Global Paths, Local Trajectories: China's Education and the Global

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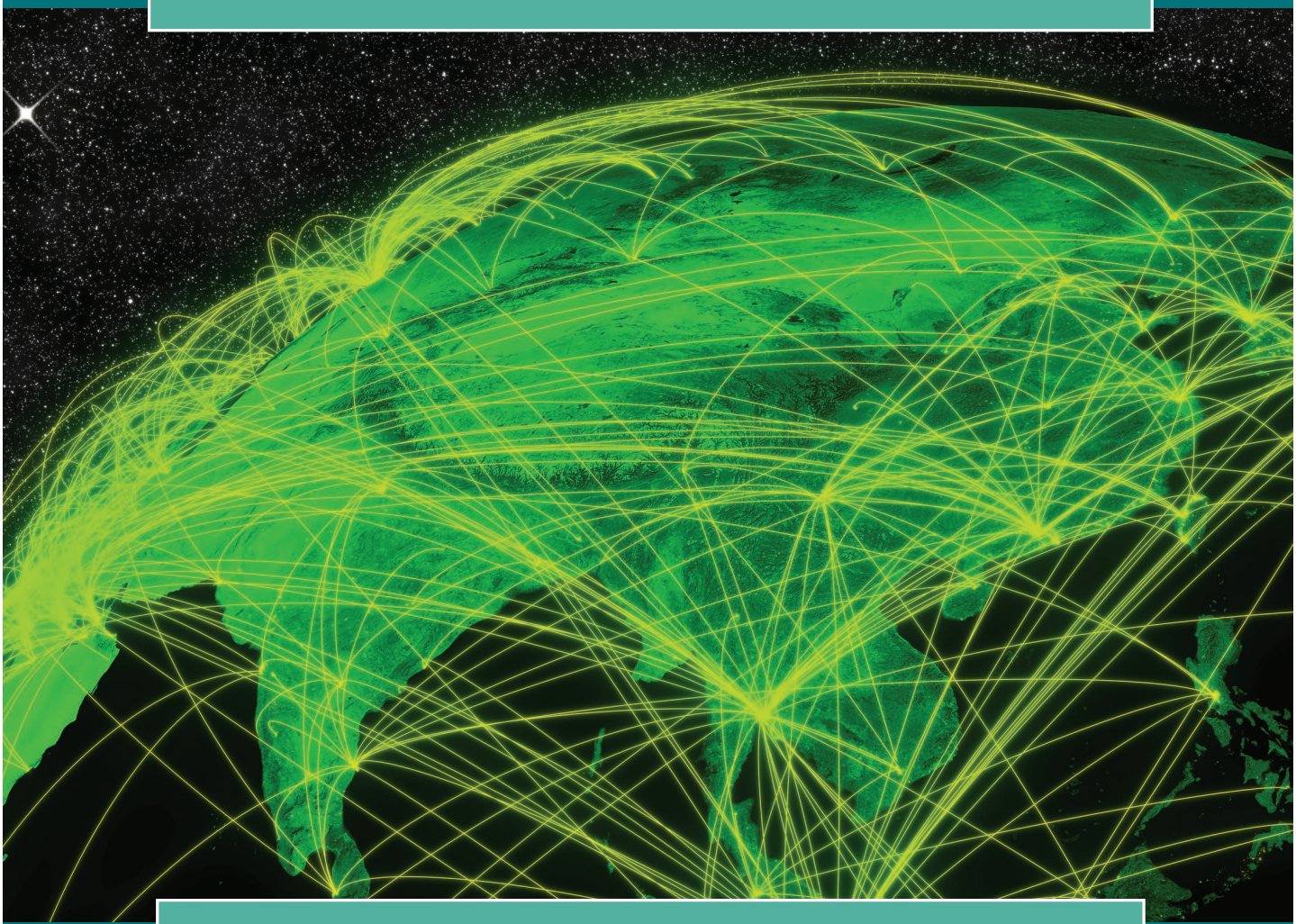
Shibao Guo and Yan Guo (Eds.)



