4 The Nordic model from afar

Chinese scholarly projections of Nordic education and teachers

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Introduction: the Nordic model, reference societies, and rationalised myths

Northern European education, and with it the ‘Nordic model’, have become an increasingly attractive object of study for scholars in East Asia, particularly in China. This contribution looks at how ‘Nordic’ education has been referenced by Chinese scholars, and what this tells us about the role that the Nordic countries play in Chinese scholarship on education. Based on an analysis of journal articles from the China Academic Journals database (CAJ), I will investigate, in the next section, how scholarly references to education in the Nordic countries have evolved since the mid-1990s, and what this development looks like compared to an influential reference society like the United States. In the third section, I will present the thematic areas that Chinese scholars associate with education in the Nordic countries, and look at how these themes are matched with the individual Nordic member states (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway). This will shed light on the question of whether the Nordic countries, in the Chinese perception, constitute a comparatively homogeneous region in terms of education, or whether they represent a more diverse conglomerate. In a brief fourth section, I will zoom in on the Chinese discussions of teachers and teacher education in Finland and Sweden, which are the two Nordic countries that have been receiving most attention from Chinese scholars. In the fifth and concluding section, I will revisit the concept of ‘externalisation’ in education (in the sense of Schriewer, 1990) and pose the question of how, in today’s globalised world, international consultant-academics, through their active engagement in educational export, impact on domestic externalisation processes, and thus directly influence domestic constructions of international educational reference societies.

The term ‘reference society’ was originally coined by sociologist Reinhard Bendix (e.g., 1967), who in turn drew on Merton’s (1967) concept of ‘reference groups’, which explicates how positive reference groups act as frames of orientation for people who aspire to assume the same social role and status as these reference groups appear to possess. Negative reference groups, in contrast, have a reverse function: they act as deterrent anti-models against which people seek to construct identities that are as different as possible from these negative examples. Raising the concept of reference groups to the level of nation-states, the orientation towards

particular ‘reference societies’ has served as an explanation for why societies have developed along specific paths; this perspective has become particularly relevant for analysing modernisation and globalisation processes, or social change more generally, when societies have been observed to opt for specific models to follow – that is, model societies that are considered ‘successful’ examples to emulate (see, e.g., Eisenstadt and Schluchter, 1998).

Depending on the social and political climate, and the aspirations and pressures arising from this climate, the choice of reference societies may be more or less stable. A shift in domestic priorities is usually accompanied by the replacement of old reference societies by new ones. Shifting reference societies have been of particular interest to scholars in the field of comparative education: a felt need for educational change and reform often coincides with constructions of international reference societies which can serve as models to follow, or alternatively, as negative examples to be dismissed (Zymek, 1975). For instance, the legitimacy granted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), combined with particular domestic policy objectives, has led to the establishment of Shanghai or, more generally, China, as a new (educational) reference society for the United States, England, and Australia, with far-reaching consequences (Sellar and Lingard, 2013).

However, as has been illustrated in numerous studies (see, e.g., the contributions in Steiner-Khamisi and Walchow, 2019), international reference societies constructed for domestic purposes are not necessarily simple or truthful depictions of empirical ‘reality’; rather, they constitute projections of what the ‘follower society’ (in Bendix’s terms; 1967, p. 334) wishes to see and adopt (or reject). Hence, as Schriewer and Martinez (2004, p. 50) have pointed out in their study of educational discourses in China, Russia, and Spain, to reference, or ‘externalise’, to other societies (or more generally, to the outside world), needs to be seen as a process ‘refracted by each [domestic] society’s internal selection thresholds and needs for interpretation, which are the outcomes of cultural traditions and collective mentality, as well as political forces and dominant ideologies’.

