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Diluting, decoupling, and dovetailing: Considering new metaphors for understanding the changing international school landscape in China

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Abstract

A major development in recent years concerning the growth of 'private English-speaking international schooling' has been the transition from a 'traditional' mode of activity towards a 'non-traditional' context. This is especially the case in Asia, where the majority of international schools now reside. Moreover, we find that in Mainland China two-thirds of the (approximately) 900 schools that might be thought of as international schools are now perhaps better classified as 'international*ised* schools', catering largely for Chinese nationals and being taught by a largely local teaching force whilst delivering a fusion of international and national curricula in a profit-driven paradigm. A major challenge is to picture and theorise this changing, and increasingly very different, landscape. This paper offers a new imagery for discussion by using metaphor. Building upon the conflicting 'diluting' and 'decoupling' metaphors that have been recently introduced in the international schooling literature, we present here a conciliatory new imagery: that of 'dovetailing'. This alternative, third metaphor suggests that the changing landscape of international schooling in places including mainland China involves models of private bilingual international schooling that are pragmatically 'dovetailed' with national forms of schooling, fusing cosmopolitan sensitivities with the nationalist needs of the state. This metaphor is now ready to be developed and adapted in China and beyond.

Keywords

International schooling, China, internationalised schooling, metaphor

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Introduction

A major development in the growth of 'English-speaking international schooling', involving schools delivering a curriculum in English outside of an English-speaking nation, has been the emergence in areas, including Mainland China, of a 'non-traditional' type of international school (Hayden and Thompson, 2013). This activity, involving the delivery in English of a non-national curriculum largely to a majority body of 'local' children and involving quite often branded networks of schools offering a selection of curriculum provision, began to appear in the mid-1990s just as the international school arena was beginning to attract scholarly attention. In fact, shortly after seminal comment was being made that 'evolution of the concept [of international education] is . . . at a relatively early stage' (Hayden and Thompson, 1995: 327), in 1997 the first branded and franchised offshoot of England's Dulwich College appeared in Phuket, Thailand (Russell, 1998). A decade later, there were definite signs of a significant shift away from the 'traditional' international school model, with the majority of children attending international schools worldwide then being 'local' rather than, as had previously been the case, expatriate (Dolby and Rahman, 2008, 690), traditionally, international schools having been seen as catering for 'globally mobile professional people whose children accompany them to a variety of postings worldwide' (Hayden et al, 2000: 107).

Within this shifting scene, away from a previously hegemonic 'traditional' landscape towards a 'non-traditional' one, the overall number of 'international schools' had hit approximately 6,000 in January 2012, and had reached about 11,000 by 2019 (Speck, 2019). By 2019 it was very clear the 'non-traditional' arena had easily overtaken in size the 'traditional' (Hayden and Thompson, 2013) type of activity, with non-traditional schools delivering a pragmatic and partly-ideological schooling experience to a transnational elite (Cambridge and Thompson, 2004).

Much of the 'non-traditional' development is driven at a demand-side level by a newer middle class (perhaps constituting a 'global middle class') (Bunnell, 2019) and at a supply-side level by national policy-making (perhaps constituting a form of 'stealth marketisation': Kim and Mobrand, 2019). Together, this presents a strong platform for potential further growth, especially in Asia (Machin, 2017), and commentators (pre-Covid) were widely predicting an arena of around 16,000 schools by 2026 (Gaskell, 2017).

The growing 'non-traditional' sphere of international schools stands ripe for theorisation, especially as it involves a newer body of clients (parents, national agencies and investors). In addition, it continues to involve many expatriate educators (still largely emanating from the UK and North America), alongside a growing body of locally-trained teachers. This paper offers an original approach to begin picturing this changing landscape. By exploring three metaphors of schooling ('diluting', 'decoupling' and 'dovetailing'), we aim to conceptualise the diversity of provision that is beginning to appear, certainly in Mainland China, where many of the nearly 100 franchised branches of elite private English schools ('satellite colleges': Bunnell et al, 2020) are expected to appear by 2023 (Quinn, 2021a).

There are already 46 of these 'non-traditional' private English school offshoots in China (Henshaw, 2019) and it is worth describing them in more detail to provide a flavour of the new landscape. Flyn (2010) reported how Wellington College had created 'an offshoot in Tianjin, China, in the image of the Berkshire school'. It was described by Flyn (2010) as a 'clone', designed in the same French rococo style as the founding college in Berkshire, England, complete with Wellington College's 'house system, prep and games' (Flyn, 2010). A spokesperson for Wellington College was quoted as saying 'it is as if Wellington College rises again in urban China.' Clark (2013), meanwhile, described how Harrow School has 'cloned itself in Beijing, complete with boaters', while it was reported (Edinburgh Evening News, 2018) that Edinburgh's prestigious Fettes College was planning to open a 'replica' school in Guangzhou, China, with the exact same grounds, buildings and house system. Intriguingly, Haileybury has an offshoot near Beijing

(Merchant, 2016) with two turrets that replicate the entrance to Eton College, revealing the occurrence of a strange trend of 'cross-replicating'.

