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## **World culture with Chinese characteristics: when global models go native**

*Barbara Schulte*

### **Abstract**

Just as the world has increasingly been compressed over recent decades through transnationally engaged actors or 'carriers' such as mobile experts, international organisations, and seemingly globalised bodies of knowledge, so have China's politicians and academics increasingly 'gone global' in various fields of social action, including education. China's Open Door policy since the late 1970s is, historically, not the country's first opening to the world but is preceded by earlier phases of opening and closing. Each of these 'global' phases is witness to two interrelated phenomena: the reconstruction of the local through the global; and the reconceptualisation of the global through the local.

The article seeks to illustrate this dialectic process both in theory and in practice. The first part unpacks dimensions and paradoxes of the global-local nexus in comparative education, discussing both fruitfulness and shortcomings of the 'world culture theory' and complementary approaches. Based on the insights from this discussion, the second part showcases the local embeddedness of seemingly global paths by revealing how the Chinese educational field dealt with – and appropriated – 'world culture'. I will exemplify this by looking at two different time periods: firstly, I will show how in the Republican China of the 1920s, the idea of 'vocational education' was taken up, transformed, and meshed with socio-culturally grounded, both traditional and contemporaneous notions of how the individual should be socialised into working life. Secondly, I will trace how the idea of 'neoliberalism' has been taken up by Chinese educationists since the 1990s and how it has been sinicised to justify – or oppose – equality in education. The insights from these two historical snapshots are two-fold: firstly, the development of Chinese education is not as nationally determined as is suggested by various actors and researchers but emerges at the interface of globally migrating ideas and nationally designed strategies; secondly, 'world culture' – or an educational ideology spreading worldwide – is not as uniform as is suggested by its apparent global ubiquity but is remade by local, if transnationally active agents and networks.

### **Global vs. local or multiple globalities?**

The tension between the global and the local is an issue of intense debate in the field of comparative education – like in other social science disciplines that deal with ideas, models, actors, and things moving around the globe. Generally, there is an agreement that the world has been compressed through processes of globalisation (e.g. Robertson 1992). However, this

observation triggers different reactions. Often, though not necessarily outspokenly, different standpoints are tied to different values. The global and the local are seen as constituting two opposite visions of a 'good' or 'bad' world and the two concomitant processes, indigenisation and globalisation, are played out against each other. Or, to use Barber's (1995) more provocative terming, the perspective is either McWorld or Jihad: it is either the triumph of the homogenising global that is, gladly or not, acknowledged; or the dissolution of all commonalities into particularising local forces.

It is the merit of a range of theoretical and empirical studies to have pointed out the complementarity and interpenetration of global and local processes. Such "interweaving of contrary currents" (Schriewer 2000b, 327) includes processes of "internationalization" vs. "indigenization", "supranational integration" vs. "intranational diversification", "evolutionary universals" vs. "sociocultural configurations", and "global diffusion processes" vs. "culture-specific reception processes". Anthony Giddens' observation according to which globalisation is a "dialectic phenomenon" (1991, 22) is developed further. Giddens' perspective is still very much shaped by the idea of action and *reaction* – "events at one pole of a distanced relation often produce divergent or even contrary occurrences at another" (*ibid.*). Subsequently, scholars have pointed to the difficulty of drawing sharp distinctions between the local and the global: much of what is called local is constituted translocally, it is "*an aspect of globalization*" (Robertson 1995, 30). Such a take supersedes the question of whether we are witness to processes (and results) of homogenisation or heterogenisation; rather, it moves to the fore "the ways in which both of these two tendencies have become features of life across much of the late-twentieth-century world" (Robertson 1995, 27). Many studies, both within and beyond comparative education, have shown the fruitfulness of such an approach that focuses on both the emulative and creative, constraining and enabling, character of translocal encounters (e.g.

Appadurai 1996; Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe 2006; Anderson-Levitt 2003; Beech 2011; Carney 2009; Schriewer and Martinez 2004; Waldow 2010; Tsing 2005).

