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Departing from the Beaten Path: International Schools in China as Response to Discrimination and Academic Failure in the Chinese Educational System

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Abstract: International schools are commonly depicted in the academic literature and popular press as offering elite educational credentials to an elite, oftentimes international, student body. In this paper, I draw on a case study of a Canadian international school to argue that a new form of international school is emerging in China – one that offers a haven for domestic students from certain competitive and discriminatory features of the Chinese educational system. Fieldwork was conducted at a Canadian curriculum high school for Chinese citizens in Beijing. Most students at the school were internal migrants or children of China’s ‘new rich’ entrepreneurial class; that is, their families had economic resources but occupied precarious social positions in contemporary Chinese society. Analyses reveal that the international school offers a pathway to obtain baseline academic credentials in the absence of other opportunities for progress in the Chinese educational system. Together with evidence of dramatic growth in international schools and tracks in China, this case study suggests the emergence of a new type of international education program that departs from a picture of international education as ‘elite’ in terms of student body, academic environment, and expected educational trajectories of graduates. The paper also develops our understanding of class and educational strategies in contemporary China.

Keywords: international education, educational inequality, social stratification, educational strategies, new rich, internal migrants, global cultural capital, cosmopolitan cultural capital.

1. Introduction

As the world becomes more globalized, an increasing number of students seek a more internationalized education. Although a contested term, ‘international education’ can be conceptualized as education that extends beyond national borders in either of two ways: (1) students moving across borders to pursue education (e.g. students seeking undergraduate or graduate studies overseas or embarking on a semester abroad); (2) incorporating foreign ideas or ways of thinking into curriculum, diverging from a focus on the nation-state in which the school is located. Examples of the latter include international high schools that teach foreign curriculum¹ or are affiliated with the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, or international tracks within standard curriculum schools that emphasize global skills, such as cross-cultural understanding.

International education of both types is highly prevalent in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). China is the top-sending country for international students attending universities in the United States (Haynie 2014) and Canada (“Facts and Figures: Canada’s Performance in International Education, 2014” 2014). Chinese students attending private secondary schools in the U.S. increased in number by 50 fold between 2005 and 2014 (Winter 2014), and, most recently, international schools for Chinese nationals have emerged in China (Hayden 2011; Hornby 2013). In China the term ‘international school’ refers to both stand-alone international schools and international departments within schools. It is difficult to obtain data about the prevalence of international schools in China since many of these schools have muddy legal status. In terms of the more visible types of international schools, there were 338 stand-alone international schools registered in China in 2013 – a 15-fold increase since 2001 (Hornby 2013), and the number of international departments in public high schools in Beijing increased from 6 to 22 in just 5 years (“2014 Nian Chuguo Liuxue Qushi Baogao [Report on Trends in Studying Abroad in 2014]” 2014).

Research on international schools in other contexts has revealed three models for these institutions: ‘traditional’ international schools, which primarily serve privileged expatriates; ‘ideological’ international schools, which attract elites from various countries to cultivate cross-cultural understanding; and ‘non-traditional’ international schools, which provide elite educational credentials and a competitive ‘edge’ to domestic, rather than international, elites (Hayden and Thompson 2015). In this paper, I draw on a case study of an international school in Beijing to argue that a fourth model of international school is emerging in China. This type of international school provides baseline academic credentials to children who face barriers within the local educational system due to their families’ precarious social status: though economically well off, they are not social elites. These findings reveal issues with the assumption within the broader literature on international education that this form of education is ‘elite’ in terms of student body, academic environment, and graduates’ educational trajectories. In addition to contributing to the literature on international education, this study develops our understanding of social class in contemporary China. Finally, it raises questions about the future of the Chinese educational system and Western institutions of higher education.

2. International Education as 'Elite'

Scholars in the fields of sociology, geography, anthropology, and education generally conceptualize international education as an 'elite' phenomenon. The 'elite' conceptualization is present in literature on international education in many forms: students pursuing tertiary education overseas (Brooks and Waters 2009; Kim 2011); students enrolled in short-term education programs overseas (Lee and Koo 2006); families engaged in international migration in pursuit of educational opportunities for their children (Ong 1999, 2006; Waters 2005); international schools for expatriates (Iijima 2009; Wright and Lee 2014); and international schools for domestic students (Weenink 2007, 2008; Yan, Han, and Cai 2015). There are two main components to the conceptualization of international education as 'elite.' One component concerns consumers of international education; the other concerns motivations for pursuing international education.

In terms of the first component, scholars generally argue that the consumers of international education are members of elite socioeconomic classes, such as transnational capitalists and families with high levels of education and income (Igarashi and Saito 2014). Brooks and Waters (2009) argue that in applying to university, students from families with privileged economic, occupational, and educational backgrounds consider both domestic and overseas universities, while students with fewer resources choose among local universities. Although some scholars have shifted attention to middle class families pursuing international education, these families are thought to share important characteristics with elites: they are described as possessing high levels of cultural capital and are conceptualized as a privileged group that faces few barriers to geographic mobility (Brooks and Waters 2009).

In terms of the second component, international education is conceptualized as part of elite educational trajectories: families enrol their children in international education programs to provide them with an 'elite' education that will grant access to superior job and educational opportunities in the future. Scholars argue that the unique curriculum and learning environment of international schools cultivates global/cosmopolitan cultural capital.² Iijima (2009, 1) described global/cosmopolitan cultural capital as a set of abilities valued within the context of globalization, including 'analytical and technical skills, proficiency in two or more languages,' and inter-cultural communication skills. Global cultural capital gives students a competitive edge within labour markets (Huang and Yeoh 2005; Waters 2005) and helps individuals transmit social status across national borders (Ong 1999). In some contexts, international education serves as a 'second chance' at an elite education. In her study of the Hong Kong diaspora, Waters' (2005) interviewees mentioned competition to gain admission to top-ranked Hong Kong universities as a motivation for emigrating. Parents believed their children had a greater chance of getting into top schools within a foreign educational system. Brooks and Waters (2009) observed a similar strategy among elite British students. Upon realizing they were unlikely to get into Oxford or Cambridge, students sought admission to top-ranked universities overseas, such as Harvard or Stanford. Waters (2007) further described how transnational elites in Hong Kong enrolled their children in international schools to provide 'sanctuary' from intense competition within local schools, thereby securing a less risky path to elite education. Though international education is perceived as less competitive in these instances, it is still incorporated into elite educational trajectories: families denied access to skills and credentials acquired through 'elite' education within the local educational system turn instead to the international education market for these needs.