In this regard, our paper is a timely rejoinder to Bunnell's (2020) comment about how the 'traditional' international school model is being suddenly 'diluted', and Poole's (2020) immediate response which aired the view that the changes represented more of a 'decoupling'. In this regard, the newer 'non-traditional' types of international school, such as the aforementioned British-type schools as well as the larger yet more discrete and lesser-reported bloc of so-called 'Chinese Internationalised Schools' (CIS) (Poole, 2021) which offer some form of international curriculum to a largely middle-class Chinese clientele, need to be 'decoupled' from normative and traditional (Western-centric) constructions of the 'international school' and seen in their own light as different yet equally valid models, representing an extension to rather than an intrusion into the field.

The alternative 'decoupling' argument (Poole, 2020) says that in particular the CIS, numbering approximately 700 (Keeling, 2019), should be judged on their own terms, not as an inferior variant of international schools catering for expatriate children, but as a different, high-quality version with an approach to education that is perhaps more 'globalist' (Cambridge and Thompson, 2004) but nevertheless just as valid as the 'internationalist' type. We see the moniker 'internationalised' as more appropriate than 'international' for understanding internationalised schools on their own terms, and hypothesise that such schools may also be found in other settings such as Malaysia, where Bailey's (2015a, 2015b) case study, for instance, implied there exists the 'Malaysian Internationalised School' catering largely for the host-nation clientele.

We therefore see the internationalised model also appearing in other settings outside China, which raises its importance further. Yemini and Furstenburg (2018: 716), for example, describe 'an international school following International Baccalaureate (IB) curricula with an inclination towards peace education that caters to Israeli students', whilst Beech et al (2021) refer to another school in Israel catering for children of parents seeking to accumulate 'cosmopolitan start-up capital'. Sancho (2016: 478), meanwhile, describes how in India a 'new class' is buying into 'private English-speaking international schools', especially in 'second tier cities' where such schools offer 'a new arena for the wealthiest to reinstate their class privileges and distinguish themselves from the expanding middle classes'. The emergence and importance of the CIS and non-traditional international schooling in China has recently started to garner much academic interest (see, eg, Poole, 2021; Probert, 2022; Wright and Mulvey, 2022; Wright et al, 2022; Wu and Koh, 2022a), and presents an interesting contemporary line of academic inquiry.

These changes call for new metaphors to acknowledge the 'reality' of the changing situation on the ground. Consequently, we offer a set of new metaphors to help understand, describe and conceptualise the changing landscape. In doing so, our paper revisits and substantially (re)develops Poole's (2020) 'decoupling thesis' by considering that what we are witnessing in China is the emergence of a new 'private English international schooling' landscape that seems to 'dovetail' with the national, offering a pragmatic and politically expedient model of international education, which is a fusion of (nationally-led) supply and (consumer-led) demand. We offer this new framework so that the changing landscape can be further discussed, investigated, and theorised. This seems especially important when we consider that the growing international school arena requires an extra (approximately) 35,000 new educators each year, many of whom continue to be from the UK and North America, and many of whom will be entering this new landscape. Next, we discuss this changing landscape in China in more detail.

A changing landscape

At the turn of the millennium, Mainland China had 22 international schools educating around 7,300 children (Sharma, 2016). This grew to 144 schools by 2007, and had reached 260 schools

educating approximately 120,000 children by 2010 (Brummitt and Keeling, 2013: 30). By that time, reports had emerged (Brummitt, 2007: 38) of China needing 3,000 international schools by 2016. In fact, by that year (Gaskell, 2016) it was being widely reported that China, with about 700, had the most international schools of any nation globally (although the United Arab Emirates, and Dubai in particular, had the most students in attendance). [It should be noted that much of the data available relating to the international school sector emanates from ISC Research]. In 2019, Holmes reported that there were 169 international schools in Shanghai, and 142 in Beijing, plus a further 55 in Shenzhen, 47 in Guangzhou, and 25 in Chengdu. Westminster School alone plans to have six branches in China by 2028, beginning in Chengdu (Nan, 2019), whilst the 11 cities around the Pearl River Delta (including Guangzhou and Shenzhen) look set for the largest future growth (Moon, 2020).

Of the 12,000 international schools worldwide by late 2019 (Morrison, 2019), China had 857 educating around 372,000 children, of whom 57% were 'local' children (Morrison, 2019); it seems likely that by 2021 the number of schools had hit 1,000. Of course, many are of the 'traditional' type, many of which offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) for mainly expatriate families wishing to attend elite Western-based universities, as identified by Wright and Lee (2014) in Hong Kong. However, about two-thirds are of the CIS type (Keeling, 2019), which also offers the IBDP. Most could be described as 'International Chinese Private Bilingual Schools' (Gaskell, 2019) and have also been termed 'Non-Exclusive International Schools' (Young, 2018). The inclusion of the term 'bilingual' reveals their emergent pragmatic nature, whilst 'non-exclusive' implies they are often an option for children who have had to leave the private Chinese sector (ie they are often not the first preference for parents).

The CIS, growing at a rate of 14% per year (Keeling, 2019), came to be widely recognised about a decade ago, when it was noted (Robinson and Guan, 2012) that a growing body of newer private, profit-driven schools had appeared, delivering a fusion of national (Chinese) and international curricula, such as the IBDP or the English Advanced Level (A Level) from grade 10 to grade 12. At the same time, Savva (2013: 13) was describing a school in China where most 'students were culturally and ethnically Chinese, despite being Anglophone passport holders' and which 'followed the national curriculum of England up until the final 2 years of secondary school, at which point it offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme.'