Through which means and channels do these encounters occur? Why and how do local actors go global? Francisco Ramirez (2012) claims in this special issue that actor-centred perspectives such as interests and goals cannot explain sufficiently the commonality of cross-national trends (such as the prime example within neo-institutionalism, the emergence of mass education throughout the world). The concept of 'world culture' as put forward by Ramirez and his colleagues proves highly productive in this regard: a communicative and sense-making frame that transcends individual actors and grasps the dynamics in the "wider world and its influence on nation-states" (Ramirez 2012; this issue). Borrowing from institutionalism, which views institutions as providing meaning and stability through regulative (rules, surveillance mechanisms), normative (expectations), and cultural-cognitive elements (shared conceptions) (see e.g. Scott 1995), the world culture approach focuses above all on the latter, on the reality-shaping power that derives from the cultural dimensions of global communication and transaction. From this view, human agency is no longer determined by merely functional requirements (such as a national economy's need of more school graduates), but it is tied to certain, at times powerful ideologies [called 'myths' in Meyer's and Ramirez' earlier works; see e.g. Meyer and Rowan (1977)], which are able to transcend local/national boundaries.

These early studies must be credited with having brought ideas back in, siding with largely social-constructivist understandings of the world (such as e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966) and attesting purely functionalist theories a lack of explanatory power. But to completely discard local agency due to its alleged failure to illuminate global processes means falling into the 'either-global-or-local' trap as outlined above. As much as actors' interests and goals are intertwined with globally travelling ideologies, so are these ideologies morphed by local agency

[cf. Robert Cowen's "moves and morphs"; Cowen (2009)]. Earlier works within neo-institutionalism were more sensitive towards these on-going processes of morphing. While presently the world culture approach focuses primarily on where and to which extent the diffusion of certain global models has been achieved, Strang and Meyer (1993), for instance, have delved deeper into the dynamics of diffusion and understood it as happening through theorisation (that is, through different ways of making sense of the world). They also argue that resonance and the involvement of key actors within the adopting society are important for the successful integration of a model, and conclude that

what flows is not a copy of some practice existing elsewhere. When theorists are the carriers of the practice or theorization itself is the diffusion mechanism, it is the theoretical model that is likely to flow. Such models are neither complete nor unbiased depictions of existing practices. Instead, actual practices are interpreted as partial, flawed, or corrupt implementations of theorized ones (Strang and Meyer 1993, 499).

Similarly, and more recently, W. Richard Scott (2003, 879) argues that the "carriers" of institutional elements are "not neutral vehicles, but mechanisms that significantly influence the nature of the elements they transmit and the reception they receive." Many present studies within the world culture approach seem peculiarly truncated in this regard since they do not explore these processes of theorisation and neglect the changes affected by them [with notable exceptions; see e.g. Hwang and Suarez (2005)]. And this is not the only truncation. The widely practiced dismissal of local agency within the world culture approach also reveals this theory's inconsequential commitment to social-constructivist perspectives: while subscribing to the constructedness of social reality, it denies the actors involved their own, particular,

constructions of social reality. That is, actors are seen as moving through a world of pre-fabricated constructed meanings while they themselves are not granted the property of partaking in these constructions. They have been degraded, as Meyer (2010, 9) so treacherously formulates in a more recent article, to performers of an "agentic actorhood", which is prescribed by "scriptwriting Others".

So-called Scandinavian neo-institutionalism has gone a different way (see e.g. Czarniawska and Sevón 2005, 1996). Drawing on, among others, Bruno Latour (1986), Czarniawska and her colleagues expand the concept of diffusion by the perspective of translation: "Each act of translation changes the translator and what is translated" (Czarniawska and Sevón 2005, 8). They point out the materiality of the translation process, as ideas need to be translated into words, institutions, and actions to be able to move in time and space. Others use 'editing' (Sahlin-Andersson 1996) or 'framing' (Snow and Benford 1992) to conceptualise these processes of adoption and transformation. Within this strand of work, researchers have also sought to break down the rather broad concept of 'isomorphism' in order to challenge the notion that what looks the same must automatically *be* the same. While some cases point to mimetic processes without the actors admitting to any borrowing (isopraxis) [also called 'silent borrowing' (Waldow 2009)], others represent diverging processes, which however are called the same name (isonymism) (see e.g. Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg 2005; Solli, Demediuk, and Sims 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Moving beyond the ominous "scriptwriting Others", scholars have also tried to identify and typologise model translators, diffusers, or carriers – not just out of curiosity, but because the identity and type of diffuser may tell us something about the nature of the diffusion process. Scott (2003) identifies four types of carrier systems<sup>2</sup> and then goes on to wonder whether these types correspond with different dynamics. For instance, translation or carrier systems that are

characterised by interpersonal or interorganisational relations (relational systems) are more easily associated with questions of power processes; systems that code and convey information (symbolic systems) lend themselves better to arguments of mimetic or learning mechanisms.