Externalisations to educational reference societies are no whimsical, ad-hoc projections; they are grounded in what the follower society sees as rational decision-making, informed by allegedly relevant and scientific knowledge. In a neo-institutionalist sense, frequently referenced educational models such as the East Asian ‘Confucian’ societies or the ‘Finnish miracle’ (cf. Simola, 2005) can be considered ‘rationalized myths’ (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 343). Through their legitimising power, rationalised myths define the ways in which institutions and their participants are expected to act. In the transnational educational arena, they transform into ‘objectively acknowledged, rational frames of thought and action’, and it is these frames that guide domestic educational policymaking, rather than actual ‘conditions of particular sociohistorical settings’ or genuine responses to ‘specific needs’ (Schriewer, 2009, p. 33). Schriewer further observes that such

myths are ‘rationalized’ inasmuch as they offer means–ends connections that enable action to be taken and carried out in reasonable sequence. Yet at the same time, they are ‘myths’ in the sense that they draw their validity from

generalized accreditation at the transnational level rather than from experience accumulated under specific conditions and analyses that do justice to individual cases.

Thus, two forces are at play. On one side, we observe a domestic push for an externalisation to international developments. In the context of this chapter, this means that the ‘Nordic’ (or Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian) model as discussed by Chinese scholarship is perhaps less Nordic than it is Chinese, as the ‘Nordic’ has been filtered through the specific perceptions and rationales that are characteristic of the Chinese academic debate on education. While there may be overlaps between the Chinese and, for instance, Swedish scholarly discussions (the latter as evident in, e.g., Swedish-language publications), we can expect that themes and issues of concern are not identical in these two discussions, but rather reflect discourses that are particular to each society. On the other side, if the targets of externalisation have already been turned into rationalised myths with high legitimating power – as can be argued for educational role models accredited through international instances such as PISA – these transnational forces feed back into and impact on domestic processes of externalisation. As will be argued in the conclusion, the ‘Finnish miracle’ is an example of both a reference society and a rationalised myth.

For the following analysis, the CAJ has been searched for Chinese-language publications issued by the end of 2019 that refer to both ‘education’ and the ‘Nordic countries’,¹ Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland.² The publications in the CAJ contain academic journal articles as well as theses and dissertations, conference contributions, newspaper and magazine articles, and books and monographs. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, most publications have been identified with regard to Sweden, followed by the ‘Nordic countries’ (which however comprise the largest

Figure 4.1 Number of Chinese academic publications on education (journal articles and other publications) that make reference to the ‘Nordic countries’, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and/or Iceland up to 31 December 2019.

Source: author’s compilation based on CAJ data.

share of journal articles), Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. Due to the low number of publications referring to Iceland, the country has been dismissed as a case for further analysis. Moreover, since the chapter focuses on the conceptions of 'Nordic' education in Chinese scholarship, only journal articles have been selected for thematic analysis. In contrast to other publications such as dissertations or magazine articles, journal articles have gone through some kind of collegial peer review and can thus be expected to capture most truthfully what is considered scholarly knowledge regarding the Nordic region. Additionally, only those journal articles have been included in the thematic analysis that have ten or more citations, so that the final sample better reflects the actual academic discussion. Topics that are written about but not taken up by other scholars are thus not included in the sample.

Analysing the academic output of Chinese scholarship in the form of journal articles has of course wider political implications. While every academic discourse has certain limits regarding what can be thought and published, the discursive boundaries in Chinese academic journals bear a particularly strong political imprint. Political influence on scholarship in China has fluctuated over the last decades,³ but has been observed to intensify considerably since 2013, when president Xi Jinping came to power. The infamous Document Number Nine, which has identified seven topics to be taboo for Chinese universities,⁴ has been followed by a series of attempts to censor and silence recalcitrant scholars (Scholars at Risk Network, 2019). While research on (teacher) education is not the primary target of Party censorship, it is nonetheless part of the political–academic ecosystem. Therefore, journal articles also within this field can be expected to follow larger trends of political challenge and accommodation.