Characterised by the coexistence of national and international orientations and operated in partnership with Chinese business, CIS are generally staffed both by local Chinese hires (representing 60% of the school's staff, according to Gaskell, 2019) and a minority expatriate teaching staff (representing about 40%). This is clearly very different from the 'traditional' type of international school where the British and North American-trained educators have tended to dominate the market (Canterford, 2003). The '60-40' split towards a majority of non-expatriates neatly concurs with Bailey's (2015a: 6) case study school in Malaysia where the 'non-traditional' setting saw the recruitment of overseas teachers capped at 40%, whilst the majority of the expatriate teachers were from the UK, South Africa, and Australia (but not North America). It should be noted that the ratio of local to non-local teachers in China may be more variable than literature suggests, due to differences between regions and school types and, more generally, the impact of Covid-19. Despite this, the trend towards employing local teachers in Chinese Internationalised Schools (Gaskell, 2019) is notable and calls for new concepts/metaphors for understanding the industry from the 'local' perspective.

Evidence is also emerging (Kong et al, 2022) of a high degree of segregation of CIS from the local community, and other Chinese schools. At the same time, it is clear that tensions are appearing in CIS bilingual settings where 'Western' ways of teaching appear to be privileged in schools, at the expense of lessons taught in Mandarin (Zhang and Heydon, 2016). Overall, we need to know more about the administration of CIS. Although it is known (Young, 2018) that they can exercise a degree

of autonomy, especially after Grade 9, and have more flexibility in administration than other public or private schools that cater for Chinese citizens, they are ultimately answerable to a Chinese city's local educational bureau and must comply with the same government regulations as national schools, including the delivery of 'patriotic education'. Delivering patriotic education involves, amongst other things, observing symbolic daily routines that reinforce the 12 Chinese 'core socialist values' (which are observed and displayed around the school), displaying the Chinese flag in every classroom, and raising the Chinese flag and singing the national anthem during weekly assemblies. This strong 'regulative pillar', coupled with a very China-oriented 'normative pillar' with its own activities and rituals (Bunnell et al, 2017), arguably makes the CIS a distinct type of institution, and differentiates (or 'decouples') it from 'traditional' types where the 'regulative pillar' is more strongly enforced through accreditation by external agencies, and IB authorisation. A newer form of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' (Wright et al, 2022) is thus being identified in practice.

Since the publication of Poole's 2020 paper, a number of studies in quick succession have emerged to suggest the emergent landscape in China is considerably more diverse and complex than first envisioned. See, for instance, Assa-Inbar (2021), Bunnell and Poole (2021), Cao (2022), Kostogriz et al (2022), Poole (2021), Poole and Bunnell (2022), Wu and Koh (2022a, 2022b), Wright et al (2022), Ying and Wright (2021). For instance, Wu and Koh (2022a) identify three types of 'internationalised school' in China: American-style, often offering American curricula; British-style, often branded and quasi-replicas of well-known English private schools; and Canadian-style, often accredited by Canadian provinces whilst many operate within a large network (eg Maple Leaf). These relatively new types reflect a new breed of 'non-traditional' schooling, implanted from overseas in order to meet agglomerated patterns of local demand (Kong et al, 2022). At the same time, Young (2018) suggests the existence of a type of school providing a 'remedial' rather than elite academic environment, acting as a schooling of second choice based upon the student being less settled (many apparently having been 'bullied') in the national system. Families at the school in Young's (2018) study held precarious social positions in Chinese society, many being internal migrants or members of the new entrepreneurial class.

In short, many questions still remain to be answered. How are we to conceptualise the newly emerging 'non-traditional' landscape? Does the emerging diversity of 'internationalised schools' represent an evolution or reconfiguration of the 'traditional' types? Or are they a deviation or a distortion? Do these two types of school exist in parallel landscapes or are they interconnected? Clearly the overall landscape, certainly as seen in contemporary mainland China, is now a 'complex scene requiring differing viewpoints and standpoints' (Bunnell, 2021: 4). It should be said that there were signs in 2021 that the Covid-19 global pandemic was having an effect on teacher vacancies, with data revealing an 11% decline in 'private English international schooling' job vacancies globally, although China was seemingly bucking the trend (Jacoutet, 2021). Further, early research into international school teacher precarity (Bailey, 2021) revealed that areas deemed to be relatively 'Covid-safe' are being seen as preferred options for teachers to move to and remain within, with Mainland China being one such area that might attract further interest. It remains to be seen how recent changes to China's Covid policy, which has seen the easing of Covid restrictions, will impact teachers' decisions to move to or remain in China.

A New Framework For Visualising The International School Landscape

The power of metaphors

Wright et al (2022: 239) note that 'state control over enrolments, curriculum, and practices adds complexity to international schooling in the China context by illuminating interactions between

global and national forces'. Our paper attempts to make sense of the complex changing, emergent landscape of China by offering three metaphors for articulation and further discussion: diluting, decoupling, and dovetailing.