But why is there a demand for diffusion/translation in the first place? Where does the power of certain ideas come from, while others enjoy only short periods of popularity (if at all) and then sink into oblivion [e.g. the diffusion and dissolution of the system of monitorial schooling (Caruso 2010; Ressler 2010)]? Or, to ask the other way round: what has *not* become a global model to follow, and for what reason? Do blue-prints emerge out of the blue, or are they advanced through more systematic ways? The relevant literature provides different explanations for this question; however, most of them can be linked back to three (complementary) foci: temporality/locality, friction/pressures, and myths/legitimation.

### *Temporality/locality*

This first focus starts from the assumption that the selection, adoption, translation, and appropriation of models are no timeless and placeless phenomena but are intricately linked to both (perceived, construed) needs of adopters and a "time axis" of developments (Steiner-Khamsi 2012, this issue); 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 and Joerges 1996). Others have used the idea of discourse or "discourse coalitions" (Schriewer 2000a, 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 and Martinez 2004, 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" (*ibid.*, 702).

### *Friction/pressures*

When different layers of discourses, fashions, or orders come into contact and possibly conflict with each other, there is friction (or interruptions, from a system perspective). Lieberman sees politics as occurring in "multiple concurrent orders" (2002:702) 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" (*ibid.*, 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, xi). Like Lieberman, she emphasises the creative property of friction, which "reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (*ibid.*, 5). The concept of friction is also apt to capture the dialectic relationship between the local and the global, as discussed above: friction emerges where the global touches local ground – Tsing talks of "engaged universals" (*ibid.*, 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 (*ibid.*, 6).

While friction as I have discussed it so far is more concerned with how an organisation, group, society, or system processes and internalises external forces, this does not preclude that these more subliminal internalisation 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).

### *Myths/legitimation*

Ramirez (2012, this issue) 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 see myths as helping an organisation to look "appropriate, rational, and modern. Their use displays responsibility and avoids claims of negligence" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 344). By attributing to myths "[c]eremonial criteria of worth and ceremonially derived production functions" and by using terms like "labels" or "vocabulary" (*ibid.*, 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.

Roland Barthes develops the idea that myth is not just a concept, but a "system of communication" (2009 [1972], 131) or a "type of speech chosen by history" (*ibid.*, 132) and thus "open to appropriation by society" (*ibid.*, 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 (*ibid.*, 148; emphasis in original).

Barthes further observes that myths serve to naturalise historically specific decisions and preferences – they make "contingency appear eternal" (*ibid.*, 168) and hence depoliticise interaction (that is, detach beliefs from specific interests and goals). 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 analyse, and whether it has not failed to look at the re-politicisation of myths once they enter a different context. This becomes particularly salient when global myths are combined with a variety of local myths, thus growing into local semantic 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 operationalised. 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: in addition to noting which and how many countries have established human rights institutions (cf. Koo and Ramirez 2009), 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, 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 materialises. While the growing legitimacy of certain global scripts – such as mass schooling – 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 as the US import of 'academic freedom' to Singapore, where it became twisted to strengthen the hegemony of the state (Olds 2005)].<sup>3</sup> 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. 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, 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.<sup>4</sup> Approaches within the framework of multiple modernities (Schwinn 2006; Eisenstadt 1999) have also proved fruitful in comparative education (see e.g. Schriewer and Martinez 2004).

