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The Political Economy of International Education
A Critical Discussion

Wenxi Wu

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Wenxi Wu
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

As educational sectors and stakeholders are increasingly engaged in the practice of international education, there have been many discussions regarding two persisting issues with the practice, which can be summarised as Western-centrism and elitism. Applying concepts from the study of political economy, this paper analyses major political constraints underlying these two challenges. The paper suggests that the origin of these political constraints is a Western-dominated neoliberal world order, with powerful effects on the educational choices made by advantaged groups in non-Western societies. The analysis highlights a political-economic cycle based on the West's export of educational products in exchange for human and economic capitals, which sustains the current ecology of international education. The paper also discusses possible ways to redress the political constraints for international education to be more inclusive and equitable. It concludes with notes on new challenges underway and their effects on the future directions of international education.

Introduction

International education is embedded in the cross-national movement of students, staff, and educational resources, and it foregrounds the promotion of students' intercultural competence in a globalised world. In many countries, international education has become a compelling theme in national educational planning tied to social and economic development. Increasing numbers of educational institutions at various levels are trying to 'internationalise' themselves, partly to meet the rising demand from students and parents for international learning experience and credentials, and also to increase income and influence, particularly at the university level, by recruiting more international students and/or opening overseas branch campuses.

Despite being a welcomed practice, international education has drawn many critiques in the research literature, among which there are two primary and persisting issues. The first can be generally referred to as *Western-centrism*, characterised by the dominance of Western[1] nations and institutions in global knowledge production and transmission, the presumed superiority of Western education, and the imbalance of inbound and outbound flows of human resources and capitals between Western and non-Western countries (e.g., Rhee, 2009; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Takayama et al., 2017). The second, and a more specific problem to international education in the non-West, is *elitism*, which concerns the heavily unequal access to international schooling and higher education among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., de Wit & Jones, 2018; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015).

Although challenges related to Western-centrism and elitism have been widely acknowledged in various settings of international education, most discussions are limited to the critique of the challenges *per se*, regarding them as deficiencies or negative consequences of the researched phenomena. While all these are valuable contributions, this paper suggests that additional efforts are needed to confront more deep-seated structural restrictions where those challenges are situated and to fully recognise their systematic impact on educational and social practices. Beyond critique, there is also a need to consider what genuine contributions can be made in order to achieve a more inclusive and equitable form of international education.

In this paper, I attempt to provide some thought on these under-explored aspects of international education research from the perspective of political economy. Briefly, the political economy approach employed in this paper is centred on the inquiry of 'political constraints' that impact policy choice which differs from the optimal policy in allocating economically significant resources among members in society (Drazen, 2000). From this perspective, understanding the political economy of international education will involve three analytical steps, (1) identifying gaps between the actual and optimal forms of international education, (2) examining the relevant political constraints and their impact, and (3) recommending solutions to the highlighted issues. Before detailing the political economy approach and presenting the main discussion, though, I will

[1] It should be acknowledged that terms like 'West(ern)' and 'non-West(ern)' are problematic in the sense that setting up dichotomies is a very Western activity in the first place. The same is with concepts like the Global 'South' and 'North'. I do not intend to reify the binarisms or to regard countries within any category as a monolith. In this article, the 'West' and 'non-West' do not stand for any fixed region in the world. Instead, they are used to convey a conceptual distinction that has been historically and politically constructed and has taken on particular geographical meaning during the process. These concepts are used because the political, economic, social and epistemological divides persist in reality. Generally speaking, the West/North in practical usage includes Western European countries, the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016).

firstly review how Western-centrism and elitism have remained to be two persisting issues in the field of international education. The scope of 'international education' considered in this paper includes both the K-12 school and post-secondary levels, which are inseparable components in the political-economic cycle of international education, as elaborated in the rest of the paper.

International Education and Its Persisting Issues

International education is a diverse field of research consisting of many different approaches (Dolby & Rahman, 2008). One primary approach is based on cross-national comparisons of educational models and practices, aiming to understand and learn from different systems and traditions (Bray, 2014). The kind of international education addressed in this study, however, is more closely related to the 'glonacal' impact of internationalisation in education, a process that involves the cross-national movement of educational resources, systems, and various agents (cf. Knight, 2004; Yemini, 2015). This broad-based focus encompasses themes like the interactions between global trends and national/local reforms in education, expansion of international education organisations and networks, and changing patterns of mobilities involving students, teachers and institutions. Taking these various aspects as a whole to construe international education, this article sets out by highlighting two persisting issues that are commonly raised in academic discussions about the subject.

First, discourses and practices in international education have been deeply permeated by Western-centrism. The idea of Western-centrism shares the same historical origin with Eurocentrism (Amin, 1988), but has incorporated countries that had inherited and developed European civilisation outside of Europe, such as Australia, Canada and the United States. Kang (2015) suggested that three general propositions underpin Western-centric views, which are Western supremacy, Western universalism, and Westernisation. Each of these aspects is manifested in the field of international education, where (neo)liberal ideologies and expressions about globalisation, educational objectives and subjectivity have gained dominance through defining the fundamental components of international education (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; Peters, 2019; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In various contexts of practice, international education has been critiqued for placing advantages for Western ways of teaching and knowing over indigenous methods (Doherty & Singh, 2005; X. Wang, 2015), Western cultural capital as desirable and profitable (J. Kim, 2016; Leung & Waters, 2013), and English as a preferred medium of instruction (Kedzierski, 2016).