In summary, the previous literature on international education characterizes this form of education as a predominantly 'elite' phenomenon. Elite social classes are described as the primary consumers of international education. Moreover, scholars contend that international education is pursued as part of elite educational trajectories due to the unique curriculum and elite academic environment offered by these programs. Until now, research on international education in China has largely echoed these arguments (Xiang and Shen 2009). My case study, however, suggests the emergence of a new type of international school that departs from a picture of international education as 'elite'. First, while many families pursuing international education are members of the socioeconomic elite, I discovered that most families at the international school under study held precarious social positions in Chinese society: most were internal migrants or members of China's 'new rich' entrepreneurial class. Though parents at the school had improved their economic status relative to that of their parents, they lacked key resources to pass on newly acquired advantages to their children. Second, this case study suggests that although international education is generally associated with elite educational trajectories, it may accomplish other goals for different social groups. Rather than a means of accessing an 'elite' education, students at the school under study pursued international education only after failing to advance or facing discrimination within the standard educational system. For these students, the school provided access to baseline – rather than elite – secondary and tertiary academic credentials. Third, my observations suggest that not all international education programs provide an elite academic environment: some programs fail to cultivate advanced academic skills and global cultural capital in large numbers of their students.

3. The Chinese Educational System

This new type of international school is unique in China in that it sidesteps many of the regulations that govern China's schools. To understand the school's unique features, and why this makes it appealing to certain Chinese families, a brief discussion of the Chinese educational system is warranted. Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the government embarked on efforts to centralize and standardize the educational system. Over the next ten years, the party-state introduced the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, a government agency was established to design all public school curricula, and the private school sector was effectively abolished³ (Smith and Joshi 2016). China's present-day educational system remains highly standardized. Although the government decentralized primary and secondary education in the 1980s, transferring administration and management of schools to local governments, the central government still regulates school curriculum (Liu and Dunne 2009). Even private schools, which were legalized in 1985 (Liu and Dunne 2009), have limited freedom in management and curriculum: '[private] schools must use the nationwide standardized textbooks...the education bureaus inspect and monitor the arrangement of classes, curriculum, and classroom teaching...[and] students are required to take the same examinations as the public schools' students in the district' (Y. Wang and Chan 2015, 92).

There are two main advantages of controlling the curriculum of public and private schools: the central government can 1) continue its efforts at the 'moral transformation' of the masses (Smith and Joshi 2016) and 2) control allocation of education above the compulsory level. Regarding the former, both public and private schools are required to engage in the patriotic education of students, the goal of which is to cultivate nationalism, as well as confidence in the Chinese Communist Party (Z. Wang 2014). Students learn about the achievements of ancient China, modern China's struggles with foreign

aggressors, and the Party's salvation of Chinese society. Moreover, by including a narrative that constructs foreigners as a threat to China, the Party hopes to frustrate the influence of Western ideology on Chinese youth (Z. Wang 2014). The standardized nature of the educational system also allows the government to regulate access to education above the compulsory level: virtually all students seeking high school or university education must participate in competitive entrance examinations, a demonstration of the party-state's ideological commitment to meritocratic schooling.⁴

4. International Schools in China

Although the curriculum of all international schools in China diverges from that of standard curriculum schools, most international schools must comply with the same government regulations as other schools, including patriotic education and use of the high school entrance exam for admission. One type of international school for Chinese citizens, however, is an exception. This type of school has more flexibility in management and administration than any other public or private school for Chinese citizens. This makes it appealing to families who seek to bypass certain government regulations that pose barriers to their child continuing academic education. Before discussing this type of school, I review the other types of international schools that have emerged in China (Table 1).

[Table 1]

All international schools in China are affiliated with a foreign ministry of education or the IB Program, which certifies the school and its instructors, and grants diplomas. 'Exclusive international schools' (Yan, Han, and Cai 2015) educate expatriates; they are what Hayden and Thompson (2015) call 'traditional' international schools. They must register with China's Ministry of Education and undergo a review process (Yan, Han, and Cai 2015). Since these schools are not attended by Chinese citizens, however, the government is less concerned with their curriculum and administration, relative to other schools. In contrast with exclusive international schools, non-exclusive international schools primarily cater to Chinese citizens. They exist as either stand-alone schools or international departments affiliated with standard curriculum schools. Non-exclusive international schools fall into two types: 1) dual-curriculum programs and 2) foreign curriculum or IB programs.

Dual-curriculum international schools are directly regulated by the local district's department of education (Yan, Han, and Cai 2015). Applicants take the high school entrance examination and, once admitted, complete standard Chinese curriculum in addition to foreign/IB curriculum. Graduates receive a Chinese and a foreign/IB high school diploma and can either participate in the Chinese university entrance examination or attend university overseas (E. Zhao 2013). Luhe International Academy, as described by Yan et al. (2015), is an example of this type of school.

Foreign/IB curriculum programs – the second type of non-exclusive international school – are the subject of the current study. Students in these programs do not complete standard Chinese high school curriculum; instead, they solely focus on foreign or IB curriculum and only receive a foreign or IB high school diploma. These schools enjoy greater administrative autonomy than any other secondary school in China that admits Chinese citizens. First, applicants are not required to take the high school entrance examination. This type of school provides the only route for underperforming Chinese citizens to gain admission to high school without passing this exam, short of migrating overseas. Second, foreign/IB curriculum programs are *not* required to engage in patriotic education. Overall, aside from

registering with China's Ministry of Education, few regulations exist for these schools (Y. Wang and Chan 2015)(Y. Wang and Chan 2015). Foreign/IB curriculum programs thus represent an exception to the Chinese party-state's otherwise ubiquitous control of the education of its citizenry. These unique features of this type of international school have largely been ignored by scholars of comparative education in China.