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Chinese Education in the Globalized World

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INTRODUCTION

In Chinese education and at Chinese schools, the global has become ubiquitous – at least in the urban areas. This is observable at different levels: at the micro level, school children wear Western clothes brands (or imitations of them); Christmas decoration is hanging from the ceilings; classrooms and school yards frequently feature large world maps and huge globes; and the school bells play Mozart or North American children songs. At the meso level, school policies stress the importance of curriculum internationalization; school principals state as their educational aim the formation of global, 'metropolitan' citizens; and teachers with international experience have a distinct advantage in being hired. Finally, at the macro level, the global rise of the 'knowledge economy' has clearly left its mark on Chinese national educational policies, which make international competitiveness and the training of 'creative talents' proclaimed goals of nation-wide strategies in reforming education.[1] Conversely, China has been clearly added to the educational map of policy makers and educators worldwide due to the Chinese students' extraordinarily high performance in cross-nationally conducted student assessments (such as PISA).[2]

But what does it actually mean when we say that something has been globalized? Do the examples above point to a global China? Or do they rather represent manifestations of the global in the local, where the global has become a part of the local, as much as the 'local' has become "an aspect of globalization" (Robertson, 1995, p. 30)? Studies in and beyond comparative education on the global-local nexus have drawn attention to the dialectic processes of meaning-making that take place at various levels of these translocal encounters (Anderson-Levitt, 2003, 2012; Appadurai, 1996b; Beech, 2011; Carney, 2009; Larsen & Beech, 2014; Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006; Tsing, 2005).[3] These studies have shown convincingly how what an external onlooker could call identical global phenomena or processes are perceived and acted upon diversely – and sometimes contradictorily – once they enter local contexts. That is, while globalization makes intra- and trans-societal agents across the world become subject to increasingly similar processes, powers, and pressures/potentials, these global forces play out differently, can mean very different things to different actors, and may also entail different consequences for the actors involved.

S. Guo & Y. Guo (Eds.), Spotlight on China: Chinese Education in the Globalized World, 19–34.

Leon Tikly (2010) has pointed to the impossibility of talking about globalization as if this was something general, with generalizable causes and effects. Rather, he argues, 'globalization' is nonsensical if not linked up to particular localities:

> It has been a shortcoming of much of the existing literature on globalisation and education that the specific contexts to which the theory is assumed to be applicable have not been specified. It is problematic to assume that there is one superior vantage point from which global forces can best be understood. (p. 152)

Thus, 'global' paths can only be traced by scrutinizing the local trajectories of the global. But how are we to understand the interaction between the two? How can we pinpoint, for instance with regard to the examples that I gave at the beginning of this chapter, where, how and why the global has hit the ground?

In this chapter, I will discuss various conceptualizations of these 'grounding' processes as they have been employed within the field of comparative education. In the following section, I will debate how the neo-institutionalist 'world culture theory' (see e.g., Ramirez, 2012) – an approach that has proven to be widely influential but also fiercely contested within comparative education[4] – has led to a specific kind of 'cultural turn' within studies on education and globalization. I will then show how the originally constructivist approach inherent in world culture theory was subsequently taken up and developed within Scandinavian neo-institutionalism, while 'culture' within the US-based world culture theory approach was increasingly watered down, becoming a sort of cultural 'add-on' in otherwise de-cultured studies. I will also point to alternative approaches towards conceptualizing actors or 'carriers' in globalization processes – some of which are based on ontological premises that are distinctly different from the assumptions that are guiding the research conducted within the paradigm of world culture theory. This discussion will be followed by an outline of the three dimensions that have proven crucial in research on globalization and education: time and space/place, legitimating myths, and friction/pressures. In a concluding remark, I will refer these concepts back to local Chinese sense-making processes as they occur in interaction with the global.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE GLOBAL