### **Global China: writing world culture**

If we are to believe DiMaggio and Powell (1983), institutional isomorphism – or educational borrowing in our case – is more likely to occur in times of uncertainty. The two time periods I have chosen here to showcase the local embedding of world culture(s) – China in the 1920s and since the 1990s – are strong candidates for isomorphism: in both periods, Chinese intellectuals, policy makers, and entrepreneurs were renegotiating China's paths into the future after breaking with imperial and Maoist politics and traditions, respectively. Both periods were also to a high degree global times and were populated by "cosmopolitans" in Ulf Hannerz' sense (1990): actors oriented towards the translocal context (that is, the nation or some global community).

China in the 1920s was witness to a period of accelerated modernisation. Following the Opium wars and the end of the monarchy, the young Republic (founded in 1912) increasingly forged political, economic, and ideational ties with the rest of the world (Schulte 2012). Likewise, contemporary China has sped up its pace of modernisation after its opening-up in the

1980s. Today, following the 'wild' 1990s when a sort of turbo-capitalism was unleashed, there is a more palpable comeback of the state to ensure 'social harmony', which has been made the slogan of the beginning 21st century.

Several indicators speak for the fact that China was, and is, firmly integrated into the global community during these two periods, both within the field of education and beyond. Firstly, both periods are marked by a high number of Chinese memberships in non-Chinese or international organisations [Schulte (2008); see also Boli and Thomas (1999) on international membership as indicator of global connectedness]. This interpersonal and interorganisational exchange was complemented, on the one hand, by individual and collective travels to and from China (Schulte 2011b); and, on the other, by tremendous numbers of international students (initially from China to other countries; increasingly now also from other countries to China) (Schulte 2007). Both periods are also characterised by a high interest in non-Chinese books and journals, resulting in extensive translation activity [on the role of translations, see e.g. Schulte (2012)]. Finally, both in the 1920s and at the end of the 1990s, the introduced curriculum reforms show clear traces of global influence (Schulte 2011a).

These periods of openness towards global ideas and models were accompanied by intense debates within the field of education. Facing a variety of different educational-*cum*-cultural models from abroad, the pendulum in the discussion shifted back and forth between elite and mass education, general and vocational education, education for society and for the individual's sake etc. Other countries were made use of as either models to follow or anti-models to abstain from (see e.g. Oelsner and Schulte 2006). And although educators and other actors in both periods were driven by the wish to modernise, many of them warned against blind westernisation [see e.g. Shu (1925) and Yang (1994); see also the discussion in Schulte (2004, 2011a)].

To relate these admittedly rough descriptions back to the three dimensions of diffusion/translation dynamics discussed above, educational borrowing in these two periods was morphed by temporality and locality, friction and pressures, and a very peculiar combination of myths. This led to multiple constructions of 'world culture' that were often at odds with each other.<sup>5</sup> They were construed by various groups, at various sites, and at various points in time, and gave Chinese globalisation processes very specific forms of purchase. Two instances of this purchase will be briefly discussed in the following: vocational education in Republican China; and neoliberalism's role in contemporary Chinese education.

#### *Purchase number one: vocational education*

When the idea of vocational education and training (VET) entered China towards the end of the 19th century, it seemed to revolutionise Chinese conceptions of education and work, brain and manual labour [for an extensive discussion, see Schulte (2008)].<sup>6</sup> The proclaimed aims of VET were to modernise the country: create modern workers, educate the people in modern technologies, and 'save country and people' by securing the people's livelihood. A great deal of external pressure was involved in this educational revolution: both foreign military aggression (first from the West, then Japan) and economic superiority seemed to indicate that the Chinese populace was only ill-equipped to meet the challenges of modernity. This was coupled with more endogenous friction within the Chinese society concerning ways of governing, allocating life chances etc. A more morally motivated aim of VET was to weed out the self-conceit of those with an academic education and upgrade manual labour.

Global culture, in these times of outward orientation, played a significant role for framing the ways in which Chinese actors reconceptualised education. Possibly disruptive views – in the eyes of traditionalists – such as education for democracy or child-centred learning, circulated widely in Chinese society. Vocational education was ambiguous in this regard. This made VET

particularly attractive to actors who were sceptical about the emancipatory side of modernisation. As Kaplan (2012) argues, spaces of ambiguity – maybe more so than perceived affinities – render borrowing more likely. He explains the indigenisation of global models by processes of "institutionalized erasures" where (invisible or unwanted) elements are eclipsed from the model.