I now turn to a discussion of the motivations and experiences of one group of Chinese students enrolled in this type of school. Fieldwork reveals that many features of foreign/IB curriculum schools that make them a challenge to the party-state's control of the education of the citizenry also make them attractive to students who failed to succeed or faced other barriers within the Chinese educational system.

5. Data and Methods

5.1. Research Site

Canada Dreams School (CDS)⁵ is an example of a foreign/IB curriculum program in China. CDS is a Canadian curriculum department located in Beijing and affiliated with a neighbouring private school (Category II, Type B-ii in Table 1). At the time of study, 96 percent of 9th-12th graders enrolled in CDS were native-born Chinese citizens. Admission to CDS is separate from admission to the affiliated standard curriculum school. Applicants to CDS are not required to participate in the high school entrance exam. CDS administrators reported that few applicants are denied admission if they can pay tuition. In academic year 2013-2014, tuition was ~\$16,000 USD per year for day students and ~\$19,000 USD per year for boarders. This tuition exceeds the income of the vast majority of Chinese families⁶, making the school accessible only to families with high levels of economic capital.

CDS is certified by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of a Canadian province. CDS must pass an annual in-person inspection, meet MoE curriculum standards, and use standardized Canadian textbooks. Graduates of Canada Dreams School are awarded a Canadian high school diploma and attend universities in Canada and the U.S. Because they do not complete the standard Chinese curriculum, students at CDS are not eligible to participate in China's university entrance exam.

5.2. Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted field research in May-July 2014. I had previous experience working at the school from September 2011 – July 2013, which provided necessary background information.⁷ Many studies take the claim that international education provides students with global cultural capital at face value, despite it being in the best interests of study participants (e.g. program administrators or families pursuing international education) to cultivate an appearance of elitism. Consequently, in addition to conducting student interviews, informational interviews with teachers and administrators, and a survey of the entire student body, I engaged in participant observation on-campus to assess the academic environment (Table 2 provides information about data collection).

[Table 2]

I disseminated information about the research project to all 9-12th grade students via classroom visits. The survey, which I pre-tested using expert review and cognitive interviewing, was completed by 96 percent of the student body. I ensured representation of the following groups in interviews: 1) high-performing students; 2) average performing students; 3) low-performing students; 4) students with outgoing personalities; 5) students with reserved personalities. Native speakers of Mandarin Chinese conducted student interviews (I supervised and was present for all interviews).⁸ I coded and tallied themes within interviews and field notes and produced descriptive statistics of survey data using the Qualtrics 'Results' tab and Stata.

5.3. A Note on Methodological Decisions

It is important to note that this is a case study of a single international school. The role of case studies is not to describe the prevalence of a finding. An advantage of this method, however, is it can reveal issues with theoretical assumptions that need to be addressed in future work. In an influential paper, Flyvbjerg (2006) called this approach to case study research 'falsification' or the 'black swan approach': 'if just one observation does not fit with the proposition, [the proposition] is considered not valid generally and must therefore be either revised or rejected...the case study is well suited for [falsifying propositions] because of its in-depth approach' (11). Consequently, this case study can highlight issues with widely held views about international schools specifically, as well as international education, more broadly. An additional advantage of this research method is it can reveal underlying processes and mechanisms (Small 2009). While a nationally representative survey or administrative data would be well suited for describing the prevalence of international schools in China, as well as the general demographics of families choosing this form of education, a case study can provide a deeper understanding of some of the motivations and experiences of students enrolled in an international school.

An additional methodological decision I made was to interview students rather than parents when exploring motivations for enrolment in the international school. Although students are not usually the primary decision-makers when it comes to educational choices, CDS parents were scattered throughout China, making parent interviews prohibitively expensive. All students interviewed were at least fourteen years old and the decision to enter the school generally occurred between ages twelve and seventeen.⁹ I thus expected that students could give at least a sense of the factors considered. In support of this, despite responding vaguely to other questions or admitting a lack of knowledge on other topics, very few students responded, 'I don't know' when asked about the decision to come to CDS.

There are also methodological advantages to using student, rather than parent, interviews. Waters observed that children are less affected by social desirability bias than parents when discussing educational choices (emphasis added):

In several cases...a child's stage in his/her schooling had dictated the precise timing of emigration. *Yet this has remained, in research to date, largely hidden.* Prior academic accounts have generally relied upon parents' explanations for household migration, and parents are understandably reluctant to admit to their child's failure, offering instead an acceptable 'political' explanation.

As Waters found in Hong Kong, my student participants were willing to discuss how academic struggles factored into educational decisions. Although one limitation of this study is it does not provide a complete picture of the process that led to enrolment in the international school, a strength is it reveals how students' experiences within the local educational system informed family decisions, a part of the picture harder to obtain via parent interviews. Since parent interviews are the dominant methodological approach within the sociology of education literature, perhaps in part due to difficulty in obtaining permission to interview minors, by focusing on student interviews I draw attention to an understudied perspective.

6. Findings

This case study suggests a possible caveat to the dominant conceptualization of international education as 'elite.' Specifically, it reveals issues with claims within the broader literature on international education about the consumers of this type of education and their motivations. In this section, I first discuss the CDS student body, and argue that their family background differed significantly from that of the highly educated social elites believed to pursue international education. Second, I discuss the motivations of students and families to enrol in CDS, and highlight important differences with the motivations described in the previous literature; rather than pursuing an 'elite' education, CDS students seek baseline educational credentials after experiencing failure or discrimination within the Chinese educational system. Finally, I describe the academic environment at CDS, which provides additional evidence that most families enrol their children in the international school to obtain a remedial, as opposed to 'elite', education.