The emergence of the Nordic model in comparison

The Chinese scholarly interest in Nordic education is comparatively recent. Most publications referring to any Nordic country (90 per cent and more, depending on country) came out after 1995. As illustrated in Figure 4.2, there is a continuous increase in references starting in the early 2000s until 2009, culminating, after a temporary decline, in an absolute peak in 2013. The figure also shows how increase and decrease occur unevenly across the Nordic region: Denmark and Norway play only minor roles throughout the period. In contrast, both the 'Nordic countries' and Sweden constitute the major share of the total references until 2013, when Finland joins these two major players and subsequently becomes a significant Nordic reference society. From 2016 onwards, Finnish references take a clear lead and thus overtake both Sweden and the 'Nordic countries'.

The general surge in interest in Nordic education since the 2000s can be attributed to change and reform within the Chinese education system (see, e.g., Schulte, 2014; Vickers and Zeng, 2018). After a phase of consolidation following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the initiation of a vast economic and social modernisation programme in the 1980s, a new education law was passed in 1995. While the law reconfirmed moral-ideological aims such as patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, as well as discipline and national-ethnic unity, it also emphasised values such as equality regarding individuals, groups, and regions. Moreover, both

Figure 4.2 Number of Chinese academic publications on education that make reference to the 'Nordic countries', Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and/or Norway between 1996 and 2019. For reasons of legibility, only numbers higher than 20 are included in the chart.

Source: author's compilation based on CAJ data.

decentralisation and the involvement of non-state actors in education began to be carefully included in educational governance strategies. In 1999, a new curriculum was drafted (Zhong, Cui and Zhang, 2001), which gradually replaced the old curriculum from 2000 onwards. Concomitant with China's path towards a knowledge economy, this new curriculum was to stress innovation and creativity, flexible and cross-disciplinary learning, and the standardisation of learning goals. While the actual implementation of the new curriculum is debatable (see, e.g., Schulte, 2018b), this reorientation led to an increased sensitivity to international trends in education, and the active search for non-Chinese educational reference societies. The new interest included countries employing approaches towards school and learning that were considered markedly different from Chinese approaches. To Chinese observers, the Nordic countries were clearly representatives of these different approaches.

The peak in 2013, and the growing dominance of Finnish references, are largely due to Finland's rise as a 'PISA nation', and, in particular, the strong Chinese interest in the Finnish specifics of curricular design and teacher education. Arguably, these latter aspects are also more digestible politically and hence deemed applicable to the Chinese context (see the two following sections). Simultaneously with Finland's ascension, the Nordic region as a homogeneous whole has become less and less important. As reflected in Figure 4.2, references to the 'Nordic countries' have decreased over recent years. While more country-specific upward developments such as that of Finland may be a partial explanation for why the 'Nordic countries' as a whole have been gradually losing their status as an educational region, the growing country expertise of Chinese scholars has to be considered a reach of at least equal importance. Increasingly, Chinese scholarship hesitates to

Figure 4.3 Share (in percentage) of Chinese publications on education referencing to the United States and the Nordic region.

Source: author's compilation based on CAJ data.

lump together larger geographic regions such as 'Europe' or 'Africa', and instead focuses on smaller units of analysis such as nation-states or sub-national units.

Even though the increased interest in the Nordic countries is considerable, Figure 4.2 tells us nothing about how Nordic references fare compared to Chinese publications on education in general, and publications on non-Nordic countries in particular. The late 1990s and 2000s have witnessed not only a greater interest in international issues, but a significant rise in the total number of publications, due to the adjustment of Chinese universities to international standards (such as measurement of output in terms of publications; see Schulte, 2019b). Weighted against this general increase in publications, no relative increase in publications relating to the Nordic region can be observed, even if all Nordic references are totalled (Sweden, 'Nordic countries', Finland, Denmark, Norway; indicated as 'Nordic+' in Figure 4.3). Nordic references only constitute around 0.1 per cent of all Chinese publications on education. In comparison, the most significant reference society to Chinese researchers in education, the United States, attains a share of 1.9 per cent in average – still not a large part of the total (see Figure 4.3). All in all, it is safe to say that even though a small group of scholars takes note of international developments, the large majority does not, and the educational debate in overall is still rather domestic in nature.⁵ Those focusing on the Nordic region constitute an even smaller group among more internationally oriented scholars.

