

Reform of the International Curriculum in Chinese “Non-Traditional” International Schools in the Context of Globalization

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How to cite: Yin Li. Reform of the International Curriculum in Chinese “Non-Traditional” International Schools in the Context of Globalization. *The Journal of Education Insights*, 2023; 1(2). Doi: [10.37155/2972-4856-0102-3](https://doi.org/10.37155/2972-4856-0102-3)

Abstract: As globalization continues to evolve, the phenomenon of internationalization in education has become an objective situation and a common international occurrence. Particularly in China, with the rise of the economy as a superpower, there has been a series of developments in the internationalization of education. Despite the number of international schools in China increasing from 22 in 2000 to 959 in 2019, serving 400,000 students, the rapid expansion of international schools in China has brought challenges. These “non-traditional” international schools strive to construct an international curriculum system that is “characteristically Chinese”, “high-quality”, and “diverse”. However, they face many challenges, including the lack of integration of Chinese and foreign curricula and the absence of standardized international school management. Therefore, this study aims to delve into the opportunities and challenges faced by these “non-traditional” international schools in building a Chinese-characteristic international curriculum system, through a comprehensive review of relevant domestic and international literature, providing a more detailed direction for future research.

Keywords: Globalization; Non-Traditional; International Schools; International Curriculum Reform; Integration of Curriculum Globalization and Localization

1. Introduction

The internationalization of the economy results in the international demand for talent, and the internationalization of talent results in the international demand for education. The internationalization of education is an objective situation and a widespread international phenomenon. Globalization brings about the internationalization of education, and the internationalization of education

promotes the development and demand for international schools (Li, 2023). Although statistics are difficult to verify and should be treated with caution, according to ISC Research, the number of international schools currently stands at 9,306, with a total of 4.2 million children attending international schools worldwide. By 2025, this number is expected to reach 8.26 million (Bunnell et al., 2016; Poole, 2019). The rise of China as an economic superpower has brought about several



economic and social transformations. Likewise, the globalization of the economy has brought about the internationalization of education (Guo & Guo, 2016). The number of international schools in China increased from 22 in 2000 to 260 in 2010. By 2019 China had 959 international schools serving 400,000 students. As a result of the reform and opening up have brought profound changes to the social class structure in China. A "new rich" class of capitalist entrepreneurs and senior professionals is expanding. The parents of these new rich are more willing to rely on education to ensure the future of their children. Therefore, the most significant growth in the expanding education market is in "non-traditional" international schools. "Non-traditional" international schools account for approximately 85% of international schools in China (Wright et al., 2021). However, the Chinese government maintains strict control over the education system in China to construct and maintain national identity. The government seeks to foster national pride, traditional cultural awareness, and historical memory in its young people through education, the government has also sought to promote a sense of national identity in its students. According to Chinese international high school policy, private international schools are part of socialist education, and the Party's educational policy must be implemented (Wright et al., 2021; Li, 2023). However, "non-traditional" international schools have more flexibility in their management than other public or private Chinese citizenship schools. However, some "non-traditional" international schools do not offer an international curriculum for various reasons (policy, funding, faculty, *etc.*). Without international curricula as the foundation, international schools have also been questioned by parents and students for being "costly and inefficient" and "disconnected" from learning (Bunnell et al., 2016; Wu & Koh, 2021). Therefore, this investigation will explore the opportunities and challenges of building a "Chinese" and "diverse" international curriculum for "non-traditional" international schools in China, based on the unique educational context of China.

2. The Nature and Significance of the Country-based Educational Reform

The curriculum reform in China, as an essential human capital development strategy, has been driven by

