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“I will change things in my own small way”: Chinese Overseas Students, “Western” Values, and Institutional Reform

Stig THØGERSEN

Abstract: The article is based on a longitudinal study of Chinese college students who studied abroad as part of their BA programme in Preschool Education. It first examines the Chinese discourse on preschool education in order to understand the current situation in the students’ professional field. The main section then discusses students’ attitudes to what they perceived to be key values and principles in early childhood education in the West: freedom, individual rights, equality, and creativity. Students generally expressed strong support for these values and wanted to reform Chinese institutions accordingly. The article argues, based on this case, that while Chinese students abroad may not see themselves as the vanguard of macro-level political reforms, some of them certainly want to play a role in the gradual transformation of Chinese institutions in their respective professional fields.

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Keywords: China, Chinese students abroad, Western values, preschool education, institutional reform

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Introduction

The main aim of this article¹ is to question the widespread image of Chinese overseas students as apolitical and uninterested in socio-political reforms. Over a period of three years, I followed 21 Chinese students who spent the fourth year of their undergraduate studies in Denmark in order to achieve a double degree in Preschool Education (学前教育, *xueqian jiaoyu*) from a Chinese and a Danish college. During this time, the students developed strong and clearly formulated ideas on how Chinese preschool education should be reformed and how Chinese children should grow up. They rarely expressed support for fundamental political reforms or electoral democracy, but they wholeheartedly endorsed what they identified as prominent Western values in early childhood education: freedom, individual rights, equality, and creativity. They expressed a high degree of “filial nationalism” (Fong 2004), but at the same time they argued for substantial changes in Chinese institutions and in traditional authority structures.

After discussing why the political aspects of Chinese students’ experiences of studying abroad have received so little attention in the literature, this article goes on to present the methodology of the study and introduce the Chinese students I interviewed. It then examines the Chinese discourse on early childhood education in order to outline the academic and ideological context of my interviewees’ experiences of studying abroad. The main part of the article discusses how the students perceived preschool education in China and Denmark, how they encountered what they identified as key “Western” values during their time abroad, and how they worked out strategies for adapting these values to Chinese realities. The article does not claim that young Chinese who study abroad generally see themselves as the vanguard of macro-level political reform. However, based on the experiences of the students in this study, it argues that some students will return from their overseas studies with the ambition of contributing to the reformation of Chinese institutions in their respective professional fields.

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An Apolitical Generation?

Political and ideological issues have received only limited attention in the booming literature on Chinese students abroad. When such topics have been discussed at all, the focus has mainly been on students' patriotic sentiments. Vanessa Fong used the term “filial nationalism” to describe how the transnational students she interviewed saw many flaws in Chinese society but still identified strongly with their country “based on the belief that they could no more cease to be ‘people of China’ than they could cease to be their parents’ children” (Fong 2004: 645). A similar patriotism was discovered by Hail, who found that Chinese students in the United States reacted negatively to American fellow students’ criticism of Chinese policies in Tibet and other thorny issues (Hail 2015).

The modest academic interest in the political aspects of the study-abroad experience mirrors a similar trend in the general literature on contemporary Chinese youth, which tends to describe the present generation as indifferent to politics and societal ideals. In his discussion of the Chinese variety of individualisation, Yan Yunxiang emphasises how the underdevelopment of “individual autonomy and freedom” in China means that “the striving individual has increasingly become apolitical and devoid of civil obligations” (Yan 2013: 283). According to Stanley Rosen, Chinese surveys likewise indicate that “young Chinese today [...] are very *pragmatic* and *materialistic*, largely concerned with living the good life and making money” (Rosen 2009: 361; emphasis in original). Therefore, Rosen concludes,

it appears unlikely that Chinese youth will pose any immediate threat to the regime. In pursuing a pragmatic, success-oriented approach, the post-1980s generation has ensured that their public lives are placed in service to their private ambitions. (Rosen 2009: 368)