The postulation of a 'world culture' being constructed across the globe (see e.g., the edited volume by Boli & Thomas, 1999) has its distinct roots in a social constructivist perspective on social science (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and, more specifically, in new institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991): structures and agency are seen as taking place within communicative and sense-making frames that transcend individual actors but also ground macro-social processes. It is through institutions that meaning and stability are seen to be provided, as institutions communicate and sanction rules and surveillance mechanisms (regulative dimension), articulate expectations (normative dimension), and embody shared conceptions

(cultural-cognitive dimension) (Scott, 1995). In educational research, this approach helped explain, among other things, the worldwide institutionalization of mass education (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000; Ramirez & Boli, 1987): it discarded purely structural-functionalist explanations and instead brought to the fore the cultural-ideological dimensions of global educational expansion. Rather than responding to any particular local requirements (such as economic or political needs), nation states were now understood as striving towards compliance with globally established cultural scripts of how to constitute a proper nation state and a legitimate member of the global community – and part of this script was a specifically structured mass education system (cf. the early exploration into myths by Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

While earlier studies within the neo-institutionalist framework must be credited with bringing culture back in, two severe flaws began to emerge as the world culture approach developed (Meyer, 2010; Ramirez, 2012).

First, local agency was increasingly rejected as an inappropriate conceptual tool for explaining global processes. Frequently, local agency was conflated with studies of the micro-level, which were depicted as having little to say about macro-processes (which were seen as embodying the global). This was despite Strang's and Meyer's important concept of 'theorization', within the framework of new institutionalism: this concept posits that there are different ways of making sense of the world, and that for a model to become adopted and integrated successfully, it has to resonate with local actors (Strang & Meyer, 1993). Clearly, the world culture approach has turned the local and the global into dichotomous, mutually exclusive entities. By operating increasingly from a diffusionist perspective, world culture theorists place the local at the receiving/reacting end of global diffusion (of e.g., educational models), thus ignoring both the dialectic, inter-penetrative relationship between the global and the local (Robertson, 1995) and the active, creative part that local agents play in this interaction (see below on Scandinavian new institutionalism).

Second, the world culture approach brackets issues of power, friction, and oppression among and between actors. Most studies within this paradigm tend to ignore the more unpleasant circumstances of educational transfer, e.g. when an educational model is imposed due to financial constraints, political dictates, or cultural hegemony. However, if 'culture' in the world culture approach is stripped off its contentious nature, what then is left to legitimize using the term 'culture' at all?[5] This negligence or even refusal to address issues of power and coercion has led critics to suspect that the adherers of world culture theory were actually promoting the benefits of (a mostly Western-framed) 'world culture', rather than just researching it (Carney, Rappleye, & Silova, 2012). More probable, I would argue, world culture theorists' tendency to ignore power, conflicts, and struggles might be a legacy of their neo-institutionalist origins. As Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C.R. Taylor observe,

> the approach that sociological institutionalism takes […] often seems curiously bloodless. That is to say, it can miss the extent to which processes

> of institutional creation or reform entail a clash of power among actors with competing interests. After all, many actors, both inside and outside an organization, have deep stakes in whether that firm or government adopts new institutional practices, and reform initiatives often provoke power struggles among these actors, which an emphasis on processes of diffusion can neglect. In some cases, the new institutionalists in sociology seem so focused on macro-level processes that the actors involved in these processes seem to drop from sight and the result begins to look like 'action without agents'. (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 954)

In an important return to the actor, W. Richard Scott has emphasized and conceptualized the role of 'carriers'. Carriers – or actors in processes of diffusion, transfer, and adoption – are "not neutral vehicles, but mechanisms that significantly influence the nature of the elements they transmit and the reception they receive" (Scott, 2003, p. 879). He distinguishes between four different types of carriers: (1) symbolic systems in which meaningful information is coded and conveyed; (2) relational systems, consisting of interpersonal or interorganizational linkages; (3) routines in the form of habitualized behavior; and (4) artifacts (material culture).

