

Canadian Offshore Schools in China

(Vancouver, April 2008)

This study is based on research literature, policy documents, statistical data, and case studies of offshore schools in China. The empirical part of it was funded by an Asia Pacific Foundation grant.

The team gratefully acknowledges the time that our interviewees invested in the study as well as the financial support from the Foundation.

Summary

Since the mid-1980s China has opened up its education system to non-public institutions. So-called “social forces” can own and operate schools and universities on a non-profit basis. China has also permitted, in fact encouraged, the establishment of foreign schools which is mainly due to the great demand from parents for quality schooling and their willingness to pay for their children’s education.

‘Offshore schools’ share some characteristics with ‘international schools’ but are distinct in several aspects, especially the composition of the student body (Chinese, not expatriate students), ownership (proprietary, not non-profit), and with respect to their curriculum (foreign but with some mandatory subjects taught in Mandarin by Chinese teachers, not just Western curriculum and medium of instruction). Offshore schools must be operated by Chinese nationals or with Chinese partners and may not be offered for primary and lower secondary levels. Chinese-foreign cooperation institutions (the official name of offshore schools) must meet a number of requirements, including a prescribed organizational structure, and must be authorized by the competent provincial and municipal Chinese authorities.

In 1995, the province of British Columbia (BC) authorized the establishment of the first offshore school, which was using the BC curriculum, learning objectives, teaching materials, as well as employing BC certified teachers and principals. As its legal basis the provincial government amended the law on independent (i.e. non-public) schools. Offshore schools receive no public funding, must be certified, and must meet the basic requirements that apply to other independent schools in BC, including recurrent inspections.

There are presently some 800 Chinese-foreign cooperation institutions in China, of which Canadian provinces have certified approximately 80. As of spring 2008, twelve of these are BC certified independent schools and three others have candidate status preparing for certification. Although the growing number shows that there is a strong demand for such schools, there are a number of critical issues which might have an impact on their viability.

One of these concerns inconsistencies in the Chinese legislative framework governing these schools and the lack of clarity of the regulations as well as their somewhat uneven implementation by the various provincial and local authorities. An example of the inconsistency of the legal framework is that, according to the Education Law of China, all education, including non-public education must be non-profit, even if there can be little doubt that investors are establishing these schools with the purpose of yielding a return for their investment. This lack of transparency and consistency is creating a climate of uncertainty in which these schools operate.

Other problems include the high turn-over of foreign teaching staff, the lack of regular teaching supervision and continuing professional education, and the lack of organized and regular dialogue between teachers and parents. Although the facilities of the schools may compare well to most Chinese public schools, some of them are sub-standard compared to Canadian public schools. Student fees are very high, not just in comparison with public schools but also relative to the average income levels. As

there are no scholarships for disadvantaged students, only students from well-to-do parents can afford to enrol.

Many of the foreign schools are hybrids in the sense that they offer a foreign curriculum along with the Chinese standard curriculum which permits students to enrol and graduate from both programs. They are, therefore, organizations not only with two different languages and cultures operating under one roof but also with different pedagogies, teacher pay scales, and work loads. These differences tend to cause tension among teachers, not least because the linguistic gulf between the two groups makes communication and attempts at mediation difficult.

More fundamental but also more elusive is the difference of educational objectives as defined in the respective education laws of China and BC. Thus, the mission of BC education is to educate young people for a “democratic and pluralist society” whereas the Chinese objectives of education are preparing students for “patriotism, collectivism, and socialism”. However, these discrepant educational goals and underlying philosophies might be sufficiently abstract so as not to cause any real conflict, so long as the Chinese authorities see offshore schools as useful and necessary complements to the public school system.

Since the Canadian constitution gives the responsibility for education to the provinces, Canadian offshore schools are sponsored, certified, and controlled in different ways. The resulting differences in standards and procedures, positive in terms of variety and choice, become a problem, for example when some schools have the reputation of being of low quality. This reputation then affects potentially all Canadian offshore schools.

In spite of these problems, offshore schools in China enjoy considerable success. Demand, which is closely linked to the under-funding and low quality standards of most of the public schools, outstrips supply. Official support for offshore schools is so far unaffected by legal principle or ideological belief, for example that in an egalitarian society access to quality schooling should not be dependent on parents’ wealth.

Offshore schools play a small yet important role in the Chinese government’s policy for increasing participation levels in upper-secondary and tertiary education, which are still quite low compared to other countries. In the absence of any major political change of directions their growth is likely to continue, especially if some of the policies and criteria for their establishment and operation would be clarified and the regulatory framework made more transparent.