My interviewees certainly did not see themselves as a threat to the regime, but this does not mean that they were apolitical or narrowly focused on fulfilling their own materialistic ambitions. To the contrary, they were seriously engaged in balancing their professional ideals with Chinese realities and struggling to find their place in a society marked by moral ambiguities and mixed signals. This is no easy task. Today's young Chinese are, in Yan Yunxiang's words, forced to be “striving individuals” who “must be industrious, self-disciplined,

calculating, and pragmatic” in order to achieve personal success in life (Yan 2013: 282). At the same time, the state expects them to serve China as dynamic and creative actors in the country’s shift from “the factory of the world” to a high-tech economy. This leads to a tension, aptly described by Mette Halskov Hansen, where schools

experiment with how to build a neo-socialist individual who is submissive to party rule and accepts dominant behavioural norms, but who is at the same time potentially capable of innovating and creating economic value through self-assertive behaviour. (Hansen 2013: 75)

Being at once submissive and innovative, disciplined and creative, and able to discern the limits inside which innovation and creativity are permitted are crucial skills for students today.

These students are developing these skills in a context of unprecedented opportunities for engaging with the world outside China through the wide range of products and imaginaries now available to them. Much like the party-state itself must cope with international norms and standards – sometimes adapting to them, sometimes trying to change them, and sometimes circumventing or defying them – young Chinese are told to learn from the “advanced” countries of the world while at the same time being patriotic and aware of the Chinese characteristics that the party-state claims permeate every field of social life.

This balancing act is particularly demanding for those Chinese who study abroad, as they are confronted on a daily basis with foreign norms and social practices that they can choose to reject, to ignore, or to integrate into their existing value systems and personal biographies. My interviewees did their best to navigate these difficult waters. They had no intention of changing China’s political system in any fundamental way, but the large majority of them wanted to promote certain values, which they thought of as Western, and wished to play a role in the gradual reform of Chinese preschools in this “Western” direction.

Methodology, Procedure, and Interviewees

The article is based on data from a qualitative, longitudinal study of students enrolled in 2009, 2010, and 2011 in a four-year BA programme for Preschool Education at Xueqian College, Jiangsu Prov-

ince. The name of the college and all personal names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. The students attended a “Chinese–foreign cooperation class” (中外合作办, *Zhong-wai hezuoban*), where some courses during the first three years were taught in English by Danish guest professors. Those students whose English-language skills were at a satisfactory level could spend their fourth year at a Danish college and thus earn a double degree. Seven students from the 2009 class, five from the 2010 class, and nine from the 2011 class made use of this option. Four of these 21 students were male and 17 female.

I first conducted semi-structured interviews with all 21 students during their third year in college, a few months before they left China. These interviews focused on their experiences in the Chinese education system from kindergarten to university, on their thoughts about preschool education in China and in the West, and on their motivation for studying abroad. All students were interviewed again towards the end of their year in Denmark, and this time the focus was on their academic and socio-cultural experiences abroad as well as their career plans. Finally, the graduates from the 2009 class were interviewed again in 2014, about a year after they had returned to China, in order to understand how they had been received by the Chinese preschools that employed them and how they had been able to apply what they had learned abroad. Most interviews were one-on-one, but particularly during the first round of interviews some students felt more comfortable if they could come in pairs. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audiotaped, and transcribed.

I decided to follow this group of students mainly because of their particular field of study. Preschool education is where the state’s vision of the ideal future citizen meets culturally rooted family habits of child-rearing. As Tobin et al. have convincingly shown through their comparative studies of American, Chinese, and Japanese kindergartens, it is also a field with distinct national differences in both perceptions and practices (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989; Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). When the interviewees worked as interns in Danish institutions, they would be directly confronted with an approach to teaching that was very different from what they were used to in China. I was interested in learning whether this would influence their thoughts about values related to education and, more broadly, to social hierarchies and authority.