Similarly, the Scandinavian variant of new institutionalism (see e.g., Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) has focused on locally induced processes of modification and change in the course of 'global' diffusion. These studies specifically employ the concept of 'translation' in order to stress the agency and creativity inherent in these local processes. Diffusion is no longer a transmission e.g. across national borders but acts of translation, with far-reaching consequences for both actors and objects: "Each act of translation changes the translator and what is translated" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8). Others have used the terms "editing" (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) or "framing" (Snow & Benford, 1992) to denote these processes of appropriation and transformation. Importantly, Scandinavian neo-institutionalists have also differentiated between different types of translation and have thus unpacked the world culture theorists' concept of 'isomorphism': while in some cases actors may take over a model without admitting it outspokenly (e.g. by calling it something different), in other cases actors may evoke a globally popular model or reform and pretend to be adopting it – while in reality implementing something else. This has been termed isopraxism in the first case, and isonymism in the second (see Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005; Solli, Demediuk, & Sims, 2005). Often, these are strategic choices depending on political climate and/or economic priorities. The concept of 'isomorphism' reflects these different and often conflictual processes only insufficiently since it tends to overemphasize cosmetic similarities (such as e.g. 'human rights education' across different countries), while overlooking underlying commonalities that are, however, labeled differently, precisely due to the world culture theorists' excessive focus on macro processes.

Another way to look at globalization and social agency that has proven influential for comparative education is through the concept of 'networks'. Research on

networks has figured large in studies on governance (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Milward & Provan, 2000) and has found its way into comparative education mainly in studies that are critical of nonstate, 'neoliberal' networks (see Ball, 2008). Here it is above all the powerful, often unholy alliances between specific actors that are seen as essential for specific 'global' models to succeed or fail on a local plane. Steiner-Khamsi (2006) has been particularly interested in the rationales of early and late adopters of educational models and has repeatedly pleaded for the contextualization of educational diffusion and transfer (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). More specifically employing a social network analysis (SNA) approach, Roldán Vera and Schupp (2005) have looked at the worldwide diffusion of the monitorial system of education, while Schulte (2012a) has analyzed the social ties among (national and transnational) actors in the vocational education movement in Republican China. Social networks, Schulte argues,

> can illustrate both the flows of ideas (carried by people or organisations) and the flows of power. The nature of the nodes (actors) through which ideas pass can tell us something about how the ideas get processed and changed, and how this has a backlash on actors and their behaviour. […] [Social network analysis] can illuminate the 'how' of social relations, and it can explain the longevity or ephemerality of certain phenomena that are created, maintained, or abolished through social relations… (Schulte, 2012a, pp. 96–97)

Departing from a flat ontology and directing attention to the nonhuman world, studies of translation processes have also been drawing on Bruno Latour's work and his approach towards social reality as an actor-network (e.g., Latour, 1986; also the Scandinavian neo-institutionalists have been inspired by Latour, 2005). Originally, this approach emerged within studies on science in the making (science and technology studies, or STS): taken-for-granted trajectories and narratives of scientific development began to be questioned. Decentering e.g. the role of grand scientists or 'compelling' scientific theories, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) assumes that causality emerges out of interactions and connections within an actor-network. Such a relational network is thought of consisting both of human and nonhuman actants. Any entity can thus become a source of action (or an actant), "including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, 'nature', ideas, organizations, inequalities, scales and sizes, and geographical arrangements" (Law, 2008, p. 141).[6] This relational, symmetrical approach is consequently no longer constricted by the macro-micro distinction so prevalent in social theory; nor is it caught within the structure-agency dichotomy that has shaped so much of social science thinking.[7]

Since a relational perspective shifts attention to how actors serve as mediators in social processes, which are thought of as networks, the idea of 'translation' is a natural characteristic of this approach. Latour distinguishes between intermediaries – who have no impact on the information that passes through them – and (human or nonhuman) mediators, who possess shaping power:

> Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. (Latour, 2005, p. 39)

Translation, according to Callon (1981), who develops the concept further, consists then of bringing things together that were previously apart or disconnected; such a process always involves the negotiation of actors' identities and possibilities of (inter)action. It also requires that things are perceived as 'problems' in the first place (problematization), actors become interested in them (interessement), and a sufficient number of actors can get mobilized (Callon, 1991). As Callon points out, translation also means a displacement of alternative possibilities.