In the following sections, I will take a closer look at these niched interests, which often serve particular purposes, such as a Nordic country offering educational solutions to problems that have not been satisfactorily handled in China. As has been argued in the introduction, such references are typical examples of externalisation: other countries are used as examples to elucidate (and at times criticise) domestic developments.

‘Nordic’ educational characteristics from a Chinese perspective

Overall, and irrespective of the number of citations and specifics of individual countries, ‘Nordic’ education covers five larger areas of interest in Chinese scholarship:

- *Curricular content and pedagogical approaches.* These include not only, e.g., curricular content such as civic education, education for sustainability, entrepreneurship education, and education on sex and reproductive health, but also pedagogical approaches, such as child-centred, project-based, cross-subject, and nature-based learning, practical training, and anti-bullying programmes.
- *Educational policy and governance.* Focal interests are school autonomy, anti-corruption measures, assessment and evaluation strategies, and students’ rights and participation in decision-making.
- *Teacher education.* Most references are to research-based teacher education and teacher autonomy.
- *System characteristics.* Those parts of the Nordic education systems that are of greatest interest to Chinese scholars are early childhood education, higher education, special/inclusive education, vocational education, community education, popular education/folk high schools, and more generally institutionalised opportunities for lifelong learning.
- *Physical and material learning infrastructure.* This includes articles regarding not only teaching material and information and communication technologies for education (ICT4E), but also school architecture and classroom design.

Apart from these general trends in the Chinese coverage of Nordic education, the references to the individual Nordic countries reveal divergent thematic patterns. In the following sections, these patterns will be first presented for Finland (presently the most referenced country), followed by Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. A theme is established when three or more articles from the above-described sample can be categorised under the theme.⁶ The figures rank the themes according to the total number of citations they received, in order to reflect the attention that the themes have been given by Chinese scholarship.

Finland

Most journal articles referencing to Finland are, contrary to what Figure 4.4 may suggest, about questions of ‘evaluation/inspection’ (both in school and university education), and ‘teachers/teacher education’. However, due to one heavily cited article on students’ key competences in Finland, Japan, and the United States (Xin, Jiang and Wang, 2014), which has been cited 663 times, ‘curriculum development’ is the most-cited theme by far with regard to the Chinese scholarly interest in Finland. The majority of references to Finland are from 2002 and later. A notable exception is Finnish ‘vocational education’, which received some attention in the 1990s but ceased to play a role after 2014.

Figure 4.4 Most-cited themes in journal articles referencing Finnish education. 'Subject education' refers to the teaching of a specific subject, such as English or mathematics.

Source: author's compilation based on CAJ data.

Together with 'evaluation/inspection', 'curriculum development' is the most evenly distributed topic throughout the years. In contrast, articles on 'teachers and teacher education' start attracting interest only after 2007. 'Higher education' ranks fourth, and is primarily regarded from the perspective of innovation, internationalisation, and the entrepreneurial university. It is closely followed by the more generally discussed fifth-ranked topic, 'policy and reform'.

All five top themes need to be considered within the context of, first, Chinese educational reform; and second – and more recently – against the background of international assessment studies such as PISA. As pointed out in the previous section, curriculum reform is seen as an essential step towards transforming the country into a knowledge economy, and Finland's reputation as an innovative nation with an educated population is an interesting example to Chinese scholars. Similarly, questions of inspection and evaluation have been receiving increased attention due to changes in Chinese educational governance. Many articles on this theme are in fact not single-country studies, but reviews of several countries' governance strategies, including the Nordic countries. The interest both in higher education and in policy and reform can also be regarded as being rooted in the many transformations that Chinese education, particularly at universities, has undergone in the 2000s. In contrast, the Chinese interest in Finnish teacher education and, to some extent, in curriculum issues, is often motivated by Finland's PISA success, which is commonly attributed to the fact that Finnish teacher education is viewed to be research-based, and to the ways in which the Finnish curriculum is organised.

Sweden

References to Sweden reveal a more diversified picture compared to Finland (Figure 4.5). While Finland displays a large gap between the most-cited and remaining themes (and to an extent also between the remaining themes), a whole

Figure 4.5 Most-cited themes in journal articles referencing Swedish education.