The pre-departure interviews revealed that many of my interviewees had already developed a critical attitude to Chinese education in upper middle school. They had all been creative arts students (艺术生, *yishusheng*), which is a specialisation within the humanities track (文科, *wenke*). This specialisation is considered to be less academically demanding than both natural sciences and general humanities. Many of the students came from rural backgrounds and most had done relatively well academically in elementary school and even in junior middle school. However, during their first year in upper middle school they had been encouraged by their teachers to change to the creative arts specialisation because of their low exam scores. This had been a great disappointment to many of them, and during the interviews they often criticised the overwhelming workload and fierce competition in Chinese schools. However, they also emphasised that creative arts students were more spontaneous and lively than what they called the bookworms (书呆子, *shudai zi*) in the other tracks. This nonconformist identity probably made it easier for them to endorse teaching methods emphasising creativity and individual freedom rather than discipline and formal academic skills (Thøgersen 2012).

In addition to interviewing the 21 students who went abroad, I also observed some of the students' classes in China and had informal conversations with several of their Danish and Chinese college teachers in order to get background information on the curriculum and the professional discourse presented to the students in China and abroad.

The Chinese Discourse on Preschool Education

In order to contextualise the interviewees' reflections on their experience of studying abroad, this section briefly outlines recent trends in Chinese preschool education. Over the last three decades, the Chinese discourse on preschool education and childhood has been changing in the direction of what in the West is often called "progressive education," a term understood in this article as child-centred pedagogical ideas and practices in the tradition of Pestalozzi, Fröbel, Montessori, and others that focus on learning by doing, children's sensory development, problem-solving, and children's rights. Since the 1980s such ideas have slowly trickled down from education ex-

perts to ordinary Chinese teachers to the effect that by 2003 pre-school teachers saw themselves on a journey towards

less direct instruction and more learning through play; less single-subject lessons and more thematic, integrated activities; and a curriculum that is less teacher driven and more children initiated. (Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009: 82)

Such changes at the preschool level correspond well with China's ambition to upgrade its role in the global economy. As the Chinese leadership aims for a transition from “made in China” to “created in China,” there is more need for innovation and creativity than for the Fordist assembly line discipline that dominated Chinese preschools in the 1980s. In order to secure a competitive workforce, the Chinese government is increasingly paying attention to the socialisation of its very youngest citizens and has recently set ambitious goals for pre-school education, according to which China will, by 2020, “universalise one-year preschool education, basically universalise two-year pre-school education, and universalise three-year preschool education in regions where the conditions are ripe” (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China 2010: 12).

In this drive for quantitative growth, the central government tells local authorities that kindergartens should not primarily develop children's academic skills. The “schoolification” (小学化, *xiaoxuehua*) of preschool education should be avoided, and children should be allowed to have a happy childhood (Guowuyuan 2010, point 8). In a similar vein, the 2011 Programme for Children's Development in China (*Xinhua News Agency* 2011) emphasises that children hold certain rights, a concept which has been gaining importance in Chinese official and popular discourse in recent years (Naftali 2009). The official Chinese view of the child is evidently changing in the direction of progressive education.

The Danish teachers whose lectures I attended in China strongly promoted the basic principles of progressive education and they were supported by teachers from Xueqian College, who also told the students that Western preschool education was superior in many ways to traditional Chinese teaching. In this way, my interviewees were encouraged by both local and foreign teachers to think that they had important roles to play in China's march towards more modern and progressive kindergartens.

There are, of course, also voices both from the political and academic elites and from ordinary parents that emphasise culture-specific aspects of early childhood education and insist that China should build on its own educational tradition rather than on imported ideas (e.g. Zhang 2007). An even greater obstacle to reform is probably that many preschool teachers still find it hard to adapt their daily practice to the progressive ideals. Li et al. found a “remarkable belief–practice gap as well as a policy–practice gap” in the way literacy instruction was conducted in kindergartens in Shenzhen, a city normally considered to be particularly progressive in the field of preschool education. Although teachers recognised the advantages of a child-centred approach in theory, they tended to stick to traditional teaching methods in their own practice. One important reason why they found it difficult to live up to new ideals was that parents pushed them in the opposite direction: towards more teacher-directed activities, which parents believed would give their children a better start in the school system (Li, Wang, and Wong 2011). A survey of rural kindergartens likewise concluded that teachers rarely supported the free play, child-centred activities, or contextualised learning recommended in official teaching plans (Hu and Roberts 2013). Evidently, the new slogans are not easily implemented inside an education system where academic exams based on rote learning still decide a child’s destiny.

