Identity grafting for educational change in chinese school systems

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Abstract

This paper introduces and summarizes the articles in this Special Issue of the *Journal of Educational Change* on “Identity Grafting: Teacher and School Development in Chinese School Systems.” (Lee, Managing Chineseness: Identity and ethnic management in Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2017). It begins with Fengqiao Yan’s key thoughts and alternative views on the modernization of China’s academic system. Next, it surveys Fei Yan et al.’s study, which examines Beijing teachers’ and students’ responses toward the recent history textbook reforms in mainland China to instill the *Core Socialist Values* of the Chinese Communist Party. Third, it examines Wing On Lee and Ji Qi’s study, which maps the identity journeys of migrant Chinese communities in Beijing. Fourth, it summarizes Koon Lin Wong et al.’s study, which revisits the dilemma Hong Kong teachers face because of the obligation to implement the national education agenda. Fifth, it extends insights from Maxwell Ho and Daphnee Lee’s study of student behaviors in financial literacy education to understand the underpinning identity influences of the recent waves of student protests in Hong Kong. Sixth, the paper introduces Daphnee Lee’s study of the group dynamics of Singaporean Chinese teachers who engage in professional learning communities to achieve change, and the cultural identity processes that explain why some teams of teachers resist educational change, while other teams of teachers can come to embrace it.

Keywords Chinese school systems · China · Hong kong · Singapore · Identity grafting

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Introduction

Chinese cities have proven to the world that their students can outperform in international benchmark assessments organized by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2019). Using Chinese school systems (e.g., Shanghai, Singapore) as exemplars, opinion leaders of international benchmarks have been urging school systems in the world to do as the United States is doing to “surpass Shanghai” (Tucker 2011). These propositions have triggered a variety of animated debates on whether the results of international benchmarks should be taken at face value or whether there are alternative ways to interpret these results (e.g., Sahlberg 2011; Shirley 2017; Zhao 2020).

The term “Chinese school systems” in this special issue refers to places where Chinese national or cultural identity underpins how schools engage in education. State agencies in Chinese school systems have been lauded for their prominent roles in leading reforms to improve schools (Sato 2017; Tucker 2011, 2019). When current conceptualizations of Chinese school systems rely on information largely provided by state agencies in the locale, it is no surprise that opinion leaders of international benchmarks call for intensifying state control and using standardized benchmarks to assess whether school leaders and practitioners are accountable for student learning (Cheng 2011; Ng 2010; Tucker 2011). However, there is also the rising concern on the absence of a theoretical understanding of educational change to develop a meaningful understanding of the impact of externally imposed reforms on the identities of school leaders, teachers, and students (Hargreaves and Shirley 2012; Shirley 2017).

Theory provides tools that build upon complex and detailed empirical inquiry, transforming concrete research insights into abstract ideas. Dennis Shirley (2017), for example, developed a theory of educational change on the new imperatives to be embodied in school reforms that empower school leaders, teachers and students. However, there is yet a theory of educational change on intercultural policy borrowing, which poses serious issues for Chinese school systems.

Chinese school systems borrow significantly from school systems in the Nordic nations (Lee, Hong and Niemi 2014), the United Kingdom, and the United States (Lee and Lee 2013) to develop educational policy and reforms. This pattern is replicated in educational scholarship. A review of the current literature in East Asia raises concern about the lack of contributions to theory building in the region (Bryant, Walker and Qian 2017). In East Asia, approximately 20 percent of research publications are theory oriented, but these generally draw on Western theories, and the remaining non-theoretical publications were empirical papers that prescribe exemplary professional practices to practitioners so they can fulfill state-led agenda (Bryant et al. 2017).

With the lack of theoretical attention on policy borrowing for educational change, we cannot ascertain if the prescriptions for good reform practices are addressing the issues highlighted by empirical studies in Chinese school systems concisely and precisely. This is especially problematic with the lack of attention given to the need for developing an intercultural theoretical lens in understanding

the effects of borrowing policies from different contexts. Therefore, a widespread assumption develops across Chinese school systems that Western inspired reforms are not feasible because of their poor fit with Chinese culture (Halse 2018). When these beliefs become pervasive among teachers, reforms will fail to realize in classrooms (Li, Rao and Tse 2012). We need a more concise and precise set of thinking tools that address policy borrowing for educational change in Non-Western school systems that engage in policy borrowing from the West.