An important concept within science and technology studies is the idea of blackboxing. Blackboxing denotes the process of obscuring (technological) complexity: things that themselves are actor-networks (consisting of complex interrelationships) become at some point 'punctualized', appearing as obvious and self-evident to the onlooker (like the computer I'm using in my daily work). They thus become black-boxed and are converted into a single point or node in another network (Callon, 1991). A school book for example may become blackboxed in its interaction with teachers, students, the classroom or the curriculum – although it is clearly socially and historically contingent, having emerged out of previous, complex interactions. As Law notes, black boxes are seldom of permanent character but can be re-opened:

> Punctualization is always precarious, it faces resistance, and may degenerate into a failing network. On the other hand, punctualized resources offer a way of drawing quickly on the networks of the social without having to deal with endless complexity. (Law, 1992, p. 385)

For instance, a textbook may at some point in time become the target of criticism, such as from minority groups or teacher unions, and can thus be unpacked.

Also with regard to educational transfer, this shift of focus onto different kinds of entities that are involved in processes of transfer and interaction – human and material – is potentially productive. However, only few studies on globalization and education have made use of this approach more than metaphorically (see e.g. Fenwick, 2010; Resnik, 2006) and it remains to be seen how influential this approach will prove in the future. As it requires a radical ontological re-orientation, it is somewhat questionable whether it will gain a stronger foothold among comparative educationists.

DIMENSIONS OF THE GLOBAL

Elsewhere I have identified three foci in conceptualizing globalization processes in education (Schulte, 2012b) and will re-introduce them in the following three subsections.

Time and Space/Place

This first focus starts from the assumption that the selection, adoption, translation, and appropriation of models are not timeless and placeless phenomena but are intricately linked to both (perceived, construed) needs of adopters and a "time axis" of developments (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012); they are historically contingent. Before a model can look convincing to potential adopters, it has to become visible in the first place. Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) use the concept of 'fashion' to explain why certain ideas are attractive at a specific point in time while others are not; fashions pose a potential threat to existing ideas/institutions and can cause their transformation or demise (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). Others have used the idea of discourse or "discourse coalitions" (Schriewer, 2000, p. 73) to explain why certain ideologies gain hold in a group/society. From a system theory's perspective, ideas are seen as becoming selected and filtered "according to the changing problem configurations and reflection situations *internal* to a given system" (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004, p. 32; my emphasis). Similarly, Lieberman (2002) argues that rather than constituting exogenous forces, "shocks" are generally homemade and an outcome of earlier tensions within a given society. This has far-reaching consequences for the alleged stability and universality of certain ideas: "[C]oncepts such as 'liberty' or 'equality' might be invoked to support very different practices in different contexts by people who all the while believe themselves to be upholding a timeless and unchanging political tradition" (Lieberman, 2002, p. 702).

In congruence with a more general spatial turn in the social sciences, place has also moved more literally into focus by turning attention to how place and space themselves can act upon diffusion and translation processes. Space is not just being compressed through globalization processes, maintain – for example – Larsen and Beech (2014), but has become an actor itself, with performative capacities, and should therefore turn from "an object of study" to "a framework for analysis" (Beech & Larsen, 2011, pp. 194–195). Drawing on Lefebvre (1991), they plead for a relational notion of space in which space, place, and social agency constitute one another.

Legitimating Myths

Ramirez (2012) points to the importance of "myths" as basic human strategies to add meaning to one's existence – and to legitimate one's action. He thus takes up again a perspective that has been put forward in earlier neo-institutionalist writings, which sees myths as helping an organization to look "appropriate, rational, and modern". Their use "displays responsibility and avoids claims of negligence" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 344). By attributing to myths "[c]eremonial criteria of worth and ceremonially derived production functions" and by using terms like "labels" or "vocabulary" (1977, p. 351), Meyer and Rowan make it clear that myths are less creeds to be believed but beliefs to be performed, in order to gain legitimacy. While

they underline the constructivist character of myths, they pay less attention to the temporality and locality of myths (see previous section).