The new value of the educated manual worker, originally part of the VET package, soon fell prey to such an erasure. Upon entry into China, VET engaged in a peculiar symbiosis with both contemporaneous and traditional notions of 'proper place' among Chinese intellectuals. Rather than replacing old-style education and its solely intellectual orientation, VET, in the end, served to cement the differences between academic and non-academic education. It was conceived to embody a new form of mass education: one that would not turn over an excess of useless graduates but integrate the masses successfully into the new economy. This was mixed with both socialising measures and traditional notions of peacefully knowing and settling in one's place (*anshen*). Even potentially individually tailored instruments, such as the US import of vocational guidance, were re-interpreted as a means to guide prospective workers away from careers that would not be beneficial to society [for a more detailed discussion, see Schulte (2013)]. Also manual work underwent a re-evaluation. The modern (and imported) notion of 'body work' was tied to older concepts of 'cultivating the body' (*xiushen*) and was legitimated by the belief that the individual was fulfilling an important function in a hierarchical chain that reached from the individual person to the peace of the world [see the classic of *The Great Learning* in Chan (1963)].

To sum up this brief excursion, 'world culture' presented itself to Chinese society in different disguises. It did not come as a unified package but offered itself in a range of (sometimes conflicting) modules that were selected by some and discarded by others. Above all, these modules did not come with prefabricated meanings. Expectedly, US models were more



often used by those whose aims were equality and democratisation, while e.g. German models looked attractive to propagators of educational segregation. However, these distinctions were by no means stable or clear-cut. US vocational schools for black students, for instance, looked interesting to activists who were seeking for solutions to store away the Chinese uneducated masses; Germany lent itself as an example of a country that was able to stand up against US American hegemony (cf. Shu 1928).

One might argue now that this was 'world culture' before World War II, when the world was still more diverse than it is today. Is globalisation today more unambiguous than it was nearly a century ago?

#### *Purchase number two: neoliberalism*

During China's tremendous transformations over the past few decades, the educational system underwent a process of decentralisation and deregulation (Mok, Wong, and Zhang 2009). Again, these processes were driven both by external and internal forces. Concomitantly, the idea of 'neoliberalism' found its way into Chinese debates on education. In the following, I will outline how neoliberalism functioned as a very specific – and quite unexpected – 'legitimizing myth' in the Chinese context.<sup>7</sup>

Two main factions can be made out in the discussion: the Marxist-orthodox and the 'equality' faction. The first faction claims that neoliberalism endangers the Marxist project and makes the nation sick; it is equated to religion (in its worst sense) and is made responsible for the chaos resulting from globalisation. It is also considered a part of the West's conspiracy against China [see e.g. the discussion in Xiao and Liu (2009) and Zheng (2007)]. In the educational field, critics point to the fact that the liberalisation of the educational market favours elite education over mass education, and has generally led to greater inequality (e. g. Li 2006).

This criticism is commonly found both in Chinese public opinion and in Western critiques of neoliberal practices in education. Neoliberalism serves here as a classical anti-myth.

The 'equality' faction moves the argument the opposite way and interprets neoliberalism as a welcome ideology and instrument against the bifurcation of education into elite and mass education. This perspective sees elite education (as embodied in so-called 'key schools') as necessary evil in socialist times of scarce resources. Since the country needed experts, to privilege elite schools at the expense of mass education meant to serve the public interest in the long run. However, in neoliberal China of today, this privilege has to go according to the 'equality' faction, since neoliberalism is seen as being based on the provision of equal (educational) opportunities. Hence, the conclusion of this faction is that there can be no elite schools under neoliberalism. From this perspective, 'neoliberalism' is understood as an ideology that has an empowering effect on the individual in that everybody is entitled to "develop his life", "enlighten his wisdom", and "search for happiness" (Zhu 2009, 28). It is thus a shift of focus from collective, institution-oriented decision making to personal, individual-based life designs (often resumed under the term 'pluralisation'). Besides, neoliberalism is used as an instrument to criticise arbitrary, uninformed or politically motivated, decisions in the educational sector – "negative intervention" as one author calls it (Ma 2008).

