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ADAPTING TO AN AMERICAN WORLD: THE ASYMMETRICAL COUPLING OF AMERICAN AND CHINESE EDUCATION

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FIW WORKING PAPER NO. 17

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IMPRESSUM

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Layout: romeer und höhmann strategisches design
Satz: Jonathan Eisleb
Internet: www.fiw.uni-bonn.de
ISBN: 978-3-946306-17-7

ABSTRACT

The extensive study-abroad consulting industry that prepares Chinese students for American schools exemplifies, and is conditioned by, the asymmetry in Sino-American educational connectivity. Mobility from China to the United States involves more students, money, and prestige, as well as a lengthier and more densely institutionalized preparatory path than movement in the opposite direction. America-bound Chinese applicants often derive from special America-oriented school programs and hire mentors from the consulting industry. These mentors help them write American-style application essays and cultivate extracurricular activities in conformance to Anglo-American upper-class ideals. Proximately, the applicants seek to adapt to the presumed values of the American admission commissioners. In extension, they could be seen as adapting to America's education culture and class structure, or even to a global power constellation in which America is hegemonic. Yet, though tempting, framings that juxtapose a 'world culture'-representing America to a peripheral Chinese 'non-world' run into conceptual contradictions.

Keywords: American college admissions, world culture theory, diversity discourse, study-abroad consulting, cultural hegemony

INTRODUCTION

04

Since the late nineteenth century, the injection of Western academic and educational values and organizational forms into the Chinese politico-cultural-educational ecosystem set in motion “a century of cultural conflict,” in the wording of the subtitle of Ruth Hayhou’s *China’s Universities 1895-1995*. Cultural and political-ideological conflict consumed the first formal-organizational coupling with American higher education: the American transplant institution Tsinghua College (1911–1929). Tsinghua College, which was financed with the Boxer indemnity (war reparations) allotted to the United States, offered an eight-year preparation for undergraduate education in America. Its Americanized format, which included an American sports program and systematically privileged things American, eventually proved too controversial, however. Chinese traditionalists and nationalists took over and sinified the college (Pan 2009, 65–84). Still, by the 1930s, due to efforts across China, Chinese students had become the largest group of international students at American universities. No less than roughly 20,000 Chinese nationals had studied in the US before the communist takeover in 1949 (Sun 1980, 364).

War and ideological conflict disrupted the early Sino-American coupling complex in the mid-twentieth century, but Sino-American connectivity made a remarkable comeback in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Since 2009, Chinese students are once again the largest group of international students at American universities and high schools (IIE Open Doors 2020). In the school year of 2019–2020—just before the corona crisis interrupted student flows—372,532 sojourning tertiary students from mainland China studied in the United States. This number subdivides into 148,160 undergraduates, 137,096 postgraduates, and 15,898 non-degree-seeking students, and 71,380 Optional Practical Training (OPT) students (Ibid.). The US Department of Commerce estimates that in 2016, Chinese tertiary students contributed 12.6 billion dollars to the American economy (Gao and Tan 2017).

Still, political and cultural conflicts, tensions, and incongruences have not disappeared from the space of Sino-American educational cooperation and interaction. [1] Nor has the asymmetry in Sino-American educational relations vanished. America is still the provider of education and pedagogical standards, as it had been so markedly during the days of Tsinghua College. Besides the flows of students and tuition money moving mainly from China to America rather than vice versa, the institutional infrastructure of Sino-American educational connectivity reflects the greater prestige of the American side, as this paper will argue. Relatedly, the efforts and institutional and financial resources that go into preparing Chinese students for further studies in America eclipse those invested in student mobility from America to China. Like the students at Tsinghua College in the 1910s, mainland Chinese applications to American boarding schools and colleges typically spent years in preparation in special international programs, supplementary classes, and commercial study-abroad consultancies called *zhōngjiè* (literally: intermediaries). The *zhōngjiè* and the normative adaptation work they facilitate, form this paper’s focus.

One reason why such preparations are so extensive is that the admissions criteria of elite American boarding schools and colleges are elaborate, idiosyncratic, and culturally complex (Ma 2020, 68, 236). In their normative complexity and broadness of scope, the admission systems of elite American colleges are, in fact, an international outlier; they are, as sociologist Karabel quips, “exceedingly strange ... from both a historical and a comparative perspective” (2005, 2). Alongside the more standard academic components—school grades, English proficiency test scores (TOEFL or IELTS), and SAT scores (for college applications)—applicants must write personal essays and take interviews. There is an emphasis on extracurricular activities, and students are selected “on highly subjective qualities such as ‘character’ ‘personality’ and ‘leadership’” (Karabel 2005, 1).

[1] Indicative of the general hostility and mistrust, in February 2021, 55 percent of Americans polled by Pew supported “limiting Chinese students studying in the US” (2021).

Most culturally demanding are arguably the essay assignments for college applications. Typical prompts for American college application essays include: ‘Describe an example of your leadership experience’; ‘Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge’; ‘How will you contribute to our diverse campus population?’; and ‘What have you done to improve your community?’ The evaluation of an applicant’s responses is, of course, an inevitably normative endeavor, but these prompts themselves already foreground specific normative concerns and stances, reflecting culturally and ideologically particular assumptions about what kinds of individuals make for ‘good students’ and ‘future leaders.’ (Graduate applications are, in comparison, somewhat more academic, less personal, and therefore ‘easier.’ They do require motivation letters, yet their contents do not have to be very ‘personal’ and extracurricular in focus because applicants can instead cite their undergraduate academic accomplishments.)