Future preschool teachers are therefore plunging into a strongly charged field in which political, cultural, and personal values and standards are undergoing rapid change. The pedagogical discourse promoted by political leaders and experts is moving in the direction of Western progressive education, but it should be kept in mind – as Kipnis (2011) points out in relation to the concept of “quality education” (素质教育, *sùzhì jiàoyù*) – that many contradictory elements are beneath the slogans emerging from the centre. What is important for understanding the interviewees’ attitudes, however, is that the Chinese discourse on early childhood education has allowed them to meet progressive pedagogical theories with open minds because these ideas have already been accepted in principle by the Chinese academic and political elite. During their year abroad, the students gradually realised that the attitudes and values governing Danish preschool education reflected cultural and political principles that were also reproduced in other types of social relationships such as intergenerational relations and workplace hierarchies.

Experiencing “Western” Values

The use of the term “Western” in this article reflects how my interviewees generalised regarding their experiences in Denmark. Even in the pre-departure interviews, the students discussed China and the West as two distinct entities, which they juxtaposed in order to describe cultural differences. They used the word “Western” (西方, *xīfang*) to cover industrialised countries in Europe and North America, without differentiating between individual countries or regions. Some even talked about “foreign” (外国, *wàiguó*) practices, which they contrasted with the way things are done in China.

Although the term “Western” blurs substantial distinctions and generalises across quite different traditions, it is commonly used as a blanket term in official Chinese discourse. The Chinese minister of education, Yuan Guiren, demonstrated this recently when he stressed that China “certainly cannot allow teaching materials to spread Western values into our classrooms” (Yuan 2015). His remarks drew attention because they were unusually blunt. A later comment from *Xinhua News Agency* was more typical of how the issue is normally phrased in official statements:

China does not oppose the ideas of liberty, democracy, equality, and human rights, which are among the core values of Western culture. In fact, these concepts are included in the Constitution. However, China’s understanding of these concepts may differ to the West. (*Xinhua News Agency* 2015)

The message here is obviously that while students can learn from the West, even when it comes to values, it is up to “China” (read: the Chinese Communist Party) to decide what should be learned and how it should be applied in a Chinese context.

Even before they left China, my interviewees were ready to learn from the West in the field of education. They described Chinese education as overly exam-oriented, rigid, and suppressive, while they perceived Western schools to be open, lively, and free, with ample room for creativity and personal development. They imagined relations between children and adults and between teachers and students to be much more relaxed and equal in the West and thought of Western children as more independent and creative (Thøgersen 2012). During their year abroad, the Chinese students were placed for several months in internships that brought them into direct contact with

social practices in Danish kindergartens. During this period, their observation of and participation in daily life gave substance to, and in many ways confirmed, their thoughts about the differences between Chinese and Western education.

After a year in Denmark, most students particularly emphasised four concepts when they explained how they had experienced cultural difference: freedom, equality, individual rights, and creativity. These terms covered positive values that the students generally associated with the West and which they to varying degrees wanted to adapt to Chinese conditions. The specific meanings they attached to each of these terms are discussed below.

Freedom

Most interviewees used the term “free” (自由, *zìyóu*) when asked to describe Danish children’s lives. They found that Danish children’s time, space, and social interactions were much less regimented than what they had observed in China during their previous internships there. Lanying, in particular, noticed how children were allowed to decide which activities they wanted to engage in and how they were even free to move in and out of classrooms and play with children of other age groups:

I thought that education in Denmark was somewhat freer than in China. Then when I got here I realised that it really *was* a lot freer [...]. They organise small activities in little groups based on children’s interests. What really surprised me was that children of different ages can mix. I never thought that would be possible, but I think it is really great. It’s just like in a private home where you can play with your brothers and sisters or with the neighbours’ kids who are a bit older than you. (Anonymous 1 2013)

Children’s freedom to make their own decisions about what to do and who to play with was seen as a fundamental value that permeated all aspects of life in schools and kindergartens. Students compared this freedom of movement to China, where preschool children are part of a class collective that constitutes the stable framework for all their activities. This means that every child has to follow a uniform rhythm and eat and sleep at the same time. Dandan described Chinese preschool children as being almost like prisoners:

Maybe Chinese children are always, how can I put it, they are always locked up in that place. Of course, they are used to it, so they don't want to leave [...]. They feel it doesn't matter where they go because everywhere there will be a teacher telling them to do this and do that. (Anonymous 2 2013)

The freedom Danish children enjoyed meant that they were allowed to climb trees, eat sand from the sandpit, or do other things that would be considered too dangerous in China and draw complaints from the parents.

My interviewees believed that the main reason Danish children enjoy this freedom is that there is no pressure (压力, *yali*) on them. They stated that in China the pressure to succeed comes from parents, teachers, and society at large and starts at a very early age. They saw this pressure as a common national destiny originating in China's huge population and in cultural traditions emphasising exams and rote learning. The interviewees had all been exposed to this pressure themselves and knew how difficult it was for individual actors to escape it, so they had no difficulty understanding why Chinese parents wanted their children to learn rather than to play. However, they still believed that more freedom would benefit children in the long run because it would make them more independent and creative.

Rights

Closely related to the concept of freedom was the respect for children's individual rights (权利, *quanli*) that students experienced during their internships. “The teachers really respected the children,” Kai-ming explained. He continued,

When a child did not want to do something, she would sometimes just say “no,” and the teacher would allow her not to do it [...]. [My supervisor] told me that when a child said “no” I should not force her. This surprised me, because in China the teachers will normally not care about the child's feelings; they will simply force her to do what they want her to do. (Anonymous 3 2015)

Chuntao and Dandan were likewise both struck by the children's “right to say no” and linked the absence of this right in China to a tradition of obeying authorities and to a more general lack of individual rights. This made them reflect on their own experiences as young adults in China, where they felt that teachers lacked respect for stu-

dents' right to privacy. Teachers would sometimes inform the whole class about a student's exam score, read aloud from an exam paper, or, even worse, pass on private information about a student to other teachers or students. Chinese teachers, they felt, were generally unwilling to acknowledge that students had certain individual rights, such as the right to privacy.

Several students also discussed individual rights outside the context of the kindergarten. They generally interpreted the concept quite pragmatically as the right to openly disagree with one's elders or superiors and to make decisions about one's personal life without having to conform to collective norms. Only two students explicitly used the controversial term "human rights," and even these two explained the relative weakness of rights in China as a "cultural tradition" rather than as a question linked to the political system.

Equality

A third recurrent theme in students' accounts was the high level of social equality (平等, *pingdeng*) they observed in Danish institutions. In spite of language difficulties, my interviewees were highly sensitive to how Danish social hierarchies differed from what they had experienced in China. They were impressed by the apparent equality between teachers and children, between teachers and parents, and between teachers of different ranks. Huifen, like many others, felt that there was much less social distance between children and teachers than what she was used to:

In China I watched the children play, but you could not really say that I played with them. I do that over here, so I am so happy.
(Anonymous 4 2013)

Many saw the relationship between adults and children in the institutions almost as a friendship between equals. According to Dandan, the children in her kindergarten were "extremely much like adults" and were used to being addressed as equals:

In China, when I speak to a child, I use a really cute voice: "Do you want to put on this pretty dress?" [...] In China we pretend we are children when we speak to them, but here we communicate with them like adults. (Anonymous 2 2013)

They also carefully observed workplace hierarchies. In China, according to several students, you would always know who was in charge in all social contexts and if someone had a higher rank, you would have to obey him or her. In Denmark, they felt that even trainees were treated as colleagues who had the right to express their own opinions. Social hierarchies were much less distinct, and more initiative and decision-making power was delegated down to the individual teachers.