Although Non-Western school systems that are inspired by Western pedagogical innovations are not exclusively Chinese, a theoretical understanding of the influence of Chinese cultural identity on educational change is critical for a thorough understanding of the paradoxes of policy borrowing. Reforms in Chinese school systems borrowed proactively and benefited from Western inspired reforms, yet reformers also express concerns about the insemination of Western cultural influences (Baildon and Alviar-Martin 2020). This paradoxical yet seemingly workable strategy to improving schools puts Chinese school systems on the watchlist for policy borrowing and excellent sites for a theoretically informed study of how cultural gaps are bridged as reforms adapt to and are transformed by the local context (Hargreaves and Shirley 2012; Lee 2017; Steiner-Khamisi 2014).

An introduction to the contributors to this special issue

Contributors to this special issue comprise scholars of teacher and school development who share a conviction to support contemporary efforts in theory building on the cultural identity influences that underpin educational change. Previous scholarly efforts had theorized about the influence of traditional Confucian culture on Chinese learners (Tu 2001; Watkins and Biggs 1996; Zhao 2018). However, as Chinese school systems also draw inspiration from Western reforms and are evolving (De López 2018), we need contemporary theories about educational change in Chinese school systems. The contributors to this special issue employ a new theory, that of *identity grafting* (Lee 2017), to raise fundamental questions about what Chinese school systems in mainland China and Hong Kong. An additional case of Singapore is also included, although it has more multicultural features than the other settings.

Identity grafting occurs in intercultural encounters people experience as they respond to change. The theory is built on empirical investigation of the confluence of Chinese and Western values arising from Chinese societies borrowing policies. When encountering new and unfamiliar identities, people graft onto their practices their responses to the cultural identities of the source from which reformers borrow policies to achieve educational change. Identity grafting theory offers theoretical precision to thinking about transformations in people's cultural identity as they respond to change buttressed by intercultural policy borrowing for improving education:

1. *Identity repression*: People repress their identities when they are convinced that change is needed, but rather than focusing on embracing new cultural identities to support change, they tend to repress their traditional identity.
2. *Born-again identity*: Rejecting or reversing change initiatives with traditional identities by perpetuating views that external cultural influences fracture the unity among cultural insiders.
3. *Identity integration*: Combining traditional and change identities in recognizable forms, so change makers retain their traditional identity. However, new identities are seen as opposed or paradoxical to traditional identities.
4. *Identity situationalism*: Constructing a new identity that adapts to the demands change makers experience, so identities transform with reform.

In this Introduction, I provide an overview of how the contributors' papers inter-relate to each other. I then highlight empirical data presented in the contributors' papers to provide illustrations of how they employ identity grafting as a set of tools to explain the current issues of Chinese school systems. This introduction concludes with a discussion of the relevance of identity grafting to other regions in the world.

Mainland China

The first contributor, Fengqiao Yan, employs identity grafting to analyze contributions to Chinese academic modernization by affiliated scholars of Peking University who draw inspiration from Western academic paradigms. His excellent case example of identity repression in Chinese academic history is a substantial contribution to the field. The *Hundred Days' Reform* (*Weixin Bienfa* / 维新变法; 11 June–22 September 1898) was introduced after the Opium War (1839–1860) to modernize Chinese academic institutions with Western institutional practices. It lasted only a hundred days because reformers focused on dismantling China's traditional academic system alone, rather than on concurrently adapting some Western cultural values to modernize Chinese academies.

Detrimental forms of policy borrowing in Chinese academic history tell us that with identity repression, today's issues with reform failure are not because ideas that work elsewhere are irrelevant to Chinese contexts. Instead, reformers overstate cultural differences and see the need for change as a sign that there are issues with their own cultural identity. It is this displaced focus on the problems of cultural differences that results in failure in intercultural policy borrowing. In Steiner-Khamsi's (2014, p. 163) words, "(in the minds of policy makers) Finland is too monocultural, Shanghai too urban, and Singapore relies too much on private tutoring to be relevant for lesson drawing." Even in Hong Kong today, research shows that teachers miss opportunities to improve student learning, persisting to assume that their students lack confidence in front of people of authority because of Chinese cultural values (Frambach et al. 2014). Teachers may be wrongly placing their focus on correcting perceived issues with traditional cultural values, for example, by not correcting students' mistakes when needed, because they fear that such interventions will further hurt students' confidence.