Transnational supply and consumption of educational products and services have divided the contemporary arena of international (higher) education into major international student source countries (mostly located in the non-West) and host countries (mostly Western and former colonial powers) (She & Wotherspoon, 2013), with the former being assumed to lack capacity to provide education that is as good as Western education (Cheng et al., 2017). Also in these source countries, international schools offering Anglo-Western curricula and study-abroad cram schools have proliferated at both pre-tertiary and university levels (Bunnell, 2019; Lin, 2020), serving as incubators for West-bound student mobility. For higher education institutions (HEIs) in non-Western, non-English-speaking societies to become 'international', many have steered themselves towards an Anglo-American template of 'world-class' by increasing English-medium programmes, hiring Western academics, publishing in English, and commodifying higher education provisions (Bauder et al., 2018; Chen & Lo, 2013; Gao & Zheng, 2020). Through these infrastructures, discourses of internationalisation have been used to euphemise and naturalise

Westernisation, which is seen as necessary and even celebratory by local policymakers and educators in the wide non-Western world (Resnik, 2012; Rhein, 2016; Y. Wang et al., 2020). Despite heated advocacies for decolonisation and de-westernisation in academia, international education in practice has continued to look to the West for legitimacy and benchmarks for developmental levels and competitiveness, such as those initiated and diffused by the OECD-PISA and various world university ranking systems.

While Western-centrism has tended to infiltrate international education through a 'glonacal agency' (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), the second issue, namely elitism, manifests itself more explicitly at the national/local levels through internationalisation-at-home practices (Maxwell, 2018). In non-Western societies mainly, the idea of international education is commonly linked to non-national, English-medium or bilingual educational programmes provided at so-called 'international schools' (Bunnell, 2019). It was reported that international schools became increasingly dominated by the wealthiest 5% of the non-English speaking world (ISC Research, 2020). Characterised by privateness, high economic thresholds and arguably high quality, international schools have often taken the form, or at least had a veneer, of an elite education (Ayling, 2019; Gardner-McTaggart, 2018; Ingersoll, 2019; Lee & Wright, 2015). Western-originated and especially Anglo-American curricula and educational products – despite being commonplace in their originating countries – are promoted as luxury goods in educational markets outside the West (H. Kim, 2019). These imported products are often perceived locally as representing more advanced forms of pedagogy and educational philosophy than indigenous, public provisions, which are presumably associated with less desirable qualities such as rote learning and illiberal ways of student development (Persaud, 2018; Song, 2013).

Through the pipelines from international schools to Anglo-western higher education, the prospect of attending globally ranked universities is upheld not only as a personal 'brand' (Rhee, 2009) but also a social image of distinction, given the various advantages provided to overseas returnees at job markets back home (J. Kim, 2016; Xiang & Shen, 2009). However, as de Wit and Jones (2018) pointed out, 'this billion-dollar industry [of international higher education] reaches only a small student elite, leaving 99 percent of the world's student population behind' (p. 17). For all the perceived benefits of international education, they have rarely reached students who belong to the general public, but are kept in artificial social structures like 'cultural bubbles' (Ledger, 2016), a 'skybox' (Lee et al., 2016), and 'urban segregation' (Kong et al., 2020). As these studies have shown, the appeal of international education in various societies is founded on the very idea of exclusivity and privilege. And it is harnessed by local elites as class reproductive means, which are further widening cultural and socioeconomic gaps.

This very brief overview of the two issues facing international education is admittedly far from complete. The terrain of international education has generated many other debates, such as those relating to neoliberalism, citizenship education, populism, and race. That said, it is argued that these aspects are mostly either concomitant or consequential to Western-centrism and elitism, which have been the core and posed enduring challenges to some of the founding principles of international education. Though these two issues have been widely recognised and repeatedly critiqued in the literature – far beyond the instances mentioned above, they are usually presented as negative aspects or risks of the researched phenomenon in a conclusive light. What is lacking is a historically and politically engaged reflection on the structural factors that have sustained international education to remain a Western-centric and elitist project. Put another way, besides exploring more cases to show that international education suffers from the deep-seated imperialist

influence and socioeconomic division, what else can be said and done, and what are the alternatives? This paper intends to offer a new conceptual tool for understanding international education and unpacking its persisting issues through a 'problematisation of problems'. This perspective is developed from the rationale and key concepts of the study of political economy, which will be explained next.

The Political Economy as an Analytical Lens

There is no shortage of research that looks into the political economy of one educational phenomenon or another, but the meanings of 'political economy' in their usages are not always clearly defined. As a family of approaches to studying the interaction between politics and economics, the phrase 'political economy' can mean different things to researchers in different traditions of the discipline. In classical political economy in Adam Smith's time, political economy was the 'statecraft' of managing a nation's resources to generate wealth (Gilpin, 1977). Emphasising individual rationalism and focusing on mathematically codified variables like value, price and cost, classical theorists of political economy abstracted 'laws' that were believed to apply to all forms of trade and industry. This approach limited its scope to calculable economic phenomenon out of concerns for methodological progress, thus separating the discipline of economics from political economy.

With this separation, the 'new' political economy, which takes into account more irregular political and institutional factors, falls into a particular area of research on how politics affects economic choices and outcomes (Mosco, 2009). Significantly, political economists posit that society is composed of heterogeneous members and social groups with different interests. Such 'heterogeneity and conflict of interests', argues Drazen (2000), 'are essential to political economy and should be the organizing principles of the field' (p. 5). