annual list of millionaires in China, the rich Chinese parents invest 20% to 25% of their annual expenditure in their children's education. Serving the parents able to pay, the private international preschools and kindergartens are flourishing by providing a variety of programmes and courses such as private classes once a week, interest groups after class or at the weekend, English, art and music, even full-time boarding. More than 10% kindergartens employ westernized teaching methods, as Montessori is the most popular one for Chinese kindergarteners. Other non-Chinese pedagogical approach originated from Reggio and Waldorf have been promoted as well. Certain schools advocate that they are "Premier preschools" in order to convince the parents to pay off and increase higher enrollment rate of the students. Some schools provide whole person education, while some promote creativity or critical thinking, and others advertise the development of young children's full potential.

The qualifications, professional training, nationalities and salaries of teachers are another factor affecting the expansion of early childhood education industry. Foreign teachers, though most of them are not well-trained, are popular in many schools, especially private international kindergartens. As the Chinese parents are willing to pay more for their kids' school fee for preparation of further study aboard, native English teachers (NET) are welcomed in preschools. Those private international schools employing foreign teachers are particularly popular. Usually, a NET has double or even triple pay of a local Chinese teacher. More foreign teachers create larger financial burden for the kindergartens, therefore, the school fees in most private international kindergartens are relatively higher. One of the problems preschools and kindergartens have to face is low salaries for the local teachers, as even lower than those of elementary teachers. As a result, good and skillful teachers are rarely attracted to teach in childcare practices. Even in chain kindergartens or well-funded preschools, some of the teachers just finished associate degrees, high school or even lower educational level lacking of any expertise, prerequisite knowledge about education and professional training for childcare.

3.0. Conclusion

In sum, early childhood education industry in China is flourishing after development for more than a decade, and also expanding substantially under the policies and support of Chinese government, especially the private international kindergartens. This fastest growing sector attracts not only local, but also international, private and corporate investors. Therefore, the number of private international preschools and kindergartens is expected to increase considerably throughout China in the coming decade with better quality and larger capacity. When the investors establish the kindergartens catering for the young children aged at or under 6, they have to convince the increasing middle-class Chinese to pay higher prices for their kids to receive better education in order to pave the way to have less pressure for exams, the competitive advantage over the peers in formal education, the exposure to western-

styled teaching and pedagogy, and ability to further study abroad resulting in better job offers for their kids in the future. Improvement of childcare teacher qualification, skills and salary in addition to providing more well-trained foreign teachers ensure the competitiveness of the private international preschools in the fierce competition. Finally, of course, the kindergartens also have to offer courses and programmes interconnecting the Chinese and western cultures for fostering creativity, critical thinking, and development of full potential of young children.

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