Indeed, American college admissions puzzle also many American applicants. Illustratively, American students from wealthy families often hire professional help too: “Increasing numbers of students ... have decided that the stakes are so high and the decisions of gatekeepers so mysterious that it is imperative to obtain the assistance of high-priced college consultants, the most sought after of whom charge fees that approach \$30,000 per candidate” (Karabel, 546–47). But America’s elite admissions are, of course, especially confusing to applicants from foreign countries where higher education primarily recruits students based on test scores alone. China is one of the many test-centered countries. Also, the country stands at a considerable cultural and political distance from the United States. Not surprisingly, Chinese applicants generally lack sufficient knowledge of American admission criteria (unless they receive guidance from friends or relatives with American education experience). More fundamentally, due to their test-oriented and less expressively opinionated educational habitus (Ma 2020, 78–108, 160–182), as will be illustrated below, “they are not trained to be the kinds of applicants the American higher education system expects” (Ibid. 68).

This mismatch and the complexity of American elite admissions together drive Chinese students to *zhongjie*, the commercial study-abroad consultancies this paper focuses on. The *zhongjie* industry, which prepares Chinese for Western and particularly American applications, parallels the American consultancy industry for Americans, though it serves, as I will show, an additional inter-cultural connectivity function. This Chinese industry—which emerged during the nineties (Lan 2019) and rapidly expanded in the twenty-first century, catering to China’s rising middle- and upper-classes—offers English trainings, test preparation courses, and one-on-one application mentoring services. A few thousand renminbi (around a thousand dollars) buys English language editing of application essays by a Chinese mentor without a foreign degree. A multi-year, all-inclusive ‘elite’ package that includes spin-doctoring of application essays and coaching on extracurricular activities by a US-educated ‘elite mentor’ will typically cost hundreds of thousands of renminbi (tens of thousands of dollars). The parents pay the bills.

It is unknown how many students annually move through Chinese *zhongjie*, and estimates are complicated by recent disruptive events such as the corona crisis, Trump’s trade war, and new Chinese educational regulations. [2] But experts familiar with its workings are under the impression that *zhongjie* provide services to most Chinese US-bound applicants. Terry Crawford, the co-founder and CEO of InitialView, a company that interviews Chinese high-school students and makes the videos available to American colleges, estimates that of “students in China [applying to American colleges], ... *most* feel that not tapping into an agent’s ‘expertise’ would leave them uncompetitive against their better-advised classmates” (2015, my italics). Likewise, education sociologist Ma Yingyi, who surveyed and interviewed Chinese applicants to American colleges and Chinese undergraduates in the United States, conjectures that “most students feel the need to use an agency in China” (2020, 62). Liu Shuning, who ethnographically researched a Chinese international high-track focused on preparing the students for US college applications, estimates that “the privileged Chinese high-school students” she encountered in her fieldwork “*overwhelmingly* use their families’ capital, particularly economic capital, to buy educational services from English training and study-abroad education consulting companies” (Liu 2020, 125, my italics).

[2] There were “more than 4,000 [*zhongjie*] agencies in China” (Ma 2020, 62). Yet, the corona crisis and the 2020-escalation of the Sino-American conflict may have reduced the number of *zhongjie*; and the new ban of for-profit k12 tutoring, which went into effect in July 2021, certainly did so. The ban does not target study-abroad consulting, only for-profit supplementary tutoring for subjects in China’s regular school curriculum, yet it may have uprooted large *zhongjie* that offer both, like New Oriental (Stevenson 2021). In 2019, New Oriental enrolled 296,000 Chinese students in test preparation courses for American and Commonwealth applications, with the prepared-for tests including IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, ACT, GRE, GMAT, and LSAT (New Oriental 2019). It is unclear how much of this infrastructure still stands.

This paper analyzes the US-oriented segment of China's zhongjie industry and its institutional environment to uncover the asymmetrical structural coupling between the Chinese and the American education fields. This asymmetry consists in the American side's educational services and pedagogy being institutionally privileged over the Chinese side's (as will be explained) and in greater demand, and student mobility from the Chinese to the American field generally requiring more money and much greater linguistic and normative adaptation than mobility in the opposite direction. As will be shown, all these different yet related asymmetries in the coupling of the Chinese and American education fields come together in the Chinese zhongjie industry. My findings derive from a structural analysis of the institutional infrastructure for student mobility between China and the United States and my below-outlined participant observations in a Beijing zhongjie.

This paper has three parts. The first will show that the industry's US-oriented segment facilitates strategic normative and cultural adaptation to elite institutions in the American education field. The second section places zhongjie in the context of the larger institutional complex that couples the Chinese and the American education field, and argues that this entire complex bears the marks of America's elite education international dominance. The third section analyzes the nature of the adapted-to dominant normative formations. Though internationally influential, these formations are too culturally and ideologically specific to be equatable to *the* international or global standard. A balanced account, it will be argued, acknowledges the existing asymmetries between the Chinese and the American education field without, however, exaggerating American dominance to the point at which elite American institutions come to stand in for something like 'world culture.'

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INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION IN ZHONGJIE

In America-oriented zhongjie, US-educated mentors help Chinese, America-bound applicants manage, assuage, circumvent, or strategically hide cultural, political, and normative-pedagogical differences, frictions, and incongruences. To be clear: China's zhongjie industry never presents itself as fulfilling a political or ideological function, and many of the industry's consultants are mainly concerned with providing mundane logistical services, such as informing student-clients of application procedures and deadlines. Still, the industry also implicitly facilitates the students' strategic adaptation to American higher education's normative orders. This adaptation can take the form of 'faking' desired qualities (compare: Crawford 2015), but it may also involve substantial habitus adjustment and identity re-imaginings. As Liu writes, "U.S. college application is a pedagogic device," one that shapes Chinese curricula and the lives of Chinese applicants (2020, 123n8). Education ethnographer Amir Hampel likewise rejects a narrow instrumentalist view, citing the historical context. He explains that when Chinese youngsters "learn that they must present themselves as creative, passionate, and confident ... to impress [American] admissions officers," they tap into a prominent, century-old pedagogical discourse "loaded with cultural and historical significance" (2020, 223). This discursive tradition idealizes the West as active and creative while accusing Chinese education of inducing passivity and conformity (Ibid.; compare: Hampel 2017, 446).

For twelve consecutive months, from 2017 to early 2018, I worked as an 'elite mentor' (which is how US-educated mentors are marketed), preparing twenty-six Chinese students for further studies in America. I brainstormed with students on how to strengthen their extracurricular profile and application essays. In the final stage, I proofread and scrutinized their application essay drafts. Also, I helped them select schools, colleges, and summer school programs to apply to, taught core academic skills such as critical reading, and conducted mock application interviews. Based at the Beijing headquarters, I could meet my Beijing-based students in the office while I communicated via WeChat video and phone calls with students residing in other Chinese cities or American boarding schools. I occasionally talked to the mothers of students and gave talks about American higher education to parents, students, and potential new clients in Beijing and other Chinese cities. I met with 'informants' working in other education consultancies or other departments of my company to explore the industry's general workings. With my students, colleagues, and informants, I communicated in English. With my students' mothers (the fathers were less involved; compare: Liu 2020, 87), our team communicated in Mandarin. Chinese colleagues translated my updates about their child's progress from English to Mandarin. Simple back-and-forths with parents on WeChat I handled in Mandarin.

The twenty-six student cases I worked on included twenty-one high-school students preparing for American college applications. Roughly, half of these were in expensive international programs, which cost sixty to eighty thousand renminbi or about ten to twenty thousand dollars annually (Ibid., 33), or in even pricier US boarding schools. The other half were in China's 'domestic' system—though they attended the more prestigious 'key' (*zhòngdiǎn*) category of schools within that domestic system. Also, I coached two middle school students: the one was preparing himself for an American high-school application, the other for American college applications four years in advance. My youngest student, a twelve-year-old elementary schooler, whom I helped with critical reading, prepared for an American middle school application. My oldest students were two China-based undergraduate students preparing for American postgraduate applications. Eight students resided in Beijing. Thirteen lived in other cities in China, predominantly in Shanghai. Five students were already in the United States at boarding schools but still hired additional distance support from their home country. The number of students actually under my direct care varied from week to week, ranging from five to sixteen at a given time, as students left for the United States or were passed on between the company's different mentors.

The mentor helps students to navigate the normative terrain. As a mentor, I tried to explain, tout, and encourage adjustment to the values and expectations of American admissions commissions, as and insofar I understood these, and correct strategic 'problems' in students' self-presentation. Besides the essay consulting and interview preparations, I helped students select application targets and develop their extracurricular profiles. The essay consulting and the activity management, which were the most time-consuming components, both have an intercultural adaptation aspect. The essay writing involves "decipher[ing] the value codes of American college admissions" (Ma 2020, 77) and re-imagining the student's life in strategic anticipation of American normative formations. The strategic development of extracurricular activities serves to converge on an Anglo-American upper- or upper-middle-class ideal of self-actualized individuality and well-roundedness, the old term for which is 'character.'

07

ACTIVITY MANAGEMENT

The activity management featured me helping Chinese high-school students find and cultivate extracurricular activities years or months ahead of application season. Students need to demonstrate having developed interests, both on their resumes and in their essays. Without any indications of prolonged engagement, a claimed passion would be insufficiently persuasive. In my first meeting with a student, I screened for hobbies and interests and then explored ways to develop these further. If a student liked basketball, I would try to get him or her to organize a club or tournament or set up a sports science blog with weekly English contributions. One boy prepared for robotics competitions. With one girl, I planned the founding of a musical screening school club. However, it was usually difficult to make meaningful contributions to students' extracurricular activities. Students more often than not did not execute the 'plans,' and forcing something on a student would be neither ethical nor viable.

The activity management is an attempt at catching up with privileged American high-school students, whose schools and family encourage and facilitate them to develop hobbies and social skills through participation in events and clubs, at school and elsewhere. A broadcultivation, traditionally thought to signal 'character' (Karabel 2005, 2), continues to function as a class marker in American education and society. Gaztambide-Fernández, who studied New England boarding schools, suggests that, "One possible interpretation of the expansiveness of athletic, artistic, and extracurricular opportunities in elite boarding schools is that the schools assume the role of providing what Lareau (2003) terms 'concerted cultivation,' which characterizes middle- and upper-class parenting in the United States" (2009, 1111). Such clubs and the ideal of individualizing cultivation are much less prominent in mainland China's regular high-school system. Mass education in the People's Republic has been heavily exam-oriented (apart from during the Cultural Revolution), leaving students with little time for extracurricular activities. Illustratively, 15-year-old high-school students in Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Guangdong reported learning 57 hours per week on average (OECD 2019, 67). The industry offers services to remedy the resulting lack of individualizing extracurricular development.

