

International Schools: A Good with Special Value for Chinese Middle Class

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the international school market in China is developing prosperously. Most families choose international schools as a means to achieve future overseas study. At the same time, more and more middle-class families consider providing international education for their children. International schools become more and more popular among middle-class families. To understand this phenomenon, this review essay analyses the social function of international schools for Chinese middle class and the commercialization of the international schools in China. This paper argues that Chinese middle class utilize international school as a shortcut to attain higher education and maintain their social status. International schools also serve as a status signifier for emerging middle class that can be brought through capitals. Recently, international schools and the education in China in general is becoming a commodity rather than a social good. In the context of extensive competition in traditional Chinese education system, such as Gaokao and Zhongkao, the increasing of education commercialization further exacerbates the competition and education stratification. The international schools act as an alternative to traditional ones, but not as a solution to the problem of intensive competition and existing inequality in Chinese education system. This paper emphasizes this problem and calls on future study to provide valuable insights and solutions.

Keywords: Chinese international school, Chinese middle class, international education, education commercialization

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in China has been changing and developing in contemporary days. As the trend of globalization pervades, international schools start to emerge in China. Comparing with other countries, China has been a huge consumer of the global international school market. According to the ISC Research, China has the largest number of international schools with 359,300 students enrolled in 2009 [34]. The international school market is expanding and becoming more and more popular among Chinese households. Unlike traditional test-oriented education, international schools have a different system of education ideology and admission process to college (Dello-Iacovo, 2019). The traditional education system emphasizes intensively competitive examinations like the Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) and the Zhongkao (senior high school entrance examination). However, international schools seem to value more on personal development. Different from the traditional education system, they also have long related

to concepts such as “quality education” “superiority” and “elites”. Both scholarly publications and mass media depict international schools as a luxurious choice of upper-class who have advantages resources to support [23]. However, more and more middle-class families are choosing to study aboard and using international schools to prepare for future study in recent years in China according to the 2020 Report on Chinese Students’ Overseas Study. In China’s construction of socialist modernization, education is the foundation of economy and technology [29]. Considering the close relationship of education and other aspect of social development, the study of this phenomenon may help understand the Chinese middle class current education situation in China and education system in China in a larger scale.

This essay focuses on the social function of international schools for Chinese middle class as well as emerging Chinese middle class. Despite the similarities between Chinese middle class and emerging Chinese middle class, this essay discusses the two groups

separately to provide a more detailed understanding on the social functions of international schools. To explicitly define, this paper limits its discussion on Type-C international schools when talking about international schools in China. This is because the main international schools in China are for-profit Type-C schools with foreign or international curriculums such as AP (Advanced Placement), A-Level (General Certificate of Education Advanced Level), or IB (International Baccalaureate) (Poole, 2019). The term Chinese middle class in this paper refers to the definition of middle class by the 2001 CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Science) report.

2. INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL: A COMMODITY

2.1. Expansion of International School Market

Around the world, education has moved from one niche market to mainstream investment themes, and education in China is the most dynamic [1]. China's demand drivers are unique: education is the ultimate consumer product for brand-conscious and ambitious consumers in China. The profound socioeconomic and political changes in China have led to significant and fundamental changes in China's education, which are manifested in the decentralization, marketization, and privatization of it [2].

Chinese students make up the largest group of international students, with half a million starting international studies each year, accounting for about 20% of the total international student population [1]. International school industry received a revenue of \$11.6 billion of the Fall 2019 semester from 821 international schools recorded in 2019, despite the pandemic and a tightened regulatory environment, shown by a report by TopSchools [3].

The rapid development of international school is partly due to its function as a utility tool that helps middle-class families to escape from social involution in Chinese education system and maintain their social status. However, international school is not the cure of the intensive competition in traditional Chinese education system. If the social involution remains intensive in education, the competition would in the end permeate into the international school market, and the market would finally become saturated.

2.2. Type-C International School as a commodity

There are multiple types of international schools in China and different methods of categorization. International schools can be categorized into Chinese-owned private schools, Chinese-owned public schools, Sino-Foreign Cooperative Schools (SFCS), and School

for Children of Foreign Workers (SCFW), by distinguishes their targeted students and founders [4]. However, they can also be classified into 9 types, according to Sanderson based on the curriculum and the construction of student body, such as those that applied International Baccalaureate (IB), non-IB but with a diversity of student from different countries [5].

However, there's another more pertinent way to classify international schools. Hayden and Thompson typology of international schools offers three types of international schools. The type-A also known as traditional international schools were designed to provide education for the children of international expatriates. It has been most international schools, until late twentieth century. Different from Type-A, Type-B international schools is highly ideological. Type-B schools such as United World Colleges (UWC) serves to educate youth into global citizens with international leadership and promote peace and diversity [6]. More recently, the Type-C schools emerged by the trend of globalization. Most international schools for local students are Type-C schools [7]. They are mostly local international school with foreign or international curriculums. It is the most popular type of international schools in China [8].

Type-C international high schools, including high schools with international curriculum, are the most common choices for Chinese middle-class families with decision of entering foreign universities. Based on a questionnaire responded by 166 Chinese undergraduate students in universities in Texas during 2017 and 2018 who came from middle-class families [9]. Students answered questions on their demographic information, decision-making strategies, college admission process, parents' objectives, as well as students' expectations for studying abroad. Among them, 50.0% students graduated from high schools with International Curriculum and 42.1% graduated from Private and international high schools. ISC Research found that in recent years, families prefer to send their children to local international schools rather than attending to an overseas boarding school [13]. It is the most common and accessible way for affluent middle-class families to provide international education for their children in order to prepare for future study in foreign universities.

Type-C schools are mostly used as a utility tool by middle class to secure the status and education resources of their children. The emergence of Type-C international schools in China is due to a demand for superior education in Chinese middle class and a metaphorical passport to foreign top universities [8]. Type-C schools serves as an education commodity. In 2013, the major international schools are for-profit, which means that parents have to pay for the education [11]. Furthermore, the growth of international schools will be oriented by the interests and demand of affluent

indigenous parents [12]. The type-C international school' characteristics of a good is crucial for understanding the relationship between Chinese middle class and International school.

Education is generally considered as a public good that benefits all levels of the society, and higher education is a crucial part of social development. Higher education has been a major symbol of upward mobility and believed by most of the Chinese family to be crucial [30]. A college degree protects the privileges of those born into upper-class families while creating the conditions for social mobility for those from lower-class families [30].

Despite that by 2005, the number of students in various types of higher education institutions had exceeded 20 million, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education had reached 21 percent, marking the stage of mass popularization [32], there are still inequalities in education. The higher education opportunity is stratified based on different geographical regions, ethnic groups, gender, and social economic statuses [33].

The unequal access to educational opportunities reflects the unequal distribution of power resources among different social strata and groups [31]. The commercialization of education in China, such as the booming of international schools, will increase the education inequalities and further hinder the upward mobility of lower social class and increase social conflicts.

3. INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL AND TRADITIONAL MIDDLE CLASS IN CHINA

3.1. Characteristics of Chinese Middle Class

Since the Reform and Opening-up Policy implemented in 1970s, professionals and entrepreneurs played an important role in the market, and gradually the idea of middle-class emerged in Chinese society. Since 1990s, the discussion on middle class has appeared on mass media and scholarly publications [10]. The special position of middle class in social stratification created their unique political and socioeconomic characteristics.

In general, middle class is a vague concept. It is a social identity which can be perceived differently. To unify the definition, this essay use the 2001 Chinese Academy of Social Science's (CASS) report [9]. According to the report, Chinese middle class can be defined with six characteristics:

(1) intellectual labor; (2) rights and responsibilities at the workplace; (3) income deriving from employment; (4) trained skills or college-level

education; (5) lifestyle and consumption habits; and (6) civic and moral consciousness.

However, in the essay "The Quest for Higher Education by the Chinese Middle Class/ Retrenching Social Mobility?" [13], there are some other significant characteristics of Chinese middle class, such as:

(1) a minimum income of RMB 9,000 per month per-capita; (2) managerial-type job position, professional qualifications, or entrepreneurship; (3) urban hukou (urban residency); (4) a house or a car; and (5) disposable income of no less than RMB300,000.

This description shows that Chinese middle class are generally well-off with social privileges such as urban hukou. They tend to choose goods and services with quality and have a relatively delicate living style. Because of the civic consciousness and education level, they are more likely to develop opinions different from conventions [14]. They are also the major consumers in the market of international school. According to 2020 Report on Chinese Students' Overseas Study, most of the parents who have children studying or preparing to study abroad are from middle class. International education, including international private universities in China and foreign universities, becomes a tool to achieve upward mobility.

3.2. International School as a Means to Secure Social Status

Chinese middle class see international school as a superior form of education [16]. In general, the Chinese education is test-oriented [9]. However, because of their high education background and affluent social and political capital, Chinese middle class tend to emphasize more on personal freedom of choice and comprehensive individual development, so they disagree with the test-oriented Chinese education system and teaching style [14]. These attitudes can also echo with their expectation of choosing international education. In 2020 Report on Chinese Students' Overseas Study, the most frequently used phrases to describe the expectations of studying abroad are "broadening international Horizons" "receiving education with better quality" and "attaining an all-round education". While a qualitative study on attitudes of Chinese international students' parents reported that Chinese education is commonly criticized with "discouragement of critical thinking" "a 'waste' of time practicing drills and rote memorization" [15]. Middle-class families consider international education as an alternative that is different from or even superior to the traditional Chinese education, and they expect their children to have an international view and outstanding ability and enter key schools [13].

In post-reform China, state-owned entities continue to dominate, allowing middle-class parents to use their social and political capital to enhance their children's

cultural capital in order to maintain their hard-own social status. Middle-class families view international school to avoid the intensive competition. Chinese education system is highly competitive. The traditional process of entering colleges in China is through Gaokao, also known as the National College Entrance Exam. It is highly intensive. In 2021, 10.78 million students registered the Gaokao; comparing to last year, the number of examinees increased 0.07 million, according to the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China [17]. Despite the Gaokao, Zhongkao (the high school enrollment examination) also only provides limited opportunity. In 2017, the 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of People's Republic of China, published by the Ministry of Education, stated that the enrollment of regular senior high schools and technical high schools should be roughly the same [18], which infers that there would be half amount of middle school graduates enter technical high schools. Both a large quantity of students and government policies increase the difficulty to receive advanced education. The anxiety on education of many Chinese parents has gone far beyond normal [19].

Gaokao and Zhongkao are both initially designed to be equal and unbiased. The middle-class families could hardly utilize their advantageous social and political resources, such as Guanxi (social connections), Hukou (registered permanent residence), and Danwei (agency) [13]. Thus, the private international high schools become a tool for middle-class families to maintain their socioeconomic status. International education comparing with traditional ones have more characteristics of a commodity [20]. Different from national school, international schools have less accountability to higher authorities, like government agency [21]. One significant fact is that some private international high schools can be entered with or without Zhongkao or other entrance tests, which means that it is a more convenient way for people with privileged socioeconomic resources to achieve education resources, thus maintain their social status.

4. INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL AND EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS IN CHINA

4.1. Characteristics of Emerging Chinese Middle Class

Based on the first definition of Chinese middle class in 2.1, entrepreneurs who meet other criteria of Chinese middle class can also be included in the class. However, some of them can be divided into a more specific group – the emerging Chinese middle class. They are people who become affluent in relatively short amount of time, through business. Chinese society is in the middle of conventions and innovations. Social norms put the emerging Chinese middle class in an embarrassing

situation. Emerging Chinese middle class are similar with Chinese middle class in terms of income level and property; however, they have huge differences in career, as the emerging middle class are mostly entrepreneurs. Although they usually have a high social profile, their social status remains relatively low, because of the 'wealth hatred' culture in Chinese society [22]. During 1978 and 2006, Chinese Academy of Social Science found out that among the six strata that would include middle class, entrepreneur and small-business person would made up the least fraction of Chinese middle class [27]. They are the marginalized minority among the middle class, despite that they share similarities in many socioeconomic factors with the traditional ones. Moreover, since entrepreneurs and business are members made up huge part of upper class, the emerging middle class would further aspire to be part of them. Thus, they have a gap between their social identity and self-perception and a need to be acknowledge by the traditional middle class and even upper class.

4.2. International School as a Class Signifier to Establish "Elite" Identity

Education becomes a mainstream investment theme from a niche market worldwide. Especially in China, education is an ultimate consumer product. Due to the dramatic social changes, education in China shows phenomena of decentralization, marketization and privatization which provide an environment for the booming of international schools. Chinese students are the largest consumers of international schools. The size of international school market in China is increasing, and there is an increasing demand of international education among middle-class families.

Type-C schools are the major international schools in China nowadays with foreign or international curriculums targeting local students. As a commodity, fees are required for enrollment, and there is no universal standard of enrollment examination set by controlling agency, which provides opportunities for middle-class families to avoid competitions in traditional education system. To ensure the education opportunity of their children, middle class parents with their advantageous capital resources use international schools as a means to attain higher education. International school becomes a tool for middle-class families to secure their education resources and social status.

Although by the development of internet technologies international or bilingual education is not limited into attending international schools or foreign colleges nowadays [1], international school remain their "elite" label. Being international has long been affiliated with privileged class in the context of postcolonialism. In oriental countries being international is highly

symbolistic. It is interpreted as being connected with the western world, with privileged political and social power [23]. There are requirements to enter an international school. Most of the international schools in China are Type-C with high fees [12]. International education is still regarded as an “elite” right [24]. Since it still demands many resources, both scholars and parents believe that generally students from socioeconomically privileged families with better occupational and educational backgrounds would pursue education overseas, comparing to students with limited resources that tend to choose the traditional way of studying in local universities [28].

Parents have their children enrolled in international schools to get access to “elite” education which is believed to lead to a superior job and future educational opportunities [25]. Some of the emerging middle-class families in middle class who choose this path are likely to lack advantages in the traditional education system [24], like the ‘business bourgeoisie’ of France in twentieth century, who wanted to improve the academic excellence in their children in order to establish their “elite” social identity [26]. Although emerging middle class are well-off financially compared to their parents, they lack the critical resources to pass on their new advantages to their children [24]. Thus, international school becomes a good with a special value that represents a superior education and a symbol of power.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this essay discussed on the transformation of international school from a form of education to a commodity that serves to secure middle-family’s social status and establish emergent middle class’s “elite” social identity. This reflects the middle class’s education anxiety in a highly competitive education system, and emergent middle class’s aspiration of upward mobility.

Chinese middle class and emerging Chinese middle class consider international education superior to local education. The label of international is often perceived equally as “elite”. International school is also a good with special value used by emergent middle class to be acknowledged by their fellows from middle class and even upper class. For them, international school not only function as a utility tool, but a status signifier and a power symbol.

This essay focuses on the value of international schools and middle class. Based on the previous discussion, an interaction between the international school market and middle class can be implied.

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