the new economic, socio-political, and educational demands brought about by globalization. In the context of globalization, the goal of reforming the country's international education is to continuously optimize the allocation of the respective educational resources and elements to produce highly qualified human resources with international competitiveness, international awareness, and international communication skills. Internationalized education reform has not only enabled China to produce global citizens but has also brought in different types of individuals and cultures, which has promoted globalization (Lo, 2019; Li, 2023). For example, the international curriculum in international schools is believed to develop students' curiosity about global issues and the ability to independently assess different globalization and education arguments compared to mainstream schools (Wright et al., 2021). So, international schools in China require active educational reform and exploration to achieve high-quality, distinctive, and diverse development, and to think more about the possibilities of internal development. First, international schools are seen as "cosmopolitan enclaves" that embrace cultural diversity and global mobility to form disciplines in a transnational space. The learning experience of the international curriculum fosters both short- and long-term "global citizenship" (Li, 2023). The international education experience fosters self-perceived global identity in students. They see "globalization" as an essential part of their identity. They are both global and Chinese, and they see this not as compatible but as an important part of their identity (Wright et al., 2021). Secondly, in the context of globalization, the curriculum and practices of international schools are increasingly influenced by global processes that transcend national boundaries. In transnational education, there is a greater desire to teach cosmopolitan values that embrace diversity and mobility, thereby breaking down narrow "nationalism". The mission of international education is to prepare young people for the challenges of globalization so that they can contribute to society's competition beyond national borders (Wright et al., 2021). For example, the two curriculum reforms led by the Shanghai government (which introduced a variety of subjects including basic, extended, and inquiry/research subjects) were also aimed at addressing the global imperatives of the challenges of globalization.

Some educators consider Shanghai students' excellent performance in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) as important evidence of the success of their curriculum reform (Tan, 2012). Finally, from the student's perspective, international education is conceptualized as elite education, and the unique curriculum and learning environment of international schools fosters global/international cultural capital, which includes a range of competencies such as analytical and technical skills, fluency in two or more languages, and intercultural communication skills. The cultural capital competencies of students, then, give students a competitive advantage in the labor market and help individuals convey social status across national boundaries (Young, 2017). International school education can provide students with "international capital" or cultural and linguistic competencies in advance, thus helping them to become competent in "globalized social arenas" such as multinational organizations and multinational corporations and so on (Wright et al., 2021). In conclusion, in the context of globalization, the reform of the international curriculum in international schools is not only necessary but also urgent.

3. The Argument in Discussing How Globalization (Global Forces) are Played out in the Country-based Educational Reform

Globalization has brought about the growth of internationalization in education, which is reflected in the rapid expansion of transnational education (Lai et al., 2016). In recent years, international schools in China have gradually expanded from first-tier cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, to second- and third-tier cities (Li, 2023). Despite the COVID-19 pandemic leading to tighter admissions policies at some foreign universities and some changes in domestic education policies, international schools are facing new challenges. However, in the long term, the expansion of international schools is still a trend (Li, 2023). As international schools continue to expand, they have their own unique educational philosophies, management systems, and curriculums. While these international schools have made some achievements and gained much experience during their development, they have also encountered several challenges. In terms of current Chinese education policy, Chinese

international schools have significant advantages in terms of environment, curriculum, and resources. For example, in terms of curriculum evaluation, the General Plan for Deepening Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era provides direction for evaluation reform in international schools (Li, 2023; Mao, 2008). The Law on the Promotion of Private Education of 2021 indicates that private schools implementing general high school education and compulsory education can offer their curricula with their characteristics by the national curriculum standards and make innovations in education and teaching. The proposed Law on the Promotion of Private Education sets forth new requirements and new missions for curriculum reform in international schools. The reform of international schools needs to move away from a simple "international agent" orientation to a mission of cultivating more "globally competitive" talent. International school curricula should not only emphasize students' collaborative skills but also the development of students' independent learning skills (Li, 2023). However, Chinese international schools do not currently have an independent, comprehensive international curriculum. Chinese international schools rely on "imported" curricula from other countries (U.S., Canada, Australia, and so on). According to statistics, UK-based Advanced (A-Levels) and US-based Advanced Placement (AP) courses account for 35% and 34% of the total international curriculum in China, respectively, while another 18% is related to other countries and only 13% is related to the International Baccalaureate (IB) (Wu & Koh, 2021). The main mission of international programs in the United States is to guide and prepare students for leading universities in the United States. The British curriculum, on the other hand, preserves its identity, culture, and brand identity. Canadian-style international schools, in contrast, are usually implemented in Chinese international schools through a model of offering co-curricular programs in partnership with local high schools (Wu & Koh, 2021). Thus, current transnational educational practices may be perceived as a one-way diffusion of educational practices from "developed" countries. For example, research has found that in the hybrid Chinese Canadian Dual Diploma Program, Chinese-related literature and its traditional teaching methods are subordinated to English-related literature

and teaching practices. The lack of reciprocity and mutual respect among multicultural teachers has led to transnational education programs being perceived as “intellectual capitalist” (Lai et al., 2016). However, providing an international curriculum is the primary mission of international schools. Legitimately providing an international curriculum “with Chinese characteristics” within the Chinese system is an important foundation and core feature of international school reform. It is also the future of international schools in the Chinese labor market (Bunnell et al., 2016). The future direction of international school curriculum reform could explore the development of an international curriculum, which could be diversified and individualized to create its own “international” brand (Li, 2023).