However, alongside the industry's external, private-market services, international school programs are also trying to offer solutions. Outside of China's regular education system, private international schools and the international divisions of key public high-schools mimic upper- and upper-middle-class Anglo-American pedagogy, facilitating 'concerted cultivation' through school clubs and activities. They ready students for Anglosphere applications by stimulating "students' comprehensive qualities such as leadership, creativity, collaboration, communication, participation, service, and responsibility" (Liu 2020, 102). Consequently, the original gap in comprehensive and extracurricular development between the Chinese and the American education fields has partly transformed into a gap between the regular and the more expensive, international programs *within* China (Ibid., 105–106). My students from international programs (about half), who had hired activity management counseling despite also having access to college counselors at their school, tended to be ahead of their regular-system, gaokao-preparing peers. In my experience, their profiles often need only a bit of tweaking, if anything. Many have taken expensive summer school classes at American universities. One of my students had on her CV a list of movies she had directed at the film studio of her international high-school in Shanghai. By contrast, many gaokao-preparing high-school students are struggling to catch up. Both the activity management offered by private education consultancies and the extensive facilitation of extracurricular activities by internationally-oriented Chinese schools are at once a *class* strategy and an *intercultural* adaptation, closing the distance with a partly internationalized, Anglo-American habitus of upper-classness.

08

ESSAY CONSULTING

The essay consulting sessions remedy both specific cultural-ideological misunderstandings and incongruences and general difficulties adapting to the genre of American application writing. An example of the former was one of my college-applying students' value-incongruent depreciation of class discussions. In one of his essay drafts, he argued that discussions are merely disruptive and futile because all "clashes of conflicts" will "eventually come to an end" in a more (or even perfectly) knowledgeable future, and that he, therefore, avoids sharing his opinions at school and elsewhere. I warned him that his statement and self-depiction conflicted too strongly with American colleges' valuation of 'active class participation'—an ideal that reflects a democratic-republican normativity. After several attempts, I managed to persuade him to tone down the anti-discussion angle for strategic reasons.

Aside from such more concrete value incongruences, many students struggled with the personal style of essayism demanded by college (and summer school) applications. My observations in the zhongjie industry confirm Ma's observation in Chinese international high-school programs that "the elaborate story-telling of personal statements ... were alien to the Chinese students and their parents" (2020, 77). With the most confused students, it could take hours of brainstorming to derive the tiniest bit of proto-narrative. Many restated biographical facts, such as their parents' province of birth, or mentioned school subjects they liked without providing accompanying narratives. Often the richest 'story' I could extract was a mere 'I like math because it is very exact, and my teacher is good.' Trying different angles, I could get some into storytelling mode. If that failed, I would try to weave stories around the biographical information the student provided. The student's homework would be to turn my suggestions into a few paragraphs. However, students would often show up a week later with only one or two sentences added. In that way, it sometimes took months to arrive at adequate complete drafts. Besides students' inexperience with self-reflective essay writing, a lack of motivation was a factor. Students were drained already by the intensive SAT and TOEFL preparatory classes they took in addition to their schoolwork.

A college application prompt type that proved particularly hard to decipher and respond to, combines the topics of identity and diversity. The identification-and-diversity prompt asks students to elaborate on their group identifications and allegiance to the spirit of diversity. Many colleges use some version of this prompt for a secondary or tertiary essay assignment. The following is the prompt for the second application essay of the University of Washington at Seattle.

Maximum length: 300 words. Our families and communities often define us and our individual worlds. Community might refer to your cultural group, extended family, religious group, neighborhood or school, sports team or club, co-workers, etc. Describe the world you come from and how you, as a product of it, might add to the diversity of the University of Washington. Tip: Keep in mind that the University of Washington strives to create a community of students richly diverse in cultural backgrounds, experiences, values, and viewpoints.

This prompt was difficult to understand and respond to for at least three reasons. First, it is conceptually demanding. The ideal of a 'diverse campus' presupposes a particular American notion of diversity shaped by the institutional histories of elite American schools and contemporary American social concerns, with which many of my students seemed at least somewhat unfamiliar. China has Soviet-style diversity policies that are more top-down and formalized, furthering the inclusion of state-recognized ethnic groups (Yuan et al. 2020). Second, the required response format—interesting narrative prose—does not match those more self-effacing students who seem to approach their identity in more of a dryly factual 'bullet point' kind of way. Third, with my college application students, none of whom belonged to an ethnic or religious minority, it was hard to find a good topic. Being Han Chinese from a wealthy family in a big city is not distinguishing or 'diversifying' anymore in the American campus context.

During the topic brainstorming sessions for this identification-and-diversity prompt, when I probed them for their identity, my grade eleven and grade twelve students' first response was often: 'I am Chinese,' offered without elaboration. I would press on with follow-up questions, inviting them to tell stories about their life. Yet I often met silence. For example, after multiple hour-long 'interrogations' in search of a topic, spread out over weeks, one seventeen-year-old, Shoushan (a pseudonym), grew increasingly despondent. He eventually sighed, in a soft voice: "There is nothing special [about me]." I assigned him a topic relating to his music interests, though Shoushan did not seem to consider his membership in the school band important to his identity. We had failed to weave a story around the features that did seem central to his actual identity: being Chinese, friendly, and from a wealthy family.

It is hard to reflect interestingly on one's identity if it lies too submerged in corporatist collectivities such as 'being Chinese,' as seemed to be the case with Shoushan. Now, the prompt does maintain some openness toward less expressively individualistic identities as it speaks of "the world you come from" and not of something like 'the identity you created or discovered.' Still, the ideal application essayist would be a conscious, self-reflective identity-constructor. Such a person would live by what Ma calls "the American creed of expressive individualism" and the values of "global citizenship" (2020, 24, 186), standing in the individualistic culture that the neo-institutionalist sociologists Boli and Elliott (2008) classify as constitutive of world society, as will be discussed below.

This brings us to the larger context of Sino-American asymmetry and America's symbolic dominance, a dominance so pronounced that it, as the above quotes already indicate, can tempt scholars to associate or even blur the categories of 'America' and 'world.'