Metaphors are particularly useful in a field such as private English-speaking international schooling, which is difficult to define and in constant flux. They function as heuristic devices that allow researchers to make sense of the reality, as well as theorising new realities. 'Diluting' implies that the changing landscape is problematic, representing an unwanted intrusion, and one that is at odds with the more 'utopian' (Bunnell, 2014), 'pioneering' (Haywood, 2005: 7) or 'ideal' (Leach, 1969) nature of private English-speaking international schooling. The metaphor of 'decoupling', meanwhile, implies that the changing landscape is a new reality and therefore needs to be understood in its own terms. Finally, the metaphor of 'dovetailing' suggests a more conciliatory approach, one that does not emphasise difference but attempts to identify areas of congruence.

In proposing new metaphors for understanding the changing international school landscape in China, we take inspiration from the seminal work of Hayden and Thompson (2013) who offered four metaphors for conceptualising 'international schools' in general: the 'hotel-chain' metaphor (which we can already easily identify in the form of for instance the international schools in Dubai appearing with three price settings, aimed at different markets); the 'exclusive' metaphor; the 'spa resort' metaphor; and the 'food court' metaphor. The 'hotel-chain' metaphor assumes that the international school sector will continue to grow and this growth will be accompanied by increased availability of choice: that developments in the global economy will lead to increased numbers of multinational companies and therefore globally mobile expatriate professionals. It can be seen that this metaphor assumes the growth of the 'traditional' form of international school (and that this model is growing as the expatriate market grows). However, the 'non-traditional' market is growing fast, at an enormous (and some might argue unsustainable) rate.

The 'exclusive' metaphor envisages a future where the market has shrunk, as many national systems of education will have developed to include an international dimension to the curriculum. Some have indeed started to open national models – such as the 'International Public School' which looks set to appear as part of the Egypt 2030 Vision (Mostafa, 2021). The Sarawak state government in Malaysia plans the development of five residential 'international schools' (Chiam, 2019). According to this metaphor, there will also be an increase in new forms of international curriculum and assessment in order to meet 'credentialist' demand for high-stakes, high-status qualifications. The 'exclusive' metaphor captures the current reality, where we can see a high demand for international schooling from (global) middle class consumers in new settings, and especially in nations which previously have experienced a high 'brain drain' of young talent.

The 'spa resort' metaphor assumes that education will increasingly be provided at a distance, offering greater choice of subject, language and access for students. The school as conceived of in the physical sense will assume less significance. The ideological dimension (making the world a more equitable place) would have greater prominence, as the pragmatic aspects of schooling would not be an issue. This metaphor was somewhat prescient, as online distance education has become a necessity (and it turns out a viable alternative to face-to-face teaching) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the 'spa resort' metaphor might easily include the franchised overseas branch model, with connections between schools across nations (as practised, for instance, by Marlborough College's links with their branch in Malaysia). Another potential model comes from prestigious Eton College, which has not adopted the 'satellite college' model, preferring instead to use online technology to interact with overseas schools (Buller, 2019).

Finally, the 'food court' metaphor (where food has also been a popular metaphor previously, used by Cambridge and Thompson, 2001 in their 'Big Mac and a Coke' analogy) imagines a future where the distinction between 'academic' and 'vocational' will be reduced. The emphasis will be

on meeting individual needs, allowing students to combine academic and vocational study in a bespoke manner, with curricular choices available 'a la carte'. Schools that adopt a 'food court' approach will ensure that close interaction is maintained between students in different programmes, whilst also providing opportunities for curriculum innovation. We see this model emerging in China, with fusions of curriculum offerings.

Whilst Hayden and Thompson's (2013) colourful institutional metaphors helped to clarify the possible direction the changing landscape might take, and indeed have already partly taken, we feel it is now time in 2023 to offer a set of metaphors that reflect the emerging reality of 'private English-speaking international schooling' in the Global South, especially across India, the Middle East, and the ASEAN region, the epicentre of the 'non-traditional' models of international schools. The previous metaphors we have been able to identify (Cambridge and Thompson, 2001; Hayden and Thompson, 2013) were arguably based on a landscape that assumed the hegemony of the Global North, arguably centred around Geneva as the 'home' of the 'traditional' setting (as the base of, for instance, the International School of Geneva, the IB and the International Schools Association). However, as noted above, the Global South (and mainland China in particular) has now become the epicentre of activity, and the 'internationalised school' in its many guises appears to be morphing into the 'international school' of the future, reflecting changes in (national policy making) supply and (global middle class) demand.

We should at this point explain briefly our use of the terms Global South and Global North. The concept of the Global South is often used to identify the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania, which have been described as 'developing' or 'peripheral'. Countries from the Global North (including most countries in the northern hemisphere, plus Australia and New Zealand) are often described as 'developed'. Although here we position China within the Global South, the country actually appears to sit somewhere between the Global North and Global South, particularly when considering the urban landscape of cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. We still choose to use the term Global South here however, because although many CIS are in major cities, the current growth is among the lesser-developed regions of China (such as Chengdu) and international schools are now to be found in many 'Tier-2 cities' (smaller cities which have seen a rapid growth in numbers of middle-class families).