6.1. Family Background

The families pursuing international education at CDS differed markedly from those described in the previous literature on international education. This observation highlights issues with current understandings of who consumes international education. Rather than social elites, most CDS parents were members of social groups with precarious positions within China's social hierarchy. Although they possessed high levels of economic capital, they lacked key resources for educational attainment within the Chinese educational system. Consequently, passing on newly acquired advantages to their children was a risky and complicated endeavour.

To understand the social location of CDS families within China's social hierarchy, it is necessary to first discuss social stratification in contemporary China. Since the introduction of market forces into the Chinese economy in 1978, incomes and income inequality have risen dramatically. Many individuals, including those from modest family backgrounds, have taken advantage of new business opportunities, leading to the emergence of an entrepreneurial class (Goodman 2012; Osburg 2013). Some members of the cadre and professional classes, which attained high social status before the reform period (Yang 2008; Goodman 2012), have also acquired wealth (Yang 2008). Consequently, an affluent class has emerged, although its members are diverse in social origin, resources, and attitudes and lifestyles (Li 2010). High-income members of the professional class, for example, possess not only economic capital, but also high levels of social and cultural capital; this is valuable for cultivating academic achievement in children. In fact, there is evidence that this occupational class has the highest rate of social reproduction (Buckley 1999). In contrast, a segment of China's entrepreneurial class is

comparatively modest in social origins and educational attainment,¹⁰ despite high levels of economic capital. I call these families the ‘new rich’¹¹ entrepreneurial class.

Many CDS families had high levels of economic capital, worked as business owners or corporate executives¹², and had comparatively low levels of education, all of which signal membership in the ‘new rich’ entrepreneurial class. The high cost of tuition at CDS and students’ consumption patterns provided evidence of families’ high levels of economic capital. Most students expressed a penchant for luxury brand clothing, shoes, bags and electronics. One graduate, for example, received a Mercedes Benz for her 18th birthday. In terms of parental occupations, the survey of the student body revealed that the majority (about two thirds) of students’ fathers were business owners or corporate managers/executives. In contrast, business owners and corporate executives comprise less than 10 percent of China’s general population (Wu 2014). Further, data I gathered at a prestigious high school in a city neighbouring Beijing indicated that only about one quarter of the surveyed students’ fathers fell within these occupational categories. Wu (2014, 115) similarly observed that 18 percent of students’ parents at a top-ranked middle school in another city were entrepreneurs or corporate managers. Finally, CDS parents were not members of China’s educated elite: a significant proportion had high school education or less (37 percent of fathers and 34 percent of mothers). This proportion was even higher among fathers who were business owners – over 60 percent had high school education or less. In contrast, among parents who participated in a survey at a top-ranked middle school in another Chinese city, only about 12 percent had high school education or less Wu (2014, 59).

Although members of the ‘new rich’ entrepreneurial class who sent their children to CDS were economically well off, their comparatively low levels of education put their children at a disadvantage within the Chinese educational system, especially relative to children of the professional class. As Lareau (2000, 9) has pointed out, parents with lower levels of education often lack ‘the skills and the confidence’ to help with their child’s studies. In support of this, Liu (2013) found a positive association between performance on China’s university entrance examination and the educational background of test takers’ parents. This comparative disadvantage was apparent in the academic struggles of the children of the ‘new rich’ entrepreneurial class enrolled at CDS. In fact, as I discuss later, failure to advance within the Chinese educational system was the primary motivation for many of these families to pursue international education.

In further contrast with the elites described in the previous literature on international education, many CDS students lacked another key marker of social status in China – local household registration (*hukou*). In China, one’s place of birth, indicated by one’s household registration, determines access to social services and affects administrative procedures.¹³ According to the student survey, 73 percent of students were internal migrants – that is, they were not native residents of Beijing and thus lacked Beijing household registration. Consequently, these students were members of a disadvantaged group in China that suffers from government policies aimed at restricting mobility. Although these restrictions did not keep students from migrating to Beijing,¹⁴ like other internal migrants they faced discriminatory school and university admission policies in Beijing, which influenced their decision to enrol at CDS.

6.2. Motivations for Attending CDS

In addition to coming from families with high levels of economic resources but precarious social status, most CDS students differed from students described in the previous literature in that they were not pursuing an 'elite' education. Instead, the international school provided access to baseline academic credentials for failing students and a response to discriminatory policies for internal migrants. The international education pathway was tied to both the resources families possessed, such as economic capital and knowledge of global education markets, and the resources they lacked, such as cultural capital or Beijing household registration.

17 out of 43 interview participants (~40 percent) cited poor academic performance as factoring into the decision to pursue international education. Tina,¹⁵ a tenth-grader finishing her first year at CDS, was one such case (all interview excerpts are translated from Mandarin Chinese):

...when I was half a semester through ninth grade, I would rather die than [go to school]... my math grades were too low. If a test were out of 120 points, I would get 6 points. So then I stopped going to school...At first [my parents] didn't know, at first I ran away...Later I went back [home], [If I had gone back to a standard curriculum school], I would have repeated ninth grade – I didn't want to repeat ninth grade. My father wanted me to come to this [international school] so I came here.

Tina was disengaged from her studies in middle school, running away from home for six months to avoid school. Although other factors may have informed the decision to enrol in the international school, given Tina's attitude toward her studies it would have been very difficult to remain within the standard Chinese educational system. In fact, Tina never participated in the high school entrance exam, barring her from entering a standard curriculum high school.

Rather than an 'elite' education, Tina's parents wanted their daughter to complete some form of secondary education. Tina's family was familiar with the international education pathway: Tina's sister attended university in Europe and her father worked at an international company and had briefly studied abroad. Though unable to ensure Tina's success within the local educational system, Tina's parents leveraged economic capital and knowledge of global education markets to find a way to continue her schooling.