Source: author's compilation based on CAJ data.

range of Sweden-related themes have gathered between 100 and 200 citations. Moreover, and due to Sweden's longevity as a reference society, they are distributed over a relatively long time period.

Most noteworthy with regard to Sweden is the top-placed theme of sex education/reproductive health, with 418 citations. The Chinese interest in this theme has been relatively constant between 1997 and 2013, but seems to have dwindled in more recent years.⁷ References to this theme can be regarded a typical case of externalisation due to unsolved issues at home: sex education is insufficiently incorporated into the Chinese curriculum, and Sweden has often been utilised as an example to argue for the important social role that this type of education plays for adolescents, and for society at large.

While the interest in 'evaluation/inspection' overlaps to a great extent with the Finnish case, the three following themes, of 'lifelong learning/old people's education', 'environmental education' (or education for sustainability), and 'preschool/early childhood education', are more specific to Sweden. The first two seem to have passed the peak of attention, but the Chinese interest in Swedish early childhood education is still vibrant. Many of the articles are written from a welfare state perspective – a point of view that also dominates other Chinese (non-educational) publications on Sweden and the Nordic countries in general. 'Equality in education' seems to be a prevalent topic with regard to Sweden, more so than for Finland. However, this difference may be more apparent than real: 95 citations (out of the 150) within this category are to one article (Zhu and Zhao, 2007) about the influential Swedish educational researcher Torsten Husén (1916–2009), which may have aroused interest due to Husén's international prominence, rather than because questions of educational equality are particularly associated with the Swedish school system. A more Sweden-specific theme is 'ICT/distance education', in which Sweden comes across as an early role model between 1994 and 2004.

In recent years, however – and simultaneously with China’s rise as an ICT nation (Schulte, 2018a) – Sweden no longer plays a role with regard to this theme.

In contrast to the Finnish case, the topic of ‘curriculum development’ is irrelevant for Chinese studies referencing Sweden. Possibly due to Sweden’s poorer performance in, e.g., PISA (compared to Finland), the country has not been considered exemplary in this regard. ‘Higher education’ and ‘teachers/teacher education’ do play a role, if to a lesser extent than for the Finnish case. Regarding higher education, the sampled articles are most interested in questions of, first, innovation and education for creativity, and second, in governance models that grant autonomy to higher education institutions. ‘Teachers/teacher education’, and how references to this topic differ from the ones made to Finland, will be dealt with in the section comparing perceptions regarding Finnish and Swedish teacher education.

Denmark and Norway

Generally, relatively few articles solely reference Denmark and Norway, but most refer to several countries, particularly those on the top-ranked themes of ‘evaluation/inspection’, and, for Denmark, ‘higher education’ (Figure 4.6) and for Norway, ‘vocational education’ (Figure 4.7).⁸ Three exceptions suggest that Denmark and Norway have nonetheless established some sort of ‘reference niches’ for certain themes.⁹ First, the references to Danish vocational education display a more country-specific profile. Here, it is above all an interest in agricultural issues that has driven the Chinese curiosity regarding Danish models of vocational education – an interest that can look back upon a long history of cross-national attraction: Haggard’s *Rural Denmark and its Lessons* (1911) was popular among Chinese reformers in the

Figure 4.6 Most-cited themes in journal articles referencing Danish education.

Source: author’s compilation based on CAJ data.

Figure 4.7 Most-cited themes in journal articles referencing Norwegian education.

Source: author's compilation based on CAJ data.

1920s, and, as noted in this volume's introductory chapter, the pedagogues of the time drew great inspiration from the Danish integration of agrarian knowledge into the school curriculum (Zhu Q., 1923; see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

Second, Norwegian preventive measures against bullying at schools aroused the interest of Chinese scholars: even though only two articles deal with this topic, they received 89 citations.¹⁰ As with sex education, bullying is thought to be a topic that is not dealt with satisfactorily at Chinese schools, so scholars have been looking for solutions elsewhere. Third, the topic of 'community education', while only having 49 citations, is particularly associated with Danish education. This is due to the prominent role that the Danish philosopher and pedagogue Grundtvig (1783–1872) and the folk high schools have played, providing insights to Chinese scholars who have an interest in developing community education in their own country (see also Chapters 1, 2, and 7).