Our paper adds to the academic discourse by offering three original metaphors that we see as better reflecting the new reality of private English-speaking international schooling in the Global South. Further, we see the third metaphor, 'dovetailing', as a conciliatory one, and less problematic than the other two. We next present this framework in detail for further discussion and debate.

The 'Diluting' metaphor

The metaphor of 'diluting' assumes that the emergence of 'internationalised' schools (and therefore of the current landscape/industry) is inherently problematic, perhaps even unwelcomed. Here, the hitherto stable and largely insular landscape, akin to a stage of 'mechanical solidarity' (see Bunnell, 2020) where internal members share common values and beliefs, has been destabilised and undermined by the emergence of the 'non-traditional' school types, which is 'diluting the distinctiveness of the [international school] model' (Hallgarten et al, 2015: 3). Commentators suggest that the adjective 'international' is increasingly being used in various ways that have little veracity (Tarc and Mishra Tarc, 2015).

The ideological and pragmatic purpose of the well-established, accredited and still largely IB-authorised 'traditional' type is thus being compromised by the emergence of 'pretenders to the throne', such as the fast-growing Chinese Internationalised School. Based upon studying 'traditional' settings such as the International School of Geneva, Dugonjic-Rodwin (2021: 16)

identifies ‘guardians of international education’; these ‘established schools view themselves as guardians of a highly internalised ethos’.

Such an interpretation might also be supported from a historical perspective. Bunnell (2014) identifies two main phases of international school activity: what he describes as the ‘ideal’ phase (roughly from the end of the second world war to the mid-1990s) and the ‘post-ideal’ (from the mid-1990s to the present day). This distinction suggests that the ‘ideal’ phase, which is associated with the ‘traditional’, non-profit setting aimed mainly at serving the ‘international community’, was characterised by Bunnell (2014) as something pure and noble. In contrast, the notion of the ‘post-ideal’ phase, as characterised by Bunnell (2014), suggests that we have entered into a new ‘transitionary phase’ (Bunnell, 2020), representative of a movement towards ‘organic solidarity’ where international schooling is more akin to an interconnected industry, driven by commercial considerations rather than the post-War moral and ideological commitment to promoting global peace and international understanding.

Overall, a sense of uncertainty, anomie and existential doubt can be inferred from the nomenclature employed by researchers wrestling with how to accommodate the changing landscape within an imagery of the landscape that had (seemingly) existed. The term ‘post-ideal’ (Bunnell, 2014) suggests that we have not only entered into a new reality, but that reality is fundamentally different from what came before. Further, the concept of the ‘non-traditional international school’ (Hayden and Thompson, 2013: 26) suggests that the new model associated with the changing landscape is a negation of the ‘traditional’ type, and a deviation from education based upon values and ideals. At least in terms of international schooling in China, it appears as if something has been lost, or at least altered. Rather than being defined in their own terms (schools pragmatically catering mainly to an ambitious Chinese middle class, rather than serving an already privileged transnational community), the ‘non-traditional’ model is (perhaps unfairly) characterised as an ‘incomplete’ variation of the ‘traditional’ (Poole, 2020).

We see a field in flux and transition, ‘as the previous norms and values break down and the traditional actors must adjust to emerging, different, and problematic norms and values’ (Bunnell, 2020: 767). This same argument could be applied to the academic discourse, which Poole (2021) considers to be rooted in models derived from the Global North. It appears as if the reality on the ground, as it were, has leapt far ahead of the academic discourse, which continues to lag behind.

The ‘Decoupling’ metaphor

The second metaphor, ‘decoupling’ (Poole, 2020), views the emergence of the new internationalised school landscape in China, and elsewhere such as in Malaysia, as a complete break with what came before. What we are witnessing is evolution; with the international school sector morphing, perhaps naturally, into a new form. From the perspective of this ‘fundamental break’ thesis, it is necessary to ‘decouple’ the CIS, and other ‘non-traditional’ models in general, from the normative models derived from the Global North. It might be suggested that decoupling is necessary in order to avoid the deficit perspective at the heart of the ‘diluting’ metaphor. Expanding on this idea, it could be argued that the ‘non-traditional’ landscape in general should also be ‘decoupled’. Rather than being viewed as a rival or an inferior version of the ‘traditional’, this burgeoning ‘non-traditional’ landscape could be seen as a new reality. It has even been argued that the CIS, due to its unique blend/fusion of national and international orientations, should be seen as the ‘prototypical globalised school of the future’ (Poole, 2020: 455).

Behind this new reality it is possible to discern a subtle change in power relations. Whereas formerly, the landscape was dominated by agents from the Global North, the nexus of activity is now to be found in the Global South. To put it another way, the former centre of the international

school sector (the Global North) is now the periphery (at least numerically), whilst the former periphery (the Global South), is now the centre. This is a major transfer of power. At the same time, a new powerful consumer is emerging in the Global South, appropriating schooling imported from the North. For example, Sancho (2016: 478) describes how a new class is buying into 'international schools' in India's 'second tier cities', offering 'a new arena for the wealthiest to assert their class privileges and distinguish themselves from the expanding middle classes'. From a postcolonial perspective (Said, 1978), this shift in focus might be viewed as part of an inevitable decolonising process. This power dynamic has been recently described (Bunnell 2021: 4–5) as follows:

> On the one hand, one can easily identify a process of neo-colonial exploitation occurring, as investors and commercial agencies (in the Global North) take advantage of the emerging thirst for a seemingly quality-assured model of private schooling that can meet both parental demand and facilitate economic growth (in the Global South). In this respect, the growth is ethically suspect. At the same time, a more cautious or sceptical viewpoint emerges which identifies nation-states as being in control, and deliberately taking advantage of the desire for continuous growth of the arena of international schooling.