However, the concept of the international curriculum is complex, and providing legitimate international programs is challenging. Performance on PIAS tests does not truly assess students’ ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-life challenges (Wu & Koh, 2021; Tan, 2012). Globalization is not a holistic, stable, universal, and trans-cendent process. The specific interpretations, manifestations, and impacts of globalization vary from place to place, depending on the interactions between globalization and the contextual factors (including historical, political, cultural, ethical, and so on) where it occurs (Tan, 2012). For example, the culture of Chinese society (e.g., test-taking culture, rote learning, repetitive exercises, and didactic traditional methods) is an important factor influencing curriculum reform in China in the context of globalization. The reform of the Chinese curriculum is not only a shift from passive learning to quality-oriented, higher-level thinking and active learning, but also the integration and absorption of international educational concepts under the context of the Chinese education system (Tan, 2012). Practical experience of curriculum reform in Shanghai reveals that international curriculum reform is characterized by the interplay between international curriculum and local sociocultural factors. The Shanghai government applied the necessity of globalization to reform the curriculum while maintaining socialist ideology and central control over high-stakes testing. The successful experience of the Shanghai government shows that global education policies cannot simply

be transferred directly from one context to another and that incorporating consideration of local sociocultural factors is necessary for successful curriculum reform (Tan, 2012). However, there is a dialectical and contradictory relationship between globalization and localization. Curriculum, as the cultural mediator of social identity construction, is a struggle over who constructs whose identity and what is constructed. Curriculum reform is not only a change in the form and content of the curriculum but also in social perceptions (Mao, 2008). However, as the forces of globalization increase and accelerate, there is a growing awareness of the necessity for young people to broaden their horizons beyond the confines of national borders. From an ideological perspective, there is a growing recognition that those who are educated in their national environments can no longer be ignored in their global responsibility to protect the environment and create peace and sustainable development. Thus, the forces of globalization have caused educational policymakers and planners in national contexts to reform international schools (Phylis Lan Lin, 2019; Thompson, 2009). For example, China’s 2001 and 2011 program curriculum reforms included new schooling expectations and expanded the goals and objectives of the school curriculum to accommodate global needs and educational demands. The purpose of the curriculum reform was primarily to adapt students to the complexities and challenges of globalization (Law, 2014). In conclusion, globalization not only drives international curriculum reform but also indirectly poses challenges to curriculum reform (Tan, 2012).

4. Conclusion

This study aims to explore in depth the opportunities and challenges that “non-traditional” international schools face in constructing international curricula “with Chinese characteristics” under the context of globalization. The growth of internationalization in education as a result of globalization reflects the rapid expansion of international education. The learning experience of an international curriculum not only fosters short- and long-term “global citizenship”, but also develops students’ global/international cultural capital, including analytical and technical skills, cross-cultural communication skills, and more. The question of how to legitimately provide an

international curriculum “with Chinese characteristics” within the Chinese system is not only central to the reform of international schools but also to the future development of international schools in the Chinese labor market. There are both opportunities and challenges to reforming the curriculum of Chinese international schools in the context of globalization. Current national education policies provide a new direction for international school curriculum reform. International schools also have significant advantages in terms of environment, curriculum, and resources. However, the relationship between globalization and localization is inherently dialectical and contradictory. The deep integration between the Chinese national curriculum and the international curriculum is complex and challenging. Therefore, this study draws on the successful experience of curriculum reform in Shanghai to suggest that sociocultural factors are necessary for successful curriculum reform. Future researchers can explore in depth the reform pathway of deep integration between the national curriculum and the international curriculum in the Chinese educational context.

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