For many, enrolment in CDS was a response to anxiety about the high school entrance examination, as students who do not achieve a particular score on the city-wide (in some cases province-wide) exam are essentially barred from continuing academic education. 44 percent of survey respondents selected 'I might not have passed the high school entrance exam' as an important motivation for enrolling in an international school. This concern was more common among students whose parents had lower levels of education: 54 percent of students whose mothers had high school education or less reported this concern, compared to 39 percent of students whose mothers had tertiary education. Not all students who expressed concern about the exam, however, had parents with modest educational backgrounds. Melissa, a soft-spoken eleventh-grader, is one example. Melissa's

parents both held bachelor's degrees, yet Melissa was consistently placed in lower-level classes. Within her interview, Melissa discussed concerns about the high school entrance examination:

[I came here in] grade nine; I transferred from [the affiliated standard curriculum school].

At that time, because of my grades, I wouldn't have tested into a standard [curriculum] high school. And vocational high schools in China are pretty crappy, you know? There's no point. So then I came here. I could broaden my horizons and experience a different form of education.

Many CDS students believed they were developing skills students at standard curriculum schools lack. The association of skills with international education dovetails with the literature on global cultural capital. As I discuss later, however, the idea that students develop global cultural capital at CDS is more façade than reality. Melissa's case also illustrates that although most families at CDS had precarious social status, the school also appealed to established elites who, despite their resources, were unable to pass on advantage to their children within the high-stakes Chinese educational system.

In further conflict with the image of the international school as part of an elite educational trajectory, I learned that CDS served as a 'dumping ground' for low-performing students from the affiliated private school. The quality of a Chinese standard curriculum school is in part determined by the percentage of graduates transitioning to the next level of schooling, and by rates of admission to top-ranked schools (Wu 2014). Consequently, schools sometimes pressure low-performing students to leave before participating in the high school and university entrance examinations. Victoria is one of 6 interview participants (~14 percent of the interview sample) who mentioned being enrolled at the affiliated standard curriculum school before coming to CDS. Victoria described her family as upper middle class. Her parents were business owners and Victoria aspired to work at her father's company. Though economically well off, Victoria's parents had low levels of education: her father was a middle school graduate, while her mother only completed elementary school. Victoria's parents likely lacked the knowledge and skills to assist their daughter in the highly competitive Chinese educational system. Victoria's academic performance in middle school was so poor as to lead the school to ask her to leave:

My grades were not very good [and] we were going to take the high school [entrance] exam shortly...the homeroom teacher – because of enrolment rates, they influence [standard curriculum schools], so they would ask those who could not graduate to leave the school...[the homeroom teacher] made several [students] leave.

Victoria's mother expressed reluctance to send Victoria to an international school:

My mother...thought international [schools] took students who had been kicked out of [standard curriculum schools], and [she] thought that if I went to this place I wouldn't really have a good future. But...I didn't have a choice, I had to go.

The concerns of Victoria's mother problematize the idea that international education provides an 'edge' or elite status maker, as it suggests a stigma is associated with attending international schools in China. Although the perception of international schools as dumping grounds for disobedient rich kids is well known in China, until now this perception was not explored empirically. A conversation with an administrator echoed the idea that enrolment in an international school may be a last resort: 'When the students come [to CDS], their...marks [aren't impressive]...Even if they come in with less than satisfactory scores, they can [achieve] success. Even low-level students can go to Canadian [two-year] colleges, if not universities.'

Not all students at CDS were academic underperformers; many enrolled when faced with discriminatory policies targeting internal migrants. Many high schools do not accept, or have complicated admission procedures for, migrant students. Private schools have more flexibility than public schools in admitting migrants, but typically charge high fees. Further, migrant students must return home to take the university entrance exam, a trip that may be difficult, especially if the family no longer has social connections to the area. A student's household registration also factors into evaluation of her exam score: Beijing residents are more likely to be admitted to Beijing universities – China's top-ranked universities – than other students.

39 percent of the student body reported that 'household registration issues' (i.e. internal migrant status) influenced the decision to enrol at CDS, with 14 percent selecting this as the 'most important factor.' Oftentimes, these were the highest performing students at CDS. Raymond, a smart and creative twelfth-grader, is one example. Raymond ranked at the top of his class and was admitted to a top-ranked Canadian university. Unfortunately, Raymond was not a native resident of Beijing, which he described as a major factor in the decision to come to CDS. A classmate of Raymond's went into greater depth in discussing the barriers faced by internal migrants:

...going to school was quite troublesome. Actually, if you wanted to go to school, you could because there are standard [curriculum] high schools [in Beijing that accept internal migrants], but you would have to pay a tuition fee, find a school – it's quite troublesome. When my dad came [to this neighbourhood] for a meal, he just happened to see this international school and felt that it was pretty good and that I should come here...(later in interview) If I had [Beijing] household registration, maybe I would have taken the university entrance exam.

For migrants in Beijing, enrolling in an international school removes the burden of finding a high school that accepts migrants, which would require time and social and economic capital. It eliminates the need to travel home for the university entrance examination, which would require time, money, and social capital. Finally, enrolling at the international school lifts non-Beijing natives out of a disadvantaged position when applying to university, as overseas universities are unconcerned with household registration.

As further evidence that the majority of CDS students were not pursuing an 'elite' education, I provide data on the educational trajectories of the 2014 graduating class. While Brooks and Waters'

(2009) participants sought admission to Harvard when rejected from Oxford, most CDS students hoped for little more than admission to mid- or low-tier universities or two-year colleges. Among the 52 members of the 2014 graduating class, only 14 percent enrolled in universities ranked within the top 100 globally (e.g. the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia). The vast majority were destined for universities with mid to low rank: 48 percent enrolled in universities ranked 144-824 globally (e.g. the University of Alberta, the University of Victoria), while 38 percent accepted offers from two-year colleges or universities that did not make it into global rankings (e.g. Humber College, MacEwan University).¹⁶ This raises issues with the claim that families pursue international education to acquire elite educational credentials.