THE ASYMMETRICAL SINO-AMERICAN LINKAGE

The workings of China's *zhongjie* reflect and are conditioned by the vast asymmetry of the linkage between China and the United States in international education. This asymmetry has economic, symbolic, and institutional-structural aspects. Macro-economically, China is a net importer of education services while the US is a net exporter; and they are so both in relation to each other and in general. Notably, there are far fewer American students enrolling in Chinese programs than vice versa. In 2018-19, only 11,639 Americans enrolled in Chinese schools and universities, while 372,532 Chinese enrolled in the United States (IIE Open Doors 2020). The United States was the top foreign destination for Chinese students, but China is not a top-five destination for American students (UIS 2017). In any given period, many more students and much more tuition fees have moved from China to the United States than vice versa.

Yet, beyond such quantities, the asymmetry concerns prestige and institutional-structural inequalities. English is the 'world language' and the United States dominates international university rankings. The country itself has 'brand value.' The American brand is so powerful, writes Kyle Long (2018, 4), that "over the past quarter-century," there has been "a trend" to establish "American universities abroad." These are "higher education institutions located outside the United States using the name 'American,'" often merely for commercial purposes. "There are now 80 such institutions in more than 55 countries around the globe ... with an estimated combined enrollment exceeding 150,000 students" (Ibid.). In China, the broader prestige of American pedagogy is also on display in supplementary education and popular cultural fields. In Chinese public speaking and self-help groups, participants idealize the supposed social skills and confidence of Westerners and particularly Americans (Hampel 2017, 442, 445), while in China's self-help book market, translated titles by American authors and American discourses dominate (Hendriks 2017, 158, 161).

The institutional infrastructure of Sino-American educational connectivity reflects this American prestige advantage. Take the skewed structure of student ‘exchange.’ Whereas sojourning students from China practically always enroll in the United States’ regular, English-taught curricula, leading Chinese universities often offer English-taught programs for foreigners. And ‘exchange students’—a misnomer given the term’s implication of symmetry—from American elite institutes such as the University of Chicago, Stanford, and Yale often get taught in English at special satellite centers and international branch campuses [3] while in China, instead of immersing in the Chinese host university’s regular curriculum. There are fifteen American branch campuses in China (more than in any other host country), whereas there are no Chinese branch campuses in the United States. In 2020, America was the country with the most internationally branched-out universities in the world (86), while China housed more branch campuses than any other country (42). Here again, the US features as the world’s largest educational ‘exporter,’ China as the largest ‘importer.’

Correspondingly, the institutional infrastructure of the student movement from China to America is much more extensive than that of movement from America to China. The American market for commercial counseling on China applications, if existent at all, is not of the same order of magnitude as the Chinese counterpart. Nor does the United States have an entire division of high schools dedicated to preparing American youngsters for higher education in China. In 2019, China, by contrast, housed 821 k-12 schools with English-taught curricula, enrolling 513 thousand students (Daxue Consulting 2020). Many of these explicitly prepare Chinese students for America, though there are even more UK-focused k-12 schools (*ibid.*). In a survey of 507 Chinese in American colleges (Chinese nationals), 49.7 percent had entered American colleges via the Chinese system of English-taught high-school programs, 32 percent had done the regular gaokao, and 18.3 percent had come from high schools in America (Ma 2020, 20). Liu (2020) and Ma (2020) identify the Chinese system of international programs, including private international schools and the international divisions of (semi) public schools, as a feeder institution of the zhongjie. Also, there is much cooperation between zhongjie and international programs; the former sometimes co-organize the latter’s curricula.

The structure of the Chinese zhongjie industry itself also reflects a privileging of America over other destinations. Its two-tiered system reserves the more expensive and extensive services and mentors for American applications. Among the hundreds of employees at the company where I worked, there were less than ten so-called ‘elite mentors,’ each of whom held a degree from a top-thirty US university (in the US News ranking), which is standard in some leading Chinese education consulting firms. Even a degree from Oxford or a leading Canadian university is insufficient; only prestigious American degrees count for the top mentoring jobs in the ‘elite’ unit. Meanwhile, educational consultants in the much more numerous, regular departments are usually domestically educated, less well-paid, and significantly cheaper to hire. In many large zhongjie, the regular departments focus on a range of Western and East Asian countries, whereas the ‘elite’ units concentrate fully on the United States. Meanwhile, some expensive boutique consultancies only work on American applications.

Admittedly, rather than purely mirroring international prestige inequality, the dominant orientation on America in Chinese zhongjie is also due to American applications being more extensive and complicated than applications to any other country. In no other major country, college applicants have to write so many essays or such personal—and therefore ‘culturally’ complicated—ones. An American college application will typically involve five to fifteen schools, each of which requires two to five essays of two to seven hundred words each (though applicants can reuse essay parts for different applications). Likewise, in no other major country—not even Britain—do the admissions of the leading universities weigh the applicant’s extracurricular activities so heavily. This criterion functions as a proxy for class. That is, it puts students from wealthier schools with more school clubs and activities at an advantage and rewards expensive hobbies and the more formalized forms of socializing that mark the “concerted cultivation” (Lareau 2003; compare Karabel 2005, 2) typical of upper-middle-class upbringings. Yet, above all, the extracurricular criterion heightens complexity by causing evaluations to be more ethical and thus more *thickly cultured* than academic admission systems in Continental Europe, Japan, and Australia, which forces applicants to strategize their self-presentations. Anyway, the effect remains the same: the structure of Chinese zhongjie symbolically places America above other foreign destinations.

[3] A satellite center such as the University of Chicago Center in Beijing serves cooperation and promotional purposes and does not grant full degrees, while an international branch campus is larger and does grant degrees. The Cross-Border Education Research Team (2020) defines an international branch campus as: “An entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider.”

