EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL VERSUS NATIONAL UNDERSTANDING: INTERNATIONALISM IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the horrific loss of life around the world, it has also magnified problems of civil society, as well as defects in our understanding of international society. In the past, many assumed that the world was globalized, and that people had developed a sense of global community. However, national responses to COVID-19 have demonstrated that the world is still divided, as societies cling to parochial agendas.

The tension between a globalized vision and nationalist thinking is manifested in education systems around the world. In China, indoctrination for nationalism has been a ruling strategy for the Communist regime, while cultivation of students with an international vision has also become a core objective of civic education over time (Yan 2020a). International understanding is thus promoted today along with a heavy emphasis on patriotism. Chinese students, especially those who go abroad (mostly in undergraduate and postgraduate programs), inevitably face an ideological tension. Although Chinese international

students are imagined to be cosmopolitan in outlook, the recent history of society and education in China complicates their experience as global citizens considerably.

The construction of the "international" as "other" to China remains central to the construction of "the Chinese self" (Müller 2011; Vickers 2009a; Zhao 2004; Gries 2004). As Duara (2018, 33) notes, a self-other identity distinction is basic to the nation form, since "national people are distinguished from other national peoples and cultures that are often in competition or opposition to them". This paper considers the importance of the international to Chinese self-understanding historically and today. It illustrates some of the challenges faced in China for developing a sense of global citizenship necessary for cosmopolitan responses to global problems.

The World to China

The premodern Chinese view of the world is known through the expression *tianxia* (all-under-heaven) (Yi 2008; Zhao 2009). According to this view, China is at the center of the world and the only true civilization. Premodern elites

believed that outside of China was the land of the "less civilized" or "barbarians", defined according to their geographical distance from China – and thus their familiarity with the Chinese/civilized lifestyle (Yi 2008). This sense of moral and cultural superiority enabled them to assert and maintain control over the population of China and legitimize expansion (Vickers 2015; Rowe 1994).

However, this conviction was challenged by the arrival of Western powers following the Opium War (1840-1842). The defeat of China and subsequent "humiliation" (e.g. "unequal treaties" following its defeat) made Chinese elites aware of a new world order of competing states (Harrison 2001). China needed to "learn from the barbarians", to become modern and compete with others (Zarrow 2012). Since then, struggles to transform China into a modern nation-state and the restoration or enhancement of its status on the international stage have been an overriding goal of the government, whether under the leadership of the Republicans, Guomindang, Maoist, or post Reform Communist regimes (Vickers, 2009a).

The construction of modern national identity in China during the early modern period relied on myths of common ancestry (Chow 1997; Dikötter 1992). Ideas of internationalism and transnationalism (e.g. Communism) also gained popularity during the period. However, these ideas became less attractive after Japan's invasion in 1937. After defeating the Guomindang in the civil war, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) founded the People's Republic. Under Mao's leadership, Chinese officials combined a vision of Chinese nationalism and Communist internationalism that positioned China as "the center of world revolution" – a revolutionary version of *tianxia* (Xiang 2009). Despite internationalist rhetoric, however, China "closed down" to the outside during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Two years after (1978), Deng Xiaoping initiated post-Mao reform with "opening up" to the outside. While this allowed Chinese people to "see" the world again, many were shocked how China lagged behind. There was thus a strong interest in rediscovering the world among elites, intellectuals, and ordinary people (Xiang 2009).

In the late 1980s, China faced a series of problems (e.g. rising inequality and growing corruption) that contributed to social instability, culminating in mass protests in 1989 and the CCP's harsh response. At that stage, the party condemned "over-Westernization" and relied on nationalism (rather than socialism) as its ruling ideology. Against this background the CCP increasingly promoted patriotism for ideological control and to re-establish legitimacy. The Patriotic Education Campaign unfolded from 1991-1994 with themes of: 1) China's special characteristics and realities (demonstrating incompatibility with Western values); 2) China's national security and defense; and 3) the CCP's role in saving China from the "century of national humiliation" (Vickers 2009b). Along with the narrative of humiliation a sense of victimhood is promoted wherein foreign imperialist powers still threaten China by isolating or attacking China over issues like human rights.