Having 'decoupled' internationalised schools, it is necessary to develop new frameworks for understanding them (and the actors therein) on their own terms. Here decoupling is not just on the conceptual level – ie viewing the CIS in their own right – but also requires decolonising methodologies. The issue with previous descriptions of the landscape in China has been a tendency to view it through the lens of models of international schooling derived from the Global North. In order to understand the 'non-traditional' school in its own terms, it is necessary to develop new methodological approaches that complement this process. We suggest that the unit of analysis should be the lived experiences of actors in the school. This is very much in a phenomenological tradition. By focusing on lived experiences, which are often complex and contradictory, a more nuanced narrative is likely to emerge. As such, researchers are less likely to impose pre-fabricated typologies that reify and pigeon-hole, and instead allow a new internationalised 'reality' to emerge.

To summarise, from the perspective of the 'decoupling' metaphor, the Global North continues to dominate the academic discourse, even though the Global South has now become the main arena of activity. It is therefore necessary to 'decouple' the 'internationalised school' so that it might be judged on its own merits rather than in deficit terms as an 'incomplete international school' (Poole, 2020). However, an issue with the 'decoupling' metaphor is its dismissal of the 'international' as little more than a free-floating signifier, valued not for anything intrinsic, but rather for its symbolic capital. Can we retain some of the 'utopian' and irenic focused aspects of the international (such as developing international-mindedness, respect and tolerance) whilst also acknowledging the commercially driven reality of the new landscape, where skills (global competency) and knowledge prevail, which is now very much oriented to local (global) middle-class, and (aspiring) elites? The metaphor of 'dovetailing' may offer a more conciliatory approach.

The 'Dovetailing' metaphor

A dovetail joint, or simply a dovetail, is a joinery technique most commonly used in woodworking (carpentry). It also suggests the combining or interlocking of two things into a unified whole; a new hybrid identity. Our 'dovetailing' metaphor acknowledges the 'reality' of the situation in areas such as China where we see a period of fraught transition in which two distinct landscapes co-exist ('traditional' and 'non-traditional'). Yet this metaphor also leaves room for acknowledging shared features and characteristics, as well as the tensions that emerge when combining aspects from national and international contexts.

In understanding how the metaphor of dovetailing might be used to understand the new landscape as seen in China, we identity two forms in practice. The first, 'dovetailing as ideal', is largely academic in nature, and considers how notions of the 'international' and the 'national' can be fused conceptually. The second, 'dovetailing as pragmatic reality', moves beyond the academic discourse to consider changes in mainland China at the policy level.

The 'Dovetailing' metaphor explored

'Dovetailing', in practice, would involve the fusion of national and international curricula. Taking the CIS as our example, it is necessary to move beyond simply offering both the Chinese national curriculum and an international curriculum, and to consider the ways in which such curricula relate to each other on an epistemological level. How might schools find ways to bridge these two curricula? In what ways do these curricula contradict one another? Such discussion would not only help to ease such tensions, but would also lay the foundations for intercultural dialogue, arguably a pre-requisite for any school seeking to identity itself as 'international'.

'Dovetailing' would also entail having a more even balance of expatriate and local host country teachers. Most recent data suggest that teaching faculty in CIS comprise about 60% Chinese staff and 40% expatriate staff (Gaskell, 2019). It would also suggest a bilingual model of schooling, with English being a less dominant platform of curriculum delivery. Dovetailing can also be understood in relation to the concept of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' (Maxwell et al, 2020). Recently, Wright et al (2022) have employed the notion of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' in order to conceptualise the CIS in a nuanced, more realistic way where the traditional aspect of reconciliation between the ideological and pragmatic dimensions of approach (Cambridge and Thompson, 2004) is given a Chinese makeover. Globalisation compels schools to develop cosmopolitan values that 'embrace diversity and mobility to prepare young people for an interconnected world' (Wright et al, 2022: 239).

In a sense, the 'international' that suffuses the 'dilution' discourse could be likened to a Platonic form. It exists as some kind of elusive ideal that functions in a gatekeeping capacity to protect the needs of the 'international community' (Bunnell and Hatch, 2021). Yet the cosmopolitan nationalism concept reminds us that any seemingly 'globalist' education trend is always interpreted and taken up in national-local contexts where aspects of nationalism are inevitably and strategically reinforced and reproduced. To put it succinctly, 'dilution' is inevitable, as the local context, regardless of whether it is in the UK, China or the Middle East, requires localisation and adaptation. As Wright et al (2022: 239) note:

> By appreciating the concurrence of cosmopolitan and nationalistic forces, 'cosmopolitan nationalism' helps to conceptualise how schooling can foster a 'global gaze' while, at the same time, retaining a 'national gaze' by contributing to national economic development, social cohesion, and identities. These dual pressures have the potential to create conflict over the intended role of education in responding to global or national concerns and priorities. The resulting tensions will likely impact schools and students in a complex and diverse manner across different contexts.