6.3. Academic Environment

A prevailing argument within the literature is that the elite academic environment offered by international education programs cultivates not only advanced academic skills, but also global cultural capital in its students. This is described as a key motivation for pursuing international education. Students and administrators at CDS echoed this belief. But was this the type of education students were obtaining at CDS? My observations on-campus suggest otherwise: rather than developing advanced academic skills and global cultural capital, most students struggled to meet even basic learning objectives. The school faced barriers to cultivating these skills in its students not because it lacked resources, but because it experienced pressure from students and families to offer a lax academic environment and low admission and graduation criteria. Overall, although an elitist façade added to the appeal of CDS, the school's success was closely tied to offering a relaxed and remedial, as opposed to elite, academic environment.

It is helpful to contrast the academic environment at CDS with that of standard curriculum schools in China. The rigorous, highly competitive learning environment of China's schools has caught the attention of scholars and the mass media. Chinese universities admit 6.5 million students each year, despite an applicant pool ~10 million (X. Zhao, Haste, and Selman 2014). Less than 10 percent are accepted into China's equivalent of Research I universities (X. Zhao, Haste, and Selman 2014). Consequently, parents put great pressure on children, and schools deploy strategies to improve student performance, including requiring extra classes and assigning ever-increasing quantities of homework (X. Zhao, Haste, and Selman 2014). Many parents enrol their children in tutoring and/or cram school to improve admission chances. This generates an atmosphere of intense stress, pressure and competition. Hesketh et al. (2010, 139) found strong evidence of academic-related stress among a sample of 9 to 12 year-olds in a Chinese province: '[t]he majority of the children...experienced pressure to perform at school, worried about exams, found the volume of homework difficult to cope with and were afraid that teachers would punish them.'

Rather than seeking an academically rigorous education, students were attracted to CDS because it offered a relatively *relaxed* atmosphere. 76 percent of the student body selected 'competition at public schools is too fierce' as a motivation for enrolling in the school, and 63 percent of interviewees mentioned pressure in the Chinese educational system. Rachel, a twelfth-grader whose parents were business owners, initially attended a standard curriculum high school. About halfway through tenth grade, Rachel said her parents expressed concern about the learning environment:

My father...thinks that there was too much pressure on me in the standard curriculum high school. Every day I would sleep for maybe 4 hours – sometimes [I would go to sleep at] 1 or 2am. He thought that there was no need to be so exhausted.

A family friend recommended CDS as an alternative. Once at CDS, Rachel earned below average grades, preferring to socialize rather than study. Rachel commented that this behaviour isn't socially acceptable in standard curriculum schools: 'if your exam scores aren't as good as other students, [classmates] laugh and ridicule you.' At CDS, however, there was not as much stigma against earning mediocre or failing grades. On the contrary, the school provided a comparatively stress-free environment in which students could earn a degree without expending much effort.

Several other CDS students mentioned that their parents were hesitant to put academic pressure on them. Jenna, an eleventh-grader, contrasted her parents' attitudes toward education with that of other parents: 'my friend [goes to] cram school. My mother doesn't like to put a lot of pressure on me, so afterschool I can just have fun.' Hesitancy to place pressure on one's child may explain why some families enrol their children in an international school rather than investing in tutoring or other activities to improve entrance exam performance. Parental attitudes toward childhood and education, however, were reported not by parents but by children; students may have projected their attitudes onto their parents. At the very least, however, the pressure and stress within standard curriculum schools negatively affected many students' learning experience, which informed educational decisions.

Given that concerns about stress and competition led many to enrol in CDS, the administration faced pressure to provide a relaxed educational experience, which introduced barriers to the cultivation of academic skills and global cultural capital. As described by a Chinese staff member: 'at this school, there is very little, if any, pressure on the students...Homeroom teachers don't feel they can be strict...because if they are, the parents will scold them, [saying] "I want [my child] to be happy, you're making him unhappy."' The school struggled with the tension between providing quality education and satisfying a desire to escape academic stress. Teachers, for example, frequently expressed frustration at the poor work ethic of students, complaining that this made it impossible to meet the Canadian curriculum's learning objectives. This was evident in a student presentation observed in an eleventh grade Language Arts class:

Two boys begin their presentation. Although they struggle with the rudimentary English written on the PowerPoint slides, they have a very casual attitude and seem unconcerned about their lack of preparedness. They glance over at the teacher every once in a while, smirks on their faces. Every few seconds the presenting students revert to Chinese to respond to another student who has shouted out a question, comment, or joke or to consult with each other about what to do next. After 30 minutes, they have abandoned English entirely and are shifting around, chatting in Chinese and flipping aimlessly through the slides. This continues until the school bell rings.

The poor work ethic of many students introduced barriers to developing English language ability, which in turn made it even more difficult to engage with course material. As illustrated by an observation of a twelfth grade history class, even students in their final year of the program struggled with English, greatly limiting how much they could gain from the international school curriculum:

The class is debating the resolution, 'political protests should be banned.' The leader of the negative (opposition) side states, 'we want the freedom of speech, democracy, education. We don't want Mao's idea to assimilate our thinking.' 'Yeah brainwash!' chimes another student. 'Everyone has right to have own opinion,' adds Matthew. Mr. Miller cuts in, 'does the [affirmative side] have questions for the [negative side]?' 'How do you sure the thing you believe are the right thing to do?' asks Piper. Matthew responds, 'Everyone has right to believe.' 'What if CCTV is wrong thing to do and this bothers you and causes trouble?' Piper retorts. Matthew looks confused, finally responding, 'Everyone was born good!' The other team starts laughing, 'This doesn't make sense!'

In this class, students were asked to think critically about an issue that could not be debated openly within a standard curriculum school. Language barriers, however, led the debate to fall apart, as students could not understand each other's points. Consequently, a unique learning opportunity was largely lost.