THE ADJUSTED-TO NORMATIVE FORMATIONS

Besides acknowledging America's symbolic dominance on the 'world stage,' a balanced account of Sino-American educational connectivity must cover the more 'horizontal' aspects of intercultural communication and the interests and historical trajectories of specific educational institutions. Accordingly, in examining which normative formations the US-oriented zhongjie facilitate adaptation to, one could distinguish between the levels of 1) intra-educational institutions, 2) national constellations, and 3) global or inter-world-regional formations and inequalities. Proximately, the mentor and the applicant-client try to adjust to the institutional values upheld by the admission commissions of American schools, yet these values, in extension, also partly reflect and interact with broader national and world-regional constellations.

THE INTRA-EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

The extensive admission process and idiosyncratic selection criteria of elite American universities and boarding schools derive from historically grown institutional status strategies, as Karabel explains in his historical study *The Chosen* (2005). Most central to American elite schools' "perceived institutional interests" has been preserving their elite status in American society (Ibid., 2). Hence, they have always been "intensely preoccupied with maintaining their close ties to the privileged" (Ibid. 8). In the 1920s, when elite American universities calculated that academic tests alone no longer sufficiently guaranteed a socially privileged student body, they began selecting students on "character" too, as this quality was thought to be "present in abundance among high-status Protestants" (Ibid. 2). Admission officers gauged students' 'character' by examining their extracurricular activities and personality through essay assignments and interviews. Then came the 1960s and 1970s, during which the discretionary approach to selection, which serves to guarantee the 'elite' student body, faced criticism by "radical movements demanding greater equality of condition" (Ibid. 4). The discretionary approach itself survived this radical period, but it now included women and ethnic minorities under the banner of "diversity" (Ibid. 484-498). The new synthesized ideal embedded this diversity discourse in the older ideology of 'character,' championing "a diverse student body" comprising of 'future leaders' from each cultural and ethnic group in American society and each foreign nation (Ibid. 498). Though not uncontested, this basic ideological synthesis has been dominant since. Thus, the values guiding American elite admissions most proximately ground in the history of strategically operating institutions within the American education field.

In extension, American admissions discourses, including their valuations of 'leadership' and 'diversity,' appear to attain their specific meanings and rhetorical force against the background of broader cultural and ideological constellations. Depending on how one depicts those more general cultural-ideological constellations, one sketches a more symmetrical or more asymmetrical picture of the relationship between the Chinese and the American education field. If one holds that in adapting to the institutional values of American elite schools, Chinese applicants indirectly adapt to something as grand as 'world culture,' 'neoliberal globalization,' or 'world citizenship,' then one sketches a hyper-asymmetrical, hierarchical picture in which one of the two sides—the American side—is the primary bearer of 'worldness.' In contrast, if students adapt to a more particularistic 'American culture,' then this would suggest a slightly more symmetrical picture in which two national education cultures make mutual—though not necessarily equal—adjustments in their interaction; that is, Chinese students entering the American education field have to adjust to particular American mores while Americans entering the Chinese field adapt to the Chinese ones. Each of these two emphases—more inter-national (and horizontal) versus more globalistic (and world-regions-hierarchizing)—carries specific theoretical risks.

THE NATIONAL LEVEL

When framing the adaptation as directed toward something like ‘American culture,’ the risk is that one invokes an overly symmetrical of an ‘equal’ exchange between two national education cultures—though this is by no means a necessary implication. Another challenge is to avoid cultural stereotypes. The comparative research literature identifies a number of typical difficulties sojourning Chinese students face in American education; these include struggling with American classroom discussions and presentation assignments and being “too modest” for the confidently opinionated expressiveness valued in American schools (Liu 2001, 72; 2002; Ma 2020, 142-182; Ping 2010; Yan and Berliner 2013, 75). Such comparative findings can show an uncomfortable resemblance to common cultural stereotypes while potentially hypostasizing national identities.

However, though this issue indeed warrants caution, we should not rush into an a priori dismissal of the comparative literature or the national level of analysis. The literature bases itself on thorough quantitative and qualitative research. Moreover, in this case, one would expect significant cultural variation to manifest on the national level because post-Leninist Mainland China and liberal democratic America provide education with a very different political and ideological environment. Education anthropologist Andrew Kipnis argues that education’s embedding in, and interaction with, governance traditions make that ‘national education culture’ is a valid level of analysis alongside other geospatial levels: “I see state formation and cultural change as interlinked and, at least in part, as processes that localize culture and generate geographically visible patterns of difference” (2011a, 16). Kipnis explains that one must guard against affirming nationalist reifications (Ibid., 15–17) but that, “Nonetheless, space must exist for analytic attention to cultural variation at the national level” (Ibid., 16).

Most fundamentally, these variations involve ideals of citizenship; that is, visions on “what type of adult (citizen/subject) the education system should produce” (Kipnis 2011b, 291). In a polity, there tends to be a dynamic feedback loop between the dominant forms of political pedagogy and the larger politico-social order. Kipnis uses Foucault’s neologism ‘governmentality’ to denote this politics-pedagogy nexus (Ibid., 7). An alternative modern term would be ‘regime,’ a semantic that points back to the integrated political-cultural-pedagogical order of the European *ancien régime*. The Platonic and Aristotelian term for the politics-political pedagogy nexus is ‘politeia.’ Accordingly, one could postulate that in China and the United States, the dominant ideals of citizenship promoted in the education system reflect, serve, and interact with a different (or a differently weighted) politeia, political regime, or governmentality, depending on one’s terminological choice. This regime type difference in the dominant political pedagogy, in turn, appears to manifest in students having a different understanding of and disposition toward confrontational discussions and self-promotion.

THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Finally, there is the global context of American hegemony (Babones 2017, 9–18) against which the asymmetry of the Sino-American coupling complex in education must be understood. In the broadest sense, America-bound Chinese applicants also orientate themselves toward a world order in which America’s regime and education field are uniquely influential, constituting the perceived “epicenter of globalization” (Ma 2020, 42). Indeed, American higher education enrolls “the largest international student body in the world” (Ibid., 2020, 42). Chinese school programs that specifically prepare for further studies in America define themselves as generically ‘international’ (Liu 2002, 121–122) as if America represents the international as such. In this, they follow the dominant international discourse in which “‘international’ does not ... refer equally to all cultures worldwide, but only to the core of the international world system” shaped by “the culture of the Anglo-Saxon upper class” (Strijbis, Teney, and Helbling 2019, 42). Finally, America-bound Chinese students often associate American higher education with world citizenship: “Ultimately, they aspire to feel comfortable and confident in living as a world citizen, and they see studying in the United States as an effective way to realize this goal” (Ma 2020, 42). Their expectation is in line with sociologist Salvatore Babones’ provocative claim that “In field after field, success in the world means success in the United States, and vice versa” (2017, 24).

So, do America-bound Chinese students prepare for and move to *the world*? No. Though the inter-world-regional asymmetry in Sino-American educational connectivity is stark and has to be addressed by any theorization of this connectivity, the theorist should maintain critical distance to the temptation to associate things American with '*the world*' or '*the international*.' Now, the theorist may make that association exactly to shed light on the workings of intercultural and ideological dominance, as does Babones; this actually serves a critical function. However, associating 'America' and 'world' is *uncritical* in the absence of such reflection; that is, when it goes unacknowledged that the association is produced by, and productive of, relations of dominance between particular regimes, cultures, and ideologies. Hence, any suggestion that American elite schools *represent* the global education order will be uncritical if it treats this supposed representation, not as a claim, power grab, or sign of domination by something particular, but instead as an expression of a natural universality or global centeredness. Such would either erase cultural and ideological others or overstate American-Chinese asymmetry, which, though substantial, is not on the scale of a world/non-world divergence. Consider that if a move toward elite American education would be a move toward the globalized world, wherever these Chinese students were previously must be a less globalized or, in any case, 'less world-representing' part of the world. The idea that certain things *in* the world are 'less world' than other things is, besides contradictory, also hierarchizing. In this way, it can serve hegemonic power. Here the idea that American elite universities are epitomic bearers of worldness could naturalize their dominance in international education by cloaking dominance as universality.

Education researchers can echo this hegemony-naturalizing discourse even against their stated intentions. Liu, for example, wants to "apply a critical socio-spatial lens" (2020, 146) but inadvertently presents America's influential elite schools in a universalistic light by making their particular pedagogic values and evaluative criteria stand in for a monolithic neoliberal globalization. Accordingly, she labels Chinese applicants' normative reorientation toward American educational institutions as "the making of neoliberal elite subjects" (Ibid., 148). The applicants "becom[e] international" in "an era of neoliberal global marketization" (Ibid., 5), which accumulates in "China's becoming international at the levels of students, elite family, school and the state" (Ibid. 27). Though mentioning that the high-school programs that are sold as cultivating "international dispositions" actually narrowly "focus on preparing students for U.S. college admissions" (Ibid., 152, 121–122), she consistently blurs the categories 'America,' 'international,' and 'neoliberal.' America-bound students move to the neo-liberal international: "Privileged Chinese students ... shift from the national (Chinese) field of power to the international (U.S.) field of power" (Ibid., 155). Of course, Liu did not mean to flatter American elite universities; she uses 'neoliberal' as a negative label (Ibid., 140, 143, 156). Yet, if one would apply a perspective that similarly links elite America to the global, while, by contrast, construing the global as a predominantly *virtuous* "world culture" (as with some, below-described neo-institutionalist conceptions) or "world citizenship" (which Ma associates with ethnically diverse American campuses; 2020, 187–188), then that would demote the Chinese side.

Here one could muster the arguments leveled against (the latest variants of) the neo-institutionalist concept of 'world culture' (alternatively labeled 'world society' or 'world polity'). Critics (e.g., Holzinger 2018, Rappleye 2014) accuse the neo-institutionalist world culture theory in comparative education of making Western values and social forms the definition of worldness. Carney, Rappleye, and Salova (2012) single out the younger variants of world culture theory in their criticism, arguing that founding neo-institutionalist John Meyer had still cautiously conceptualized world culture as a set of contingent "rationalized myths" dependent on America's standing in the world. Since the nineties, however, world culture theories increasingly took these myths for reality, interpreting them as rational globalized models (Ibid. 380), and thereby implicitly legitimized "dominant educational paradigms" rooted in "particular Western and, especially, North American ideals" (Ibid., 366).

Yet, despite the conceptual deficiency of its later formulations, neo-institutionalist world culture theory is attractive because it seems to fit the phenomenon of asymmetrical adaptation in inter-world-regional educational mobility all-too-well. Take the theorization of diversity discourse as a feature of world culture by Boli and Elliott (2008). "Diversity ideology," the two neo-institutionalists maintain, "has swept the globe" (Ibid., 547, 541): "In the community, the school, the workplace, the political party and the sitcom on television, diversity is prized, and it is institutionalized in policy and practice throughout world society" (Ibid., 542). Complexly, this diversity ideology is not a return to collectivism, but, to the contrary, a manifestation of world society's individualization: "Diversity and multiculturalism, while seemingly oriented to the celebration and preservation of group differences, are facades that mask, and are generated by, the individualization of world society" (Ibid. 543). World-so-

cietal diversity ideology, they elucidate, celebrates a facile diversity of individuals with different eclectic ‘categorical group’ identifications and pushes out kin-based “corporate collectivities” (ibid. 550–553).