The notion of 'cosmopolitan nationalism', an analytical lens to examine how global educational policies, trends, and practices interact with nationalistic tendencies (Maxwell et al, 2020; Wright et al, 2022) also helps to clarify the metaphor of 'decoupling'. As presented by Poole (2020), 'decoupling' suggests a short, sharp break with the international, with the latter being presented as inherently nebulous in nature, essentially a form of cultural/symbolic/social capital deployed by students and parents as a class-making strategy (Basaran and Olsson, 2018). Whilst some

credence should certainly be given to the argument that the 'international' is a form of symbolic prestige, the notion of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' is a reminder that the 'international' also has some substance in the form of developing students' cosmopolitan sensibilities so that they can navigate an interconnected world.

However, dovetailing national and international demands is no simple task. If the dovetailing metaphor is to have any real academic value, it needs to go beyond articulating the need to combine the national and the international; it also needs to identify *which* aspects are to be combined and *how* they should be combined. As Wright et al (2022) found, combining national and international perspectives is inherently problematic, as areas of tension will inevitably emerge. These tensions involve attempting to find a balance between the need to develop (local) students' cosmopolitan sensibilities whilst also ensuring that they retain a strong attachment to the state and develop a strong national identity.

Identifying these shared features and characteristics is also a difficult task. The international and internationalised school landscapes have emerged from different historical moments, and therefore represent very different ideological and philosophical positions. As noted earlier, the 'traditional' types emerged from post-war contexts where promoting understanding and greater empathy was part of the school's institutional mission. In contrast, the internationalised school has emerged from a post-Cold War and 'post-ideal' context that seeks to commodify the 'international' as a form of prestige and distinction (Wright et al, 2022).

However, caution needs to be exercised if we are not to over-emphasise the internationalist nature of the 'traditional' models, as they have been left to narrate their own story with little critical intervention. It has been observed that all international schools, regardless of mission or type, must function as a business and guard against losing 'social legitimacy' (Stout, 2015). Surviving in the market and serving the needs of parents are therefore important goals of these schools (Gardner-McTaggart, 2022), as it is with any elite expensive model of private schooling.

In this regard, the notion of 'legitimacy' could be a shared concern that functions as a 'dovetail joint' for bringing the 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' landscapes together. Institutions such as the CIS are likely to struggle to be recognised as 'legitimate' as they are often unaccredited although all are, or should be, either licensed locally by the local Bureau of Education or perceived as having very little to do with international education, aside from advertising themselves as such. The provision of an international curriculum, such as the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) with its strong 'regulative pillar' enforced through the IB authorisation process (though not all international schools offer the IBDP), emerges here as the central and dominant characteristic of 'traditional' models and can be viewed as its 'primary institutional task'; the foundation on which its legitimacy rests (Bunnell et al, 2017).

A Pragmatic Reality

At this point, it is also necessary to bring into the discussion current political events in China. The need to ensure a strong national identity has recently come to a head here, with new policies being introduced to regulate the private education industry (Quinn, 2021; Xinhua, 2021; Wu and Koh, 2022b). Although the 'internationalised school' industry in China has largely been left to regulate itself, moves are now underway to tighten control of the country's fast-growing private education sector. At the end of 2020, the Chinese education ministry published a regulation banning primary and secondary schools across China from using textbooks of foreign countries (CGTN, 2020). 'Traditional' types of international school that enroll expatriates are the only exception. According to CGTN (2020), the policy is designed to safeguard the nation's educational sovereignty. However, the ban on textbooks is not quite as straight-forward as has been represented in the media, and its

implementation clearly depends on the course and subject in question. Moreover, it is possible that schools will be able to find a way to work around this ban, which makes a distinction, for instance, between having books in libraries and using them for teaching purposes. It could therefore be possible for teachers to copy parts of books from libraries and use them in their teaching in a covert manner.

More recently, China's State Council has announced tough new curbs on school curricula and ownership of private schools. The new law, which came into effect on 1 September 2021, limited the teaching of foreign curricula from kindergarten to grade 9 (Reuters, 2021). Previously, private bilingual schools such as CIS were free to integrate national and international curricula at any level. Once these changes have been implemented, schools will only be able to teach a foreign curriculum from grades 10 to twelve (which means they can still offer, for instance, the IBDP). Before the promulgation of the new law in September 2021, there were some significant internationalised schools in China, such as YK Pao school in Shanghai. Now, following implementation of the law, all CIS from grades K through to 9 are legally required to be not-for-profit. This will undoubtedly make the landscape much more complex, and tortuous for many schools, particularly those that were previously for-profit in nature.

Other recent changes announced include restricting membership of the board of directors at K-9 schools to Chinese nationals (who must also include representatives from the regulators), and no longer allowing schools to organise entrance tests or recruit Chinese students before official recruitment drives (Reuters, 2021). These laws appear to be the result of concerns about Chinese students in international schools knowing much about Western culture and society but lacking knowledge of their native country (CGTN, 2020). It remains to be seen how these changes will impact the 'non-traditional' arena. However, it can be speculated that the impact will be significant considering that the provision of an international curriculum, as a gateway to western universities, is probably a key factor in Chinese parental choice. The example of tighter regulations suggests a variation of the dovetailing metaphor.