Failure to meet learning objectives and develop advanced academic skills is further reflected in students' academic performance: the average overall grade¹⁷ among 9-12th graders in spring semester 2014 was 63 percent and nearly one quarter had an overall grade equal to or below 50 percent. 35 percent failed at least one class. It is difficult for students to cultivate global cultural capital if they are unable to master basic course content. Although they continued to certify the school, the Canadian Ministry of Education also raised concerns about the school's ability to meet curriculum standards, in particular as evidenced by students' low scores on provincial examinations. Of course, there were exceptions: 11 percent of students earned an overall grade of 86 percent or above on their spring report cards. Most of these students came to CDS not due to academic failure, but because they faced discriminatory policies due to migrant status. Overall, however, interviews and class observations suggest that the international school was attractive in large part because it cultivated an appearance of elitism while simultaneously offering a relaxed atmosphere in which even the least studious individuals could achieve high school and tertiary credentials.

7. Conclusion

This case study draws attention to the emergence of a new form of international school in China. In contrast to the elite institutions depicted in the academic literature and popular media, this type of international school provides a remedial, rather than elite, academic environment. Further, rather than catering to either a domestic or international elite, the school serves families who are well off economically but lack other markers of elite social status in China, such as high levels of education

and local household registration. Consequently, this paper adds nuance to theories about the role of international schools, and international education more broadly, in social stratification processes. While international education often contributes to the social reproduction of elites, it can also serve the needs of parents from modest social origins who encounter barriers to transforming newly acquired economic advantages into broader social advantages for their children. Given that this is a case study of a single school, however, additional work is needed to understand how wide-spread – or rare – this type of international school is in China, as well as elsewhere.

In addition, the findings of this case study develop our understanding of class and educational strategies in post-reform China. This work raises issues with the assumption that members of China's emergent affluent class are adopting the same educational strategies. Scholarship on social class in post-reform China acknowledges differences among segments of the middle/affluent class¹⁸ in lifestyles, attitudes, and resources (Goodman, 2008). This has largely been overlooked, however, by scholars studying educational strategies, who generally lump together all families broadly conceived as members of China's 'middle class' in their analysis (Donald and Yi 2008; Crabb 2010; Wu 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Although all affluent Chinese families recognize education as the primary path to both social reproduction and social mobility, I argue that affluent families come to this field with different resources and different attitudes toward childrearing. This shapes the strategies families adopt, as well as if and how they incorporate international education into status attainment trajectories.

To ensure success within an increasingly competitive educational system, Chinese middle class families are described as heavily investing in academic tutoring, carefully monitoring their children's study habits, and, in some cases, putting academic excellence before psychosocial well-being (Wu 2014). This case study suggests preliminary evidence, however, that some families may 'depart from the beaten path': that is, opt out of the local educational system, and perhaps also diverge from the mainstream middle class approach to childrearing and education in favour of a more relaxed approach. The families who choose this pathway are likely those without comparative advantage in the competitive Chinese educational system, such as the 'new rich' entrepreneurial class. They share similarities with the 'business bourgeoisie' of twentieth century France, who lacked resources to cultivate academic excellence in their children (Bourdieu 1998). Rather than compete with cultural elites for spots within France's *grandes écoles*, the business bourgeoisie established schools of management and business as 'sanctuary schools' for their underperforming children. Like the Chinese families profiled in this study, they carved new pathways for transmitting advantage inter-generationally.

An attention to differences among affluent social classes is important for understanding not only contemporary China, but also other societies. Recently, there has been much important work on change, as well as continuation, in the identities and behaviours of affluent, or 'elite', social classes within various national contexts, and implications for educational inequality (Zanten, Ball, and Darchy-Koechlin 2015). There is increasing recognition of important distinctions between affluent classes in the past versus today, as well as between new and old forms of privilege within the same society contemporaneously. In particular, scholars have called for additional research on the 'new rich' (Zanten 2015). This paper is preliminary evidence that economic capital may not be as easily exchanged for educational credentials as some have assumed, presenting barriers to the social reproduction of the 'new rich' that require creative solutions.

What do these findings suggest for educational policy in China? Children attending foreign/IB curriculum schools sidestep many of the rules and procedures established by the Chinese government, such as competitive entrance examinations and patriotic education. As foreign/IB curriculum schools continue to rise in popularity, the government may implement new policies to a) restrict the spread of these schools and/or b) address issues within the standard curriculum system that lead students to opt out. At present, the Chinese government is favouring the former. In 2014, a ban was imposed on the establishment of new international departments in Beijing's public high schools. More recently, the government has prohibited private schools, including stand-alone international schools for Chinese citizens, from offering grades 1-9. One motivation for this was the concern that international school students are heavily exposed to Western ideology ("China Battles Foreign Influence in Education" 2016). Future research might explore the struggle between the Chinese government and the international school market.

In addition, this study has implications for Western higher education. Many Western universities are reforming their programs to meet the desires of high tuition-paying international students who seek saleable technical or professional skills (Ong 2006). The fact that some students are now pursuing international education not so much as a means of acquiring knowledge and skills but primarily as an easier pathway to baseline academic credentials raises concerns that Western pedagogy will increasingly diverge from an emphasis on a liberal arts education in favour of capitalistic instrumentalism.

Notes

¹ 'Foreign curriculum' refers to the curriculum of a country other than the one in which the school is located.

² see Ong 1999; Park and Abelmann 2004; Waters 2005; Chen and Zimitat 2006; Weenink 2007, 2008; Iijima 2009; Kim 2011; Igarashi and Saito 2014, among others.

³ Non-profit *minban* schools run by and for villagers were permitted in rural areas but were heavily regulated.

⁴ Although intended to equitably allocate education above the compulsory level, entrance examinations generally advantage students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Liu 2013).

⁵ 'Canada Dreams School' is a pseudonym.

⁶ According to a joint report of the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics and the Bureau of Human Resources and Social Security, in 2014 the average annual income for Beijing residents was ~\$13,000 USD (Wen and Wei 2015). Incomes in Beijing are higher than incomes in other Chinese cities, and much higher than in rural areas.