Contributors Fei Yan, Zhou Zhong, Haoning Wang, and Qiao Wen next examine Chinese Communist Party efforts in bolstering students' confidence in their national identity through a national textbook revision campaign to enhance students' Core Socialist Values. Based on interviews with teachers and students in sampled primary and middle schools in Beijing, these authors study textbook reforms designed to consolidate students' identity and values. The authors find that the ideological content of reformed textbooks strengthened significantly compared with the soft moral education of mainland Chinese history curriculum before 2012. The authors are concerned about the discomfort raised by some students over the repression of Chinese identities that deviate from Chinese Communist Party discourse with these revisions. Concurrently, the shifting emphasis has important implications for increased born-again Chineseness, which manifests as aggressive nationalism and anti-Western sentiments among China's younger generation. Students who believe that China will suffer the same fate as the war-torn Middle East converged in views that dehumanize Westerners and augment the importance of preventing Western value systems (e.g., democracy) from infiltrating China.

Yan et. al.'s work highlights that people may choose to defend identities that may or may not be truly traditional to the context. For example, Lee (2011, pp. 340–341) observes that born-again sentiments in Chinese school systems emerge with fuzzy references to Confucian culture in the “East–West divide in teaching and learning”. These references overshadow the diversity of traditional practices that may vary across Chinese school systems, such as in the medium of instruction for each locality (e.g., Cantonese in Hong Kong, Mandarin in Shenzhen, English in Singapore).

China had students from both rural and urban provinces (i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang) participating in PISA and once again topped the world rankings even though there was some slippage in results (OECD 2019). Wing On Lee and Ji Qi gives a deeper examination of the impression that mainland Chinese nationals are achieving educational excellence at an equivalent pace through interviews with rural Chinese immigrants residing in Beijing. Their student participants reported that rural Chinese immigrants continue to occupy marginalized positions in urban Beijing. These students repress their rural identities to pass off as Beijing residents, bringing up their rural origins only when engaging in help-seeking behaviors with their teachers.

Li and Qi propose that teachers can play an important role in helping these students develop identity situationalism. That is, a new identity based on the students' experiences (e.g., rural–urban migration), instead of whether they are rural people or city dwellers. What research reveals about the everyday experiences of students tells a different aspect about rural–urban inequality from the international benchmarks. The authors work highlights the need for us to consider future directions for teacher development in China. A “mass production model” has “exceptionally high rate of educational wastage” because “what is being discarded are young people.” (Tucker 2011, p. 207)—students are sacrificed when they do not fit with the expectations of a standardized curriculum. Teachers need to be put in a stronger position to support the diverse learning needs of “Chinese learners.”

Hong Kong special administrative region (SAR)

At the time of the handover of the Hong Kong's sovereignty from Britain to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government introduced education reforms to equip students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Che 2002). However, strategic moves by the Chinese Communist Party in the implementation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, hint toward plans for early reintegration of Hong Kong with mainland China and a premature end to Hong Kong's SAR status. Citing the 2019 student protests, state agencies hold teachers accountable for encouraging critical thinking among students in ways that stoked them into engaging in violent acts. Through China's state endorsed media Xinhua, Beijing has expressed its displeasure about Hong Kong's "failure to decolonize" (Murdoch 2020).

With the possible return of national education agendas on the horizon, Koon Lin Wong, Helen Haste, Chi Kin John Lee, Kerry John Kennedy, and Kin Sang Jacqueline Chan revisit with a mixed methods study the identity dilemmas Hong Kong teachers have in their obligation to implement an unwelcome national education agenda—the *Guide to Moral and National Education* (MNE) issued by the Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong (2012). Teachers in Wong et al.'s study express concern over parents' reactions to the national education curriculum. Wong et al. refer to the escalation of born-again Chineseness among many Hong Kong citizens (Fung and Chan 2017; Leung 2003). That is, with the rising awareness of the ideological rifts on notions of citizenship rights and obligations between Hong Kong citizens and the Chinese state governments, people are increasingly developing a resistance against mainland Chinese influence over their Chinese identities. This underpins some parents' objections to what they consider the "brainwashing" of their children by the Chinese Communist Party (Law 2019, p. 78).

National education proponents seek to eliminate Hong Kong's British colonial past because it is perceived as a barrier that prevents Hong Kong citizens from developing loyalty to China (Tai 2018). However, the state-led maneuvers to neutralize Western influences with Asian Values with national education in Singapore (Alviar-Martin and Baidon 2016) and in Hong Kong seem to augment impressions of the differences between Chinese cultural identities in mainland China and the two ex-British colonies. The implications manifest in language instruction and language instruction education. With the introduction of Mandarin as language of the Chinese, Singaporeans' preference for the English language became reaffirmed and Hong Kong citizens' Cantonese identity became a marker of local solidarity (Lee 2020).