Thus, at the same time as local actors are coming to terms with 'Western' notions of neoliberalism, very specific usages of this concept arise from the friction between representatives of old socialist legacies on one side and propagators of 'limited government' on the other. For the latter, neoliberalism lends itself as a welcome weapon to critique out-dated legacies; it has been morphed into an antidote to blind, ideologised government intervention. As Andrew Kipnis observes with regard to Chinese sensitivities, "what is needed is not a critique of neoliberalism but a neoliberal critique" (2008, 277). Conversely, techniques like output control,

which Western observers tend to associate with neoliberal techniques, are seen as part of a Socialist audit culture, which is to ensure that local units prove themselves responsive to central targets. Hence, on the one hand, similar technologies can serve very different ideologies, resulting in a specific form of isopraxis. On the other, the Chinese usage of 'neoliberalism' is an intriguing example of isonymism: while sharing the same name, the corresponding images and values differ greatly. Seldom do these propagators of 'neoliberalism as limited government' call for a whole-sale marketisation of education. Rather, the neoliberal project for them constitutes the promise to overcome partisan politics.

### **Conclusion: the global lies in the eyes of the beholder**

Each of the attempts outlined above to embark on new projects and jettison established truths meant transgressing a frontier. What to the outside observer may look like a "cut-and-paste process" (Meyer and Ramirez 2000, 128) meant pioneering work with unknown outcomes to the inside actors. They set foot in "a zone of not yet – not yet mapped, not yet regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned" (Tsing 2005, 29). Andrea Mennicken (2008, 388) argues that it is "at the peripheries of capitalism that new spaces for globalisation are delineated". In these spaces, world culture is written as much as it is read; this writing contains a creative or even wild aspect of what is termed 'diffusion'. Exceptions to the 'rule' accumulate to the extent that the rules change: e.g. 'education for all' is modified into 'education for all who are educable'; or 'human rights' are changed into the 'human right to subsistence' (both 'translations' hold true for the Chinese case).

Maybe the main problem with the world culture approach is that it has too orderly an appearance – to borrow Lieberman's critical words about much of political theory, it provides "a coherent, total vision of politics that informs institutions and ideas and knits them together into a

unified whole", while one should rather see the "multiple, discordant forces" upon actors who are offered "contradictory and multidirectional imperatives and opportunities" (2002, 702). Such a perspective is only possible if one keeps in sight both the encoding and decoding contexts of world culture myths, and the dynamics of how these two contexts engage with each other.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In their earlier writings, Meyer and Rowan (1977, 350) were much more lenient towards deviant behaviour on the side of the implementers. Not without irony, they remark that "[a]ffixing the right labels to activities can change them into valuable services and mobilize the commitments of internal participants and external constituents."

<sup>2</sup> These are symbolic systems (in which meaningful information is coded and conveyed), relational systems (e.g. interpersonal or interorganisational linkages), routines (habitualised behaviour), and artefacts (material culture). Examples of analyses of relational systems in educational transfer can be found in Roldán Vera and Schupp (2005) and Schulte (2011b).

<sup>3</sup> Compare also the recent plan to construct a women-only city in Saudi-Arabia to enable Saudi women to live 'normal' modern working lives (Davies 2012).

<sup>4</sup> These are the European gate of revolution or reform (endogenous change); the New Worlds of the Americas (transcontinental migration and genocide, independence); imposed or externally induced modernisation in Asia (external threat, selective imports); conquest, subjection and appropriation in Africa; and combinations of these different types.

<sup>5</sup> DiMaggio and Powell (1983) note that the existence of alternative models at least slows down the rate of isomorphism. Of course the term 'slow down' presupposes that the eventual outcome is isomorphism.

<sup>6</sup> Due to space constraints, I will not provide the primary sources for each of the arguments discussed below. However, I refer to my other publications throughout this section where these and other arguments are scrutinised in greater detail.

<sup>7</sup> A detailed elaboration of the enactment of this myth is presently in progress under the title 'Domesticating Global Desires: Private Schools in Urban China'. It is part of a research project funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond in Sweden.

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