Xiaohong thought that she would have problems when she returned to China precisely because she was no longer used to accepting institutional hierarchies:

In Chinese kindergartens many teachers are really old-fashioned, I think. Their lessons follow a really rigid plan, so I don't think I could fit in. You must obey your superiors and you must obey the teaching plan. That would really be too boring. (Anonymous 5 2015)

In her mind, the lack of freedom represented by the rigid teaching plan and the lack of equality in the workplace made Chinese kindergartens less attractive, not only to the children but also to herself as a teacher.

Creativity

The fourth value high on the interviewees' list of distinctive features of Danish kindergartens was creativity. In full accordance with the pedagogical theories they were taught in class, students constructed a causal link from the lack of freedom caused by the regimentation of Chinese children's lives to their supposed lack of creativity. They particularly noted how Chinese children were told to emulate models rather than to be spontaneous (cf. Bakken 2000). Danish children were encouraged to make music with spoons, plates, shoes, and whatever they could find in their environment, while Chinese children were taught to play regular music instruments. Danish children were encouraged to dance around to music as they pleased while teachers in China would select the prettiest children and teach them to perform a carefully choreographed dance. Danish teachers would immediately hang children's paintings on the walls while their colleagues in China would first correct the picture according to established aesthetic criteria, or even criticise a child who had not painted

according to the teacher's instructions. One student felt that the absence of adult criticism made the Danish children less ambitious so that they developed artistic skills later than Chinese children in the same age group, but the large majority felt that it was exactly this freedom from adult evaluation and ranking that would foster creative adults.

Kaiming gave an example of what he saw as the basic cultural difference in this respect. His supervisor had drawn an angel on the blackboard and asked the children to draw their own angels on sheets of paper:

I also wanted to draw one and, you know, I grew up in China so I automatically copied the angel from the blackboard. So one of the kids said, "Hey, you can't do that. You've got to use your imagination and draw your own angel." So I thought, wow, this is great! Ever since they were quite young they have learned not to have fixed ideas but to look at things in many different ways and find the most suitable solution. (Anonymous 3 2015)

Creativity was clearly a less controversial value than freedom and rights. Students were fully aware that creativity is now praised by the highest political level in China, and they believed they had much to contribute to China's development in this field.

The image of Danish society that emerges from the interviewees' accounts is, of course, highly idealised. The socialisation of Danish children does not take place in a power-free space of unlimited freedom and equality. Likewise, workplace hierarchies can be expressed in subtle ways that are not immediately apparent to outside observers, and many Danish preschool teachers would probably find it difficult to recognise themselves in the Chinese students' narratives of harmonious relations between the leaders and the led. What is important for my argument, however, is that students' exposure to the theories and social practices of preschool education abroad led them to reconsider more general issues that in essence are deeply political: the freedom to control one's own time, freedom of artistic expression, the right to privacy, and power relations in the workplace. It was part of their professional training as kindergarten teachers to observe and describe social relations in preschool classrooms, and many students evidently managed to apply this skill to their own life situations – past, present, and future. Their observations rarely led them to question China's political system, but they obviously went through a pro-

cess of political socialisation during their time abroad and returned home with strong opinions on how preschool education and, more broadly, social relations should be reformed. In the following section, I discuss their thoughts about the possibility of implementing such reforms in China and about the obstacles they are expected to face.

Borrowing from Abroad?

As graduation drew closer, my interviewees became more preoccupied with how they would be able to use what they had learned abroad once they went back to China. While all students agreed that directly copying Western practices was not a viable option, only Fuhuan completely rejected the idea of borrowing (借鉴, *jièjiàn*) from abroad. To him, Chinese teaching methods simply reflected the country's level of development. China did not have time to wait for people to develop naturally in a free environment. He accepted that with its present education system China would not “produce an Einstein,” as he said, but he saw the schools as very successful in training the “huge masses of skilled people” needed for China's economic development. To Fuhuan, regimentation and rote learning represented a sacrifice that the present generation had to make for the future of their country (Anonymous 6 2014).