Narratives of humiliation thus framed Chinese attitudes towards the West in the last few decades. Over this period, many Chinese people became sensitive to foreign

criticism, drawing parallels between critique and imperialism (Zhao 2004). The angry Chinese students protesting in front of the American Embassy in Beijing after the Belgrade bombing of 1999 and the spy plane collision of 2001 say much about changes in the worldview of Chinese youth since 1989, when the United States was generally praised and admired as a model of democracy (Gries 2004). Moreover, the CCP's legitimacy is underpinned by its performance to gain "the rightful place of China on the world stage" (Callahan 2004, 214; Zhao 2004, 288-9). This was shown in the celebration of the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997 (Gries 2004). While the campaign presented the image of a strong Chinese state capable of "redressing past grievances, resisting current and future foreign intrusions, and wielding a high degree of influence in the international arena", Chinese people (especially students) were called upon to unite around the CCP (Zhao 2004, 245; Vickers 2009b, 63). The relationship between Chinese citizens and the state is thus defined in such a way as to encourage the former to make sacrifices for

the latter. This perception is reinforced through curricula (Yan 2020a).

Recently, China has become a major power in the global system, economically, politically, militarily, and culturally. It has launched a series of international programs, taking a new stance on the international stage. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated the idea of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind"; under this, the government proposed its vision of world order and cooperation, combatting "anti-globalization" and nationalist movements around the world. It also stressed China's "active participation" in *tianxia*, frequently referred to in Xi's speeches (Xi 2018). In this version, China will "lead as a model" and share "Chinese wisdom" and "Chinese solutions" (Xi 2019).

Although today's education aims to promote international communication and intercultural exchange, what students learn from the official curriculum is an essentialist understanding of Chinese identity as distinct from other cultures or nations (Yan 2020a). Chinese identity is conceived as ethnocultural in textbooks and

international communication and cooperation take a state-oriented approach, as students are reminded to prioritize national interests when pursuing international cooperation. This is unhelpful to building international trust in times of common peril, such as the pandemic. This is shown in the experience of Fang Fang, who was abused by Chinese netizens (especially the young generation) for the English publication of her records of Wuhan during lockdown. They criticized Fang for being "unpatriotic" and "handing knives to enemies" (Yan 2020b). The current education system thus makes it difficult for Chinese students to understand the complexity of relations between their country and the world and their own relationships with their state and the world.

China's opening up since the 1970s has made it more interdependent with other countries and it has benefited from links with the world, but students are repeatedly warned that the outside world is hostile. The result is "a confusion of beliefs and emotions" towards the world (Unger 2015, xvii). Chinese students studying abroad are ton the frontline of such tensions. The state hopes that they

will bring back the skills and international vision needed for China's economic development and rising leadership in international affairs. However, many students experience difficulties inside and outside of classrooms when studying abroad, for example, when discussing China's role in the Covid-19 pandemic. While some avoid being drawn into such discussions, others become hyper-sensitive and combative in relation to criticisms of China (He 2015). In many ways, education for "international understanding" in China has not prepared Chinese students to have meaningful dialogue over issues with others who have a different view.[1] Possibly, what they learn from this experience only reinforces an impression of "a hostile international community" towards China.

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[1] Students' view of the world is not only shaped by schools. Family, the internet, and social media also have a significant impact. However, the internet and social media in China are strictly controlled and censored by the state (Yan 2020a; Schneider 2018). As a result, in the digital world Chinese students' access is limited and distorted.

Conclusion

This article focuses on China to illustrate the subtext of nationalist ideologies in cultivating international understanding. It shows some of the challenges faced by Chinese students for developing a sense of global citizenship necessary for international collaboration in response to global crises. While China is rather distinctive in its way of manipulating nationalism in its education system,[2] around the world political and educational systems are imbued with nationalist messages (Jackson 2019). A self-other identity distinction is also significant in the United States, and can be traced in education, despite the country's presence on the international stage over the last century. Calhoun (2007) thus contends that "international" is not "non-national", as the nation-state is still the dominant form of political organization around the world. Sugar (1981, 69, cited in Unger 2015, xi) also notes "there is no corner on the globe

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[2] Vickers (forthcoming) points out that interpreting Chinese nationalism in a Western frame is rather misleading, since "the predominant notions of nationhood, and the role assigned to schooling in constructing citizenship [in China], diverge significantly from conventional Western models."

where the leaders of the … state do not constantly use all the means of communication (in the widest sense) at their disposal to foster nationalism". Education still produces national citizens who are expected to put their country's interests first. The pandemic response thus reflects the status quo of populist nationalism around the world. To build global solidarity and international cooperation, educators, researchers, and practitioners must pay attention to civic education so that the pandemic can be an opportunity to educate students as global citizens.

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