Whereas the notion of 'cosmopolitan nationalism' suggests a theoretical understanding of integrating international and national orientations, the regulatory example given above is a form of 'segmented incorporation' (Lan, 2014). Integration is evident, but the integration is not on a deep level – ie it is not epistemological. Rather than the systematic exclusion of the 'international', which would be both undesirable (due to the revenue that the CIS seem likely to contribute to China's GDP) and arguably unstoppable (private education is a bottom-up phenomenon, fueled by an expanding (global) middle-class who demand school choice and alternative university pathways), we can see a more subtle form of 'dovetailing' at work. Rather than fusing the international and the national, we discern the strategic and subtle incorporation of the international into a fundamentally national(istic) framework. We might describe this process as a way to ensure that 'international education with Chinese characteristics' prevails, and survives. Whereas 'fusion' suggests hybridity (the ideal meaning of the dovetailing metaphor), 'incorporation' suggests that the aspect (for instance, the international) becomes part of a whole (or perhaps suffused throughout the whole). Within the paradigm of 'international education with Chinese characteristics', the national becomes the new whole, with the 'international' relegated to a largely rhetorical status.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a new metaphor ('dovetailing') for understanding the changing landscape of English-speaking international schooling that we are witnessing in mainland China. Here, the major body of 'international schools' is of a newer, less discussed 'non-traditional' variety serving a majority body of host-country children and offering a fusion of curricula taught by a majority

body of Chinese educators. This metaphor of 'dovetailing' is inspired by what we could identify as two existing yet slightly conflicting metaphors that have emerged since 2018, which we have identified as 'diluting' and 'decoupling'. We now seek to move the imagery beyond these two metaphors, by considering a more conciliatory and positive direction in which the fast-growing international school landscape seems to be moving in contexts such as mainland China.

We consider metaphors to be particularly useful in a field such as private English-speaking international schooling, which is difficult to define and in constant flux. They function as heuristic devices that allow researchers to make sense of reality, as well as theorising new realities. We can see that the changing scene, towards 'non-traditional' models of activity emerging in contexts such as mainland China, has led to two conflicting (perhaps extreme) metaphors appearing. 'Diluting' implies that the changing landscape is problematic, representing an unwanted intrusion and one that is at odds with the more 'utopian' (Bunnell, 2014), 'pioneering' (Haywood, 2005: 7) or 'ideal' (Leach, 1969) nature of private English-speaking international schooling as traditionally conceived. The perspective represented by the 'diluting' metaphor is arguably a conservative one, assuming that Chinese Internationalised Schools are a deviation from traditional international schools.

'Decoupling', meanwhile, implies that the changing landscape is a new reality and therefore needs to be understood on its own terms. The perspective represented by the 'decoupling' metaphor might best be described as an evolutionary one. It views the rise of 'non-traditional' models in for instance the Global South as a 'natural' and evolutionary phenomenon. Such schools are well-suited to their environments, representing perhaps a form of educational Darwinism. In our view, therefore, the 'international*ised* school' represents a new, pragmatic and politically expedient form that is potentially well-suited to the emergent landscape of China, and wider Asia.

Whilst these two metaphors genuinely reflect existing positions within the academic discourse and within the sector itself, we now feel that individually they are not sufficient in conveying the nuance of provision and activity that is required in picturing rapidly-evolving landscapes such as mainland China. Hence, we now offer the more nuanced metaphor of 'dovetailing'. This, to us, suggests a more conciliatory approach and one that attempts to find areas of congruence rather than emphasising the emergent differences. We see the new metaphor of 'dovetailing' as having value as a conceptual framework and vocabulary. It is offered in an aspirational sense; not in terms of what *is*, but rather in terms of what *could* or *should* be. As such, the metaphor of 'dovetailing' may be of relevance to researchers. Whilst it recognises the need to find points of congruence between international and national orientations, it also acknowledges the practical reality of implementing 'the international' in national contexts – which requires new conceptualisations of 'the international'. This vision of dovetailing views 'the international' not as a transcendent Platonic form, but rather in situated terms as 'the internationalised' – that is, a glocalised version of 'the international' (such as international-mindedness and global awareness) that is compatible with the sociopolitical realities of the local context.

We believe that the notion of 'dovetailing' may also be useful as a heuristic for conceptualising the wider changing landscape. The metaphor compels us to look beyond normative models of international schooling derived from the Global North. As the metaphor of 'dovetailing' is offered as a conceptual framework, it is arguably necessary to develop this metaphor with empirical evidence. This empirical evidence might include stakeholders' (such as school leaders', teachers' and students') understanding of the conceptually slippery concepts of 'the international' and 'the national' and what these two might look like when combined as 'the internationali*sed*.' The empirical evidence might also include consideration of how schools fuse 'the national' and 'the international' in terms of classroom practice and school routines, as well as what 'the internationali*sed*' could or should look like within the context of encroaching regulation.

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