All other students maintained, to varying degrees, their enthusiasm for child-centred education and free play and started to think in concrete terms about how they might implement these principles when they returned. Most came to the conclusion that the kind of early childhood education they had experienced during their internships was great for Danish children, who were growing up in a much less competitive environment, but that many aspects would have to be adapted to local conditions before the new practices and attitudes could be accepted in China. This partly followed from the fact that Chinese kindergartens operate under economic conditions that are very different from those of their Danish counterparts, but the students said that even if the material conditions were similar they would prefer to integrate Danish and Chinese methods rather than simply emulate the foreign model.

My interviewees, therefore, had to carefully consider how they could optimise their chances of being allowed to practise progressive preschool education after their return to China. Some planned to

look for jobs in what they called “developed places.” Shanghai and Shenzhen were often mentioned in this context, as these cities were perceived to be in the top layer of the Chinese locational hierarchy both in terms of economic development and the acceptance of progressive ideas. Students believed that their foreign diplomas would be appreciated more in these localities because there would be more upper-middle-class parents ready to embrace the new trends.

Another potential strategy was to apply for a job in one of the bilingual or international kindergartens that are mushrooming in all the larger Chinese cities. My interviewees expected these institutions to be more receptive to Western pedagogical ideas and to give them points for their good oral English skills. However, some students who had been trainees in bilingual institutions had learned that they could not escape the demands of competitive parents even there. Dandan remembered an international kindergarten that emphasised English-language training but was run in the traditional Chinese way in all other respects:

[The children in the bilingual kindergarten] don't really speak any English, but when they get home their mom and dad will ask them: “What did you learn?” “I learned ‘dog.’” “How do you spell it?” “D-O-G.” So the parents don't ask if the child has been happy, it's always “What did you learn today, baby?” This puts a lot of pressure on the teacher [...]. We must teach them something every day, so sometimes we have to force it upon them. (Anonymous 2 2013)

Considering how difficult it was to escape rote learning even in kindergartens with an international profile, it was hardly surprising that teachers planning to work in ordinary preschools expected to make even more compromises. They intended to tackle this challenge first of all by making changes in daily teaching practices that were so small they would go under the radar. Meihui expressed her strategy like this:

I will build on the Chinese system; I can't do away with it. Things [in China] are highly organised. I will drill my way into the system and follow it in general, and then I will change things in my own small way. I will teach a small group of kids, and they will become like their teacher. (Anonymous 7 2013)

As an example, she mentioned that she would allow children to sit on the floor instead of at their desks. She would also play guitar instead

of piano, because this would bring her physically closer to the children. The long-term perspective for several of the students who planned to follow this strategy was that when they had gained some years' experience in an ordinary kindergarten they hoped to be able to establish their own institutions, which they would market to progressive parents as offering genuine European-style education.

Thus, on the eve of their return to China my interviewees were eagerly making plans not only for their own futures but also for how they could implement the progressive pedagogical ideas they had been introduced to abroad.

Obstacles to Reform

When my interviewees returned to China, however, even the most optimistic students realised that they faced many obstacles in their plans for reform. One of the first would be the professional recruitment exam (编制考试, *bianzhi kaoshi*), which controls the access of professionals to permanent positions in public institutions such as kindergartens. The exam includes written tests in psychology, education, and other theoretical topics, as well as an oral exam that mainly tests practical skills in singing, dancing, creative art, and handicrafts.

After their studies abroad, the students felt disadvantaged in this regime of standardised exams, where both the theoretical and the practical tests are based on the Chinese curriculum and the way professional pedagogical knowledge is constructed in Chinese colleges. In spite of the increasingly progressive discourse, exams of this type still mainly test the applicants' ability to reproduce textbook knowledge, and the students I followed felt that all the ideas they had brought back from abroad were worthless or even damaging in this context.