The 'Nordic-ness' of the Nordic countries

Considering the relatively diverse themes presented above, it is difficult to maintain that there is a common Nordic model of education from a Chinese perspective. The greatest overlap across all four countries is on the topics of 'evaluation and inspection' and 'higher education'; however, both themes are discussed in articles which do not focus on the Nordic region only (or on any Nordic country solely), but rather in comparison with other models of governance and accountability. The most 'Nordic' theme is perhaps the topic of lifelong learning and education for the elderly; however, this excludes Finland, whom Chinese scholars do not commonly associate with that topic. In terms of country-specific interests, Finland's greatest overlaps are with Sweden, in the area of preschool and early childhood education and, to a lesser extent, regarding 'equality in education'.

Yet, if compared again with references to the United States, the array of themes is quite distinct. Due to space constraints, references to this country cannot be presented in detail, but the two most prevalent themes are rather different compared to the Nordic region: new ICT-related pedagogies, including issues such as blended learning, inverted classrooms, etc., and multicultural education, including bilingual learning. Moreover, frequently cited articles referring to the Nordic region as a whole overlap with some of the country-specific themes discussed above, such as community education and preschool/early childhood education. In sum, even though the four Nordic countries do not constitute a homogeneous picture in Chinese scholarship, we can nonetheless observe themes that recur more often, compared to non-Nordic references.

The Finnish/Swedish teacher through Chinese eyes

What are Finnish or Swedish teachers to Chinese academics, how are they observed to be educated and trained, and what insights does Chinese scholarship gain with regard to the teaching profession in China? In this section, I will look briefly at these questions before coming to the chapter's conclusion.

In general, frequently cited Chinese articles on Finnish teachers and teacher education are much more homogeneous than those on Sweden. As pointed out in the previous section, teachers and teacher education are not very prevalent topics in the Chinese discussions of Swedish education. For example, the teacher's role can be discussed in articles regarding sex education and reproductive health – the top-cited theme regarding Swedish education – but these articles' focus is neither on teachers nor on teacher education as such. References to Finnish teachers and teacher education, in contrast, almost exclusively dwell on the conception that Finland has implemented and perfected research-based teacher education, and that this approach accounts for the success of the Finnish system. What prevails in most articles is what we could call the science view: Finnish teachers are considered to employ a scientific notion of didactics, to base their teaching on evidence, and to succeed in integrating theory and practice (Zhang X., 2016; Zhou and Gong, 2016). At times, scholars also stress that Finnish teacher education includes both interdisciplinary and societal perspectives, and thus moves beyond the emphasis on pure subject knowledge (Rao and Li, 2016). More rarely, social and relational aspects are mentioned as keys to success, such as relations of honesty and trust, or tutoring and mentoring aspects (Chen, 2014). The questions underlying almost all the articles referencing to Finnish education are about what aspects have contributed to Finland's educational success, how these aspects differ from the current state of Chinese (teacher) education, and how (some of) these aspects could be introduced in China.

Regarding Swedish teachers and teacher education, Chinese scholarly interest is more varied. Some articles focus on didactic and pedagogical questions, such as on how teaching has become professionalised, how gender and feminist perspectives have been incorporated into teaching, and how different student interests and capabilities can be integrated; others deal with the systemic organisation (such as the integration of primary and secondary levels of education in the teacher

education curriculum); still others emphasise governance issues, such as the autonomy of teacher education institutions in questions of curriculum, their independence from the government, and, in general, the flexibility of teacher training institutions (e.g., Gu and Wang, 1999; Qiu, 2008). The Swedish way is thus presented less as a recipe for educational success than as an interesting case that reflects a social and cultural development that is quite different from the Chinese path.