Roland Barthes develops the idea that myth is not just a concept, but a "system of communication" (Barthes, 1972/2009, p. 131) or a "type of speech chosen by history" (2009, p. 132) and is thus "open to appropriation by society" (2009, pp. 131–132). This appropriation is culturally contingent:

> Myth has an imperative, buttonholing character: stemming from an historical concept, directly springing from contingency […], it is *I* whom it has come to seek. It is turned towards me, I am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity. (2009, p. 148; emphasis in original)

Barthes further observes that myths serve to naturalize historically specific decisions and preferences – they make "contingency appear eternal" (2009, p. 168) and hence depoliticize interaction (that is, detach beliefs from specific interests and goals). It shares some similarity with the above-discussed process of blackboxing.

It is worth asking whether the world culture approach itself has not bought into the eternity and stability of the myths that it had set out to analyze, and whether it has not failed to look at the re-politicization of myths once they enter a different context. This becomes particularly salient when globally circulating myths hit upon local myths, thus producing global-local networks of myths with highly differential consequences for politics, economics, and everyday lives.

From an empirical perspective, one of the originally central concepts of the world culture approach, myths, is only insufficiently operationalized. Often, the mere fact that countries engage in or take over aspects of world culture models is taken as proof that these countries *embody* (parts of this) world culture. To raise an example: to what extent can we treat the number and distribution of human rights institutions as evidence that the respective country that hosts these institutions has actually implemented human right norms (cf. Koo & Ramirez, 2009)? For an approach that takes both time/place and myths/legitimacy seriously, it is imperative to explore also how human rights are understood and enacted in each of these societies. One has to take into account, in Lieberman's words,

> the goals and desires that people bring to the political world and, hence, the ways they define and express their interests; the meanings, interpretations, and judgments they attach to events and conditions; and their beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships in the political world and, hence, their expectations about how others will respond to their own behavior. (Lieberman, 2002, p. 697)

To move local enactments of myths back into focus does not mean that the global dimension needs to be sacrificed. On the contrary, such a move can add to an understanding of how the power of global institutions and ideas materializes. While the growing legitimacy of certain global scripts – such as mass schooling or human rights – is an undeniable fact, this legitimacy has been put forward differently, by different actors within different settings through different scripts. At times, what

is called 'variation' initially even subverts the original idea. Such is the case for example with the US import of 'academic freedom' to Singapore, where it became twisted to strengthen the hegemony of the state (see Olds, 2005). If we are to take the idea of myths seriously, there is not *one* world culture, but a variety of both scripted and on-the-spot constructions of world culture that have repercussions in the 'real world' (i.e., resulting in certain choices, actions, and policies). So not only are the narratives played out differently (implementation), but they are also scripted differently – although they are engaged with each other at the global level.

This is not just a matter of 'decoupling', as maintained by Ramirez (e.g., 2012). Explaining variation by decoupling disguises the failure to come to analytical terms with difference; it has become a black box within this strand of research (and probably even a 'black box' in Latour's sense in that complex relationships have become punctualized). The solution of course cannot be to construct a myriad of independent case studies where each shows how world culture is experienced differently. As already Bertrand Russell (1956, p. 195) noted, "[w]hen one person uses a word, he does not mean by it the same thing as another person means by it." It would be a hopeless enterprise to try and map every single local understanding of globally travelling myths. However, comparative research can contribute by working on a typology of narratives as they are diffused and transformed across the world. Göran Therborn (1995), for instance, notes at least four different routes to modernity that may correspond with different understandings of world culture: the European gate of revolution or reform (endogenous change); the New Worlds of the Americas (transcontinental migration and genocide, independence); imposed or externally induced modernization in Asia (external threat, selective imports); conquest, subjection and appropriation in Africa; and combinations of these different types. Similarly, approaches within the framework of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 1999; Schwinn, 2006, 2012) have proved fruitful in comparative education for showing how societies modernize and reform on their own terms, even when they are 'borrowing' (or translating) from other countries (see e.g., Schriewer & Martinez, 2004). Comparative education has yet to find a balance between indulging in a multiplicity of idiosyncratic case studies (that is, a myriad of local 'appropriations') on the one hand, and on the other, risking over-ambitious generalizations (that is, the diffusion of one model in which the specificity of the local actor, or the translator, no longer plays a role).

Friction and Pressures

When different layers of discourses, fashions, or orders come into contact and possibly conflict with one another, there arises friction (or interruptions, from a system perspective). Lieberman sees politics as occurring in "multiple concurrent orders" (2002, p. 702) where friction between these orders leads to action and change:

> Measuring friction, then, is a matter of deriving, from the historical record, accounts of these incentives, opportunities, and repertoires that arise from multiple sources of political order and impinge simultaneously on the same set of actors. (2002, p. 703)

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, from an anthropological perspective, understands friction as arising out of encounters and interactions that take place in "zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak" (2005, p. xi). Like Lieberman, she emphasizes the creative property of friction, which "reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (2005, p. 5). The concept of friction is also apt to capture the dialectic relationship between the local and the global: friction emerges where the global touches local ground – Tsing talks of "engaged universals" (2005, p. 10) – and it

> keep[s] global power in motion. It shows us (as one advertising jingle put it) where the rubber meets the road. Roads are a good image for conceptualizing how friction works: Roads create pathways that make motion easier and more efficient, but in doing so they limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement. Friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing. (Tsing, 2005, p. 6)

While friction, as I have discussed it so far, is more concerned with how an organization, group, society, or system processes and internalizes external forces, this does not preclude that these more subliminal internalization processes are preceded, accompanied, or prompted by more palpable pressures such as coercion or brute force. Already DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in their widely cited article, differentiate between coercive isomorphism, mimetic processes and normative pressures. It is conspicuous that the world culture approach has tended to neglect the first element in this set. As Scott (2003) notes, it should have an impact on the outcome of diffusion whether models were taken over from soldiers or bankers (or from academic experts, I would add).

CONCLUSION: MAKING SENSE OF THE GLOBAL IN CHINESE EDUCATION

China often lends itself as a case where 'everything is different' (as remarked once by a critical colleague of mine). Are case studies on China, or more particularly, on how global models play out in Chinese education, thus only adding to the 'myriad of local appropriations', of which I warned above? Or can insights from the Chinese case actually tell us something about globalization as such? I believe the latter is a more valid statement, at the same time as I am siding with Leon Tikly (2010; see introductory section) in that I see no point in looking at globalization only in general terms – if we want to attach meaning to *globalization*, we will have

to investigate how globalization processes unfold on the ground. In the following, I will sketch a few of these grounding processes by drawing on some previous studies (both by myself and others). Very obviously, the volume to which this chapter contributes provides further ample evidence of a globalized/globalizing China.

Looking more closely, China is not as 'exotic' a case as often maintained. China has been part of what we today call the 'international community' for a long time and was both agent and patient of East-West and West-East knowledge interchange (for a brief and recent overview, see Schulte, 2013). Regarding contemporary China, scholars have been particularly interested in seeing how deeply ingrained traditions of teaching and learning are impacted by the import of global educational models (such as student-centered learning, communicative language instruction, etc.). Various case studies show how local teaching and learning practices continue to draw on indigenous conceptions and practices (Tan, 2015; Zhao, 2013) and in a curious combination of both embracing and resisting 'Western' teaching and learning models, the latter become creolized (Ouyang, 2003), thus leading to "hybrid reforms" (Paine & Fang, 2006).[8] There is still very little research on how these local re-interpretations of global models may have a backlash on the environments from where these models emerged – for instance, how these Chinese hybrids have an impact on North American conceptions of teaching and learning (but see Tucker, 2011, to get an impression of where this may lead).