Landing a job did not mean the end of tests, exams, and evaluations. The students told me that during their first two years of employment their teaching competence and artistic skills would be evaluated every second month. These evaluations are, of course, based on mainstream Chinese standards, and those who studied abroad tended to see them as part of a general pressure to conform.

Conservative parents constituted another major obstacle to genuine pedagogical change. In spite of the official move away from “schoolification,” most parents wanted their children to pick up as

many academic skills as possible and therefore preferred strict teachers and orderly classrooms. Chinese parents would also immediately complain if their child took part in the physically challenging activities my interviewees had observed in Danish kindergartens, such as climbing trees or balancing on a fence.

Workplace hierarchies were another challenge. Chuntao described how all activities in the kindergarten where she worked followed a tight schedule based on the centrally issued curriculum guidelines and with practically no room for improvisation:

Our leader will check on us. She knows what you are supposed to teach at any specific time, and if you don't do it, well, she will not actually deduct from your wages, but your class will not receive a star [in the internal evaluation]. [...] And our kindergarten is actually quite relaxed compared to some others [...]. If you work in a really good kindergarten, the parents will be wealthy and have a high educational level, so if you do not toe the line they will make all sorts of complaints about you. (Anonymous 8 2014)

This made some students sceptical about their ability to generate change. In Guiying's words, there was a risk that her way of thinking would "become Chinese again":

Maybe the leader of the kindergarten will not support me. [...] So maybe after some time I will return to Chinese-style education. After some time I will slowly retract. So that is why I say that I really don't hope that my way of thinking will become Chinese again. (Anonymous 9 2013).

To Guiying, her thinking "becoming Chinese again" meant giving up the ideas of freedom, equality, children's rights, and creativity that she appreciated. While other students were more optimistic about their prospects, nobody thought that change would happen quickly or easily. As a consequence, some planned to seek employment outside the formal education system, but many were determined to work their way up through the hierarchy until they reached a position where they had more power to make decisions.

Conclusion

The students in this study left China with the wish to enhance their own personal and professional competencies, and they also wanted to

contribute to the reform of Chinese preschool education. The progressive Chinese discourse in their professional field allowed them to relate positively to what they identified as Western ideas and values, and while they were abroad they were able to observe how these ideas were reflected in daily life. Based on these observations they formulated a more general critique of Chinese society, which also drew on theoretical knowledge from their professional field as well as on their earlier personal experiences with the Chinese education system. They dreamed of kindergartens that would build on those principles of progressive education they had studied in the West and foster creative and self-confident Chinese children. However, they were far from being the uncritical admirers of all things foreign that party propaganda warns their generation against. They understood that directly copying foreign models would not work, so they made plans for how they could adapt their ideas to a Chinese environment after their return.

Once back in China, they realised that kindergarten teachers, like other public employees, are constantly monitored and evaluated in a hierarchical system that leaves little room for alternative ideas (cf. Kipnis 2008). They also experienced how daily practices in Chinese kindergartens are regulated by rules and guidelines that drastically reduce individual teachers' room to improvise or to introduce any significant reforms to teaching methods. The possibilities for generating change in the short run were further restricted by the children's parents, who above all else wanted their sons and daughters to be well prepared for primary school.

In spite of these difficulties, many interviewees were still determined to contribute to the reformation of Chinese preschool education. Some hoped to achieve this by making miniscule changes in daily practices and advancing step by step inside the system until they reached a position that enabled them to introduce more radical reforms. Others aimed to sooner or later establish their own private institutions catering to the needs of a progressive upper-middle-class audience.

These ambitions are not apolitical. They are expressions of a strategy to adapt to China's social and political realities without giving up the long-term hope of reforming authoritarian practices. My interviewees' plans to reform preschool education were certainly individual – in the sense that they did not plan to organise or to act collective-

ly – but they looked far beyond their own narrow material interests. It would be hazardous to draw far-reaching conclusions based on this case study, but the experiences of this group indicate that studying abroad can have additional political effects on Chinese students other than simply strengthening their patriotic feelings. It can also reinforce their desire for social change, which could in the long term prove to be important in reforming Chinese social institutions.

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