Revisiting the concepts as laid out in the introduction, the Finnish model is closer to the notion of a reference society as a rationalised myth – that is, a rationally legitimated, exemplary model to imitate. In contrast, the references to Sweden portray an alternative educational world which, however, is hardly deemed realistic to emulate in present-day China. Aspects associated with the Finnish system are largely portable and transferable, both in educational and political terms: Chinese teacher education can be relatively easily imagined to be research-based, and it is conceivable within the Chinese context that relations between theory and practice could be more systematised and thereby improved. In comparison, aspects typically attributed to Sweden are different from the Chinese system in more fundamental ways: their implementation in China would require the underlying system to make considerable changes. Thus, these references should be read less as an intention to adopt them than as an attempt to elucidate and call into question those parts in the Chinese system that are considered problematic yet hard to change, such as the system's hierarchical and politicised nature, or its exam-oriented pedagogy, which makes it difficult to attend to each student's capabilities.

Elsewhere (Schulte 2019a, pp. 190–191), I have identified three different types of tools that are at play when actors (scholars, policymakers, etc.) externalise to other education systems: '(1) a *conceptual tool* for ordering, categorizing, and interpreting empirical reality; (2) a *strategic tool* for arguing for or against a particular approach or reform; and (3) a *political tool* for legitimizing (or delegitimizing) the ideology underlying these approaches or reforms'. If we regard the scholarly discussions of Finnish and Swedish teacher education as externalisations, then we could maintain that while the references to Finland have a more strategic character, aiming for the partial adoption of Finnish teacher education, the externalisation to Sweden is more political in nature: by pointing to alternative solutions, these scholars challenge the ideological foundations of the current (Chinese) response to educational problems.

Conclusion: the Nordic model in China – an offering or a prescription?

Scholars in comparative education have again and again emphasised how 'educational borrowing' has to be viewed from the borrower's perspective. The specific local context, and the translation work done on educational ideas coming from outside, are considered at least as important as these ideas themselves (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). This stance originates in the scepticism of, on the one hand, a Western-centric conception of educational modernisation, which assumes the latecomers among nation-states will simply adopt the educational models of the

‘developed’ nations, and, on the other, diffusionist perspectives on educational change, which however neglect the role of powerful intervening actors (see the overview in Schulte, 2012b). What happens, then, when local sense-makers – educational scholars, policymakers, and the like – are infiltrated by their international peers? That is, when the translation work is at least partially left to the authors rather than to the translators?

In Finland’s representation in Chinese scholarship, such a process may just be occurring. As noted above, the discussions of Finnish teacher education are conspicuously homogeneous. Moreover, and in contrast to the other Nordic countries, the Chinese journal database contains a number of Chinese-language articles about Finnish education which are authored by Finnish scholars, and which rather uncritically present the Finnish way of doing education as a silver bullet (e.g., Harju and Niemi, 2017; Lavonen, 2020; Välijärvi, 2009). For several years now, Finnish scholars of education have been actively encouraged by their institutions to participate in ‘educational export’ activities, and more recent literature suggests that it is not only outright commercial edu-businesses (see, e.g., Seppänen, Thrupp and Lempinen, 2020) that act as educational export agents, but also scholars who co-produce the Finnish image of a nation of educational excellence by ‘selling (in) directly and implicitly/explicitly flows of services, ideas, and policies’ (Dervin and Simpson, 2019, p. 35). As Dervin notes in his foreword to the volume *Myths in Education, Learning and Teaching* (Harmes, Huijser and Danaher, 2015), Finland has been very active in – and profited from – establishing the country as an educational ‘dream-place’ (p. xii). Finnish educational culture has become essentialised in these brandings: under the guise of scholarly contributions, such marketing presentations oversimplify Finnish education and package it into easy-to-digest stereotypes (Dervin and Simpson, 2019). Such accounts of the Finnish miracle are then, according to Liu and Dervin (2017), reproduced in books published for a more general Chinese readership.