In a large comparative case study of educational knowledge over a period of several decades in Spain, Russia/the Soviet Union, and China, Schriewer and colleagues investigated what 'global' or 'international' actually mean in each context by scrutinizing international references in these societies' educational research journals (e.g., Schriewer, 2004). From a bird's eye perspective, increased international references may simply point to an increased internationalization of these societies (or rather, of these societies' academic discourse on education). However, looking more closely at what kind of international authors (educators, psychologists, philosophers etc.) were cited, the project could actually identify rather diverse 'international' reference societies, and thus "alternating constructions of internationality" (Schriewer, 2004, p. 509).

Closing up on one important international reference, namely the appearance of the educator and philosopher John Dewey in Chinese educational discourse, Schulte (2011) has looked at how one and the same reference can stand for very different and even conflicting ideas about education, depending on the time period and the concomitant political and academic climate. Here, as well as in Schulte (2004), which discusses the abuse of the postmodern argument of 'relativism' and thus a reversed orientalism in Chinese academia, it becomes evident that the 'international' or the 'global' often serve as a strategic argument to push forward local interests.[9] Similarly, in another comparative project on how vocational education programs

were integrated into Argentina's and China's modernization schemes, Oelsner and Schulte (2006) note how the adoption of international models is contingent upon these societies' (often competing) perceptions of problems in the first place, as well as their (often historically grounded) bonds with foreign reference societies. Frequently, the apparently 'global' became reduced to one or two countries that were particularly visible in the Chinese or Argentine contexts (termed 'reference horizons' by Oelsner & Schulte, 2006).

The discussion above is by no means exhaustive but is to illustrate how case studies that are grounded in one or more distinct localities can nonetheless yield important insights into the workings of more encompassing processes like globalization. Rather than choosing a "view from nowhere-in-particular" (Jensen, 2011, p. 2), such studies make conscious use of a culturally sensitive, relativist approach – without making the investigated processes unique to the point of incommensurability. To conclude with the words of Jensen,

> [c]omparative relativism is understood by some to imply that relativism comes in various kinds and that these have multiple uses, functions, and effects, varying widely in different personal, historical, and institutional contexts; moreover, that those contexts can be compared and contrasted to good purpose. (Jensen, 2011, p. 2)

NOTES

1 This becomes for example apparent from the current Ten-Year-Plan of informatizing education (see MOE, 2012).

2 There has been a debate about PISA both with regard to fundamental aspects of its design and its technical implementation. The first concern raises the question of to what extent assessment studies like PISA can really reflect a student cohort's level of competence and knowledge, what kind of knowledge is entailed in PISA's design and, whether this knowledge is what we would want our children to learn (see e.g. the discussion in Meyer & Benavot, 2013). The second critique raises concerns about the sampling procedures (Kreiner & Christensen, 2014), which, especially with regard to the Chinese PISA (or rather Shanghai PISA), has prompted some criticism – something I cannot go into detail here (but see for example the blog by Loveless, 2014).

3 See also the special issue *Re-Conceptualising the Global-Local Nexus: Meaning Constellations in the World Society* in the journal *Comparative Education, 48*(4) (2012). In the present chapter, I draw on arguments that have been presented in my contribution to this special issue (Schulte, 2012b).

4 See e.g. the critique in Carney, Rappleye, and Silova (2012).

5 See for instance Barnard's and Spencer's understanding of culture as a "site of contestation" (1996, p. 141); see also Morley and Chen (1996).

6 Note the similarities with Appadurai's concept of 'scapes', which distinguishes between ethnoscapes (people/groups on the move), mediascapes (information/images on the move), technoscapes (technologies on the move), finanscapes (capital on the move), and ideoscapes (ideas/ideologies on the move) (Appadurai, 1996a).

7 ANT distinguishes between agency and intentionality: somebody or something may serve as an agent without necessarily having the intention to act for a specific purpose.

8 See also the peculiar integration of the concept of 'creativity', the buzzword of today's knowledge economy, into Chinese education (Schulte, 2015).

9 This strategic move has been extensively discussed in Zymek (1975).

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