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- ⁷ A reviewer raised the concern that my role as a former employee may have influenced data collected. To minimize response bias, Chinese research assistants conducted all student interviews (under my supervision), the survey was administered online, rather than in-person, and I did not solely rely on students with whom I was acquainted for interviews (the majority of interviews were conducted with students that I had not previously met during my time working at CDS). Nevertheless, important insights within the sociology of education have been gained from research by sociologists who worked at the schools in which they collected data; the work of Shamus Khan (2012) is a notable example. Holding a position within the school can help in accessing the ‘back stage’ of the institution and in building rapport. Moreover, given the muddy legal status of many international schools in China, my relationship with the school provided access that may have been impossible otherwise.
- ⁸ Although I speak Mandarin Chinese, I asked Chinese research assistants to conduct interviews. This was primarily to minimize response bias, since I am a white American and interviews included questions about attitudes toward foreigners.
- ⁹ 63 percent of interviewees enrolled in the international school during the transition from middle school to high school (ages 14-15). 30 percent entered the school between ages 12 and 13. Only three interviewees entered in elementary school.
- ¹⁰ In 1988, on average the entrepreneurial class had lower levels of education than even the working class (Li 2010). Since this time, however, the proportion of the entrepreneurial class with modest social origins and low levels of education has decreased substantially (Xiang and Shen 2009; Li 2010).
- ¹¹ Some scholars use the term ‘new rich’ to refer to China’s emergent affluent class (sometimes conceptualized as a new ‘middle class’), since income inequality and wealth were largely non-existent during the Maoist period (Buckley 1999). In this paper, however, my conceptualization of the term ‘new rich’ is closer to the concept of the ‘nouveau riche’: individuals who have recently acquired great wealth, usually in a single generation. This is not a foreign concept in Chinese culture, as evidenced by the stereotype of *baofahu* (loosely translated as ‘upstart’).
- ¹² Both business owners and corporate managers/executives are conceptualized as members of China’s new entrepreneurial class (Goodman 2012).
- ¹³ Although one can transfer household registration, this is extremely costly and complicated.

¹⁴ In fact, in 2010 it was estimated that roughly 221 million Chinese citizens were living outside of their place of household registration (Liang, Li, and Ma 2014).

¹⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

¹⁶ Based on U.S. News and World Report's 2016 "Best Global Universities Rankings."

¹⁷ Student's overall grades were calculated by averaging the grades the student earned in all Canadian curriculum courses in the spring semester.

¹⁸ The terms 'affluent class', 'middle class', and 'new rich' are used interchangeably by scholars to describe the high income-earning segment of the Chinese population that has emerged in the wake of economic reforms (Goodman 2008a).

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TABLE 1: TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN CHINA

	<i>High school entrance exam required for admission?</i>	<i>Participate in university entrance exam?</i>	<i>Complete standard Chinese curriculum?</i>	<i>Type of degree earned</i>	<i>Aspects controlled by Chinese government</i>	<i>Example</i>
I. Exclusive School (Foreign Students Only)	No	No	No	Foreign/IB diploma only	School registration only	Yew Chung International School(s)
II. Non-Exclusive School (Chinese Students Accepted)						
A. <u>Stand-Alone School</u>						
<i>i. Dual-track</i>	Yes	Optional	Yes	Chinese diploma and foreign/IB diploma	Curriculum, textbooks, teacher hiring	Maple Leaf School(s)
<i>ii. Foreign/IB curriculum</i>	No	No	No	Foreign/IB diploma only	School registration only	Beijing Huijia Private School
B. <u>International Department</u> <i>(within Public or Private School)</i>						
<i>i. Dual-track</i>	Yes	Optional	Yes	Chinese diploma and foreign/IB diploma	Curriculum, textbooks, teacher hiring	Luhe Academy
<i>ii. Foreign/IB curriculum</i>	No	No	No	Foreign/IB diploma only	School registration only	Canada Dreams School (pseudonym) (subject of study)

Not e:

This paper is a case study of a foreign/IB curriculum school (in bold) within an international department (highlighted in grey).

TABLE 2: DATA SOURCES

<p>I. Student Survey (199 surveys) (average length: 15 minutes)</p>	<p>96 percent of the student body (n = 199) at Canada Dreams School participated. Administered via Qualtrics during class time in school computer lab. Language: Mandarin Chinese</p> <p>Question themes: family background, motivations for enrolling in Canada Dreams School, student identity, attitudes, mobility patterns, inter-cultural engagement, and sources of influence in student’s life (e.g. mass media, parents, peers)</p>
<p>II. Student Interviews (43 interviews) (average length: 60 minutes)</p>	<p>Ninth-graders (8) Tenth-graders (10) Eleventh-graders (8) Twelfth-graders (17) – higher number of interviews with graduating class to allow for possibility of follow-up interviews once moved overseas for university Language: Mandarin Chinese</p> <p>Question themes: family background (e.g. parents’ occupations and education, family income, family’s overseas experience, parenting styles), decision to enrol in Canada Dreams School (e.g. who first suggested idea, did all family members support idea, factors considered), perception of standard curriculum high schools in China, mobility patterns (e.g. previous visits to foreign countries), future plans (education, career, migration plans), media consumption, sense of national identity/belonging/pride, interactions with and attitudes toward non-Chinese groups.</p>
<p>III. Informational Interviews (6 interviews) (average length: 20 minutes)</p>	<p>Administrators (2) Chinese Staff (2) Canadian Curriculum Teachers (2) Language: Mandarin Chinese or English</p> <p>Question themes: types of families that come to Canada Dreams School, motivations for coming to the school, school environment (especially relative to standard curriculum schools), attitude and behaviour of students, academic performance of students, interactions with parents, general information about the school’s history and administration.</p>
<p>IV. Participant Observation (~225 hours)</p>	<p>Daily, 6 weeks 8:00am to 3:30pm on weekdays (interviews after school during week and on weekends)</p>

Observed conversations and events that occurred in Canadian curriculum teachers' office, observed interactions in the hallways, engaged in formal class observations, served as substitute teacher, taught survey methods to all 9-12th grade classes, attended school performances, ate lunch daily with teachers, proctored provincial exam, attended year-end award ceremony, served as MC at high school graduation ceremony, attended graduation party, attended year-end administrative meeting.