Thus, what we can observe in the Chinese scholarly framing of Finland as a reference society is not just Chinese processes of externalisation, but also the effects emanating from the Finnish co-directorship in building up what Dervin has called ‘mythologies of education’ (in Harmes, Huijser and Danaher, 2015, p. xiii), in which certain ideas about education are turned into ‘unquestionable truths’. By producing educational knowledge for export, which is then distributed both in the transnational arena and in local academic discourses such as those in China, Finnish scholarship helps to rationalise the Finnish model and thereby contributes to the transformation of the ‘Finnish miracle’ into a rationalised myth.

As this chapter’s analysis suggests, ‘accreditations at the transnational level’ (Schriewer, 2009, p. 33) are not simply the objective outcomes of international deliberations, but can be pushed and shaped through the intervention of prospective ‘reference societies’ in local (national) discourses. These discourses then feed back into processes of transnational legitimation, which in turn develop the power to impact national developments. Regarding the construct of a ‘Nordic model’, it seems as if this model has been replaced, at least regarding its accrediting power at the international level, by the rationalised myth of the ‘Finnish miracle’.

Notes

- 1 'Nordic', or more correctly, 'Northern European' (*Bei Ou* 北欧) is much more commonly used in the Chinese language than 'Scandinavian' (*Sikandineiveiya* 斯堪的纳维亚), the latter often including Finland as well. This differs, e.g., from the Swedish distinction between 'Nordic' and 'Scandinavian', where the latter usually excludes Finland. *Bei Ou* has been the default denominator for the Nordic countries since the 1980s, while in older language usage, it could also include the Baltic countries. A search for 'Scandinavia' and 'education' yields only eight articles, five of which are already covered by using the search term 'Nordic'. Therefore, 'Bei Ou' has been used as the primary search term.
- 2 Articles do not necessarily have to exclusively reference one or several of these countries, but Nordic references can co-occur with references to non-Nordic countries.
- 3 See, e.g., my analysis of how John Dewey was interpreted in China from the 1920s until the present time (Schulte, 2012a).
- 4 Document Number Nine was leaked by an anonymous source from the Third Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2013, and identified the following seven taboos: the promotion of Western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, freedom of the press, 'historical nihilism', and questioning Chinese reform policies (ChinaFile, 2013).
- 5 Since not all journals prior to the mid-1990s have been digitised, a quantitative analysis of international references for earlier periods is problematic. The relative weight of Nordic references (e.g., compared to references to the United States, or the total number of articles on education) cannot be concluded from the available data. Based on the data that have been digitised, the Nordic countries were hardly referenced at all until the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, Nordic references increased more than the eightfold, from 197 references between 1980 and 1989, to 1,666 references between 2010 and 2019. However, during the same period, articles on education increased by a factor of 21. In the 1980s, Finland was the least referenced of the Nordic countries; it overtook Norway in the 1990s, Denmark in the 2000s, and passed Sweden in the 2010s.
- 6 Themes which gathered less than three articles are categorised as 'Other'. Two exceptions are made. For Norway, themes were established with a minimum of two articles falling into a category, since otherwise articles labelled as 'Other' would have become too numerous. For Denmark, the category 'preschool/early childhood education' was created even though only two articles fall in this category. This is due to the fact that these two articles have between them accumulated 105 citations.
- 7 It seems that this topic is transitioning to the theme of gender-equal/feminist education in more recent years, but since articles on this topic are quite recent, they have not received a sufficient number of citations to be included in the sample. Also, feminism is a politically sensitive concept in the Chinese context; adding to this the somewhat strained relationships between China and Sweden due to human rights issues, we can expect to see fewer references to Swedish feminist education.
- 8 Within 'vocational education' for Norway, 241 citations are to an article about vocational education in several countries (Li, 2000).
- 9 The seemingly high number of citations regarding Danish preschool/early childhood education is due to a single article about the architectural design of Danish preschools, published in the journal *World Architecture* (Zhang and Dong, 2003). Most of the journal articles citing this article are not within the field of education but of architecture. Therefore, preschool education is not considered a 'reference niche' here.
- 10 However, these articles are not solely on Norway.

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