When we get closer to a controversial issue, the risks involved in expressing frank opinions may trigger research participants' self-censorship. In a politically sensitive climate, a further probe into the controversies entangled within a changing educational landscape in Hong Kong may be complemented by seeking insights drawn from seemingly unrelated domains. Maxwell Ho and Daphnee Lee take stock of financial literacy education, a product of reforms designed by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. The authors seek to understand the influence of traditional Chinese values on student identities, such as obeying

authoritative figures, on their performance in various aspects of financial literacy. Ho and Lee found that Chinese learners who can integrate progressive and traditional identities not only perform better in financial knowledge, but also demonstrate ability to engage in good spending behavior. These students are less likely to uncritically accept instructions from authoritative figures (e.g., teachers) and are conscientious in learning both knowledge and practical aspects of financial literacy.

The findings imply that it is the effective integration of traditional and progressive influences, such as combining conscientiousness in learning and thinking critically about teachers' teaching, which supports effective student learning. Ho and Lee's study enables us to assess claims that equipping students with critical thinking skills triggered the "defiance" demonstrated by Hong Kong youths in 2019. I share Ho and Lee's concern over the Hong Kong Government's deliberation over terminating the offering of the subject of Liberal Studies. Extending from the authors' concern, I am skeptical about the assumption that progressive cultural influences promoted in the subject, such as encouraging critical thinking, are responsible for misleading youth, promoting violence, and encouraging lawlessness among Hong Kong students (Xinhua news agency, cited in Murdoch 2020).

Singapore

The Chinese and Hong Kong Governments often refer to the "Singapore model" to borrow policy because they believe that Western inspired reforms that work in a Chinese context will be more likely to likewise succeed in their own contexts (Lim and Horesh 2016). Daphnee Lee examines via an observational case study how policy borrowing from Western educational movements transforms the cultural identities of school leaders, teachers, and students when teachers engage professional learning communities to introduce pedagogical change at schools. She highlights the types of collaborative processes that promote and inhibit teacher identity formation towards progressive educational change. Lee illustrates teachers' eventual awakening to their commitment to champion for social justice in their classrooms when discussing critical incidents arising in the classroom with colleagues that possess diverse pedagogical values.

Lee's provides a case exception to Castells's (2011) series of works on global change in contemporary societies. Castells states that while social movements in Latin America have had demonstrable success in transcending national and cultural boundaries (Castells 2011), change in Chinese contexts remains dominated by national and cultural agendas orchestrated by the state (Castells 2010). In *Managing Chineseness* (Lee 2017), I posit that people's efforts to achieve identity situationalism are constrained by the dominance of dual hegemonic discourse in the Chinese context. That is, the obligation of people that have a Chinese identity to maintain the boundaries between Chinese and Western identities, and to pledge their unconditional support for Chinese hegemony, prevents

them from connecting with and taking ownership of global change. In an exceptional case, Daphnee Lee shows that when teachers take ownership of change with their commitment to social justice, they empower themselves to conceive and realize change by taking the cue from their students instead of solely from state prescriptions.

Identity grafting: A view of global educational change

Although this special issue is about Chinese school systems, readers are invited to see the relevance of educational change experiences raised here to other school systems and contexts in the world. Education researchers (Harper 2020; Koh et al. 2020; Osler and Stokke 2020) are citing video recordings of the disproportionate use of force by the police to suppress social protests in both Hong Kong SAR and in the United States as issues that require the attention of educators. As society polarizes over whether state agencies have the legitimacy to enforce an disproportionate use of force to quell disagreement, teachers will need to reconcile the dilemmas that penetrate their classrooms--should students still be taught to appraise controversial issues critically, or should they now be prevented from knowing controversial issues? Education, educational change, and education research are instrumental to empowering teachers to address these dilemmas, wherever they occur, so students can learn without fear of having their own opinions:

Imagine how much easier it would be to teach students if they never raised impertinent questions, and if you could rely on your government to imprison them if they persisted! The blindness to the suppression of not only student voice, but that of their educators as well, represents a failure to uphold human rights. (Shirley 2017, p. 21).

Problems with student learning emerge out of teachers being prevented from cultivating diverse teacher identities to support students with diverse learning needs. When teachers are expected to teach the curriculum content and ensure they do not cross the boundary into politics, they focus on toeing the line instead of on the students. When students do not go to teachers because they worry it may overload their already stressed teachers, they resort to other sources of support and become more vulnerable to expressing their opinions in destructive ways. We need to look into the real issues that are more deeply entrenched in the broader context of education in which teachers are situated instead of just putting teachers on the firing line.

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