This framework can explain why a student like Shoushan, seemingly rooted in corporate collectivities such as ‘being Chinese,’ may struggle with American application writing since this genre could be construed as standing closer to world-cultural individualism. In Boli and Elliott’s account, world culture “entails two general obligations: individuals must consciously construct their identities to build (or discover) authentic selves, and the identities they construct must be unique” (2008, 543). It is as if this characterization of world cultural individualism derives from a guide to American college application writing, for such an expressive, ‘creative writing’ approach to one’s identity would certainly be beneficial for writing American college application essays. Therefore, one could imagine the US-going preparation and application process as a mechanism that integrates Chinese applicants into world-cultural—or, negatively phrased: globalized neoliberal—values and expectations.

However, the question is how one would reconcile such a globalistic interpretation of diversity discourse with the discourse’s unique American history and its specific ties to American elite education. As we saw, contemporary diversity discourse arose in American education in the seventies as a strategy by elite American universities for legitimizing their system of discretionary student selection in the face of widespread criticism. When critics contended that discretionary selection (in contrast to selection on academic scores only) was a means for preserving a white Anglo-Saxon elite, Yale, Harvard, and Princeton countered that discretion was needed, to the contrary, to safeguard the ethnic, temperamental, and gender diversity of the student body (Karabel 2005, 484–498). Hence, both the discretionary selection criteria and their justification by reference to ‘diversity’ derive from elite American universities’ strategic positioning in the American education field and class structure and respond to historical shifts in Western political culture. The personal college application prompts, the extracurricular selection focus, and the diverse campus ideal (though internationally influential) are still primarily associated with the Anglo-American realm.

That returns us to the conceptual problem of ‘worlding’ particulars: if large chunks of the world’s most populous nation were to somehow stand mostly outside of world culture, then that culture perhaps should not be regarded the ‘world culture’ at all. [4] Of course, American-style diversity ideology in education is internationally influential and congruous with a broader trend toward Simmelian individualism. Yet, the problematic bit is the jump from ‘x is influential’ to ‘x represents the world.’ Critiquing world culture theory, anthropologist Anderson-Levitt warns scholars to be cautious in declaring things ‘world cultural’ lest they further the symbolic interests of the powerful: “[W]hat counts as world culture is not necessarily shared by all or even many people in the world, but is rather whatever is successfully claimed as world culture by those people who manage to have a say in the matter” (2012, 39). Accordingly, globalistic theories that designate specific, influential cultural forms as representing ‘the world’ risk speaking, not truth to power, but power’s ‘truth.’ This concerns any suggestion that by orientating themselves to elite American schools, Chinese applicants integrate into the ‘world culture’ or ‘global ideology.’

CONCLUSION

Besides enabling wealthy Chinese families to convert money into educational opportunities abroad, the America-oriented segment of China’s zhongjie industry also manages and bridges the cultural and pedagogical-ideological distance between the two education fields. The mentor’s spin-doctoring of extracurricular activities and application essays thus simultaneously facilitates an intercultural and a class adaptation. The Chinese student-client adjusts to a different educational culture and an Anglo-American upper (middle) class habitus marked by expressive individualism and the cultivation of resource-demanding hobbies. Socio-spatially this concerns a movement *from* specific (elite) institutions in the Chinese education field (such as America-oriented international high-school programs), *through* coupling institutions such as (upper or lower tier) education consultancies, *to* specific (elite or sub-elite) institutions in the

[4] In this regard, world culture theory’s foremost rival, the systems-theoretical Weltgesellschaft school (which lies beyond this paper’s scope), has a more serious claim to the world epithet because it tries to theorize the differences and frictions between cultural regions as internal to world society (Luhmann 1991, 60; Stichweh 2000, 216–217, 241).

American education field. Each of the involved institutions strategically operates in, reproduces, and is shaped by a local, domestic, and partly international class structure (compare Liu 2020, 153), one that manifests *within*—but is also *refracted by*—the functionally differentiated education field.

The intercultural work and the difficulties involved bring to light the organized effort that goes into producing and maintaining connectivity between the education fields of different countries, cultural regions, and regimes or polities. The industry's America-oriented segment is part of a larger coupling complex that consists of institutions, practices, and organizations facilitating mobility between the Chinese and American education fields. This coupling complex is asymmetrical: China-US and US-China movements do not hold symmetrical positions within it. The normative and linguistic adjustments demanded of students, and the institutional support infrastructure and financial investments involved, are more extensive with student movement from China to the United States than vice versa. The *zhongjie* industry reflects and responds to this need for considerable adjustment from the Chinese side.

Chinese applicants' attempted (strategic) normative adaptation to elite American educational institutions can be analyzed on various geospatial levels. Proximally, the adapted-to or placated normative formations are those of specific institutions in America's education field, but these formations also have national and global environments. The hypothesis that Chinese applicants are, in extension, adapting to something like American education culture is not implausible, first because this is frequently suggested in the research literature; and second, because the Chinese and the American education field interact with a very different political environment. Applicants also adapt to 'global' or 'inter-world-regional' asymmetries of prestige—that is, to American cultural hegemony. Yet, one should not exaggerate these Sino-American asymmetries by styling America's leading schools as locale-transcending bearers of worldness vis-à-vis a Chinese 'non-world' periphery, for that would obscure the American educational field's ideological, cultural, and historical particularity and naturalize its international dominance.

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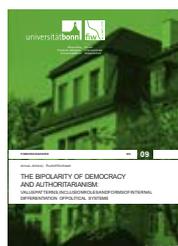
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Datum: 978-3-946306-16-0



Autoren: Eric Hendriks-Kim
ISBN: Oktober 2021
Datum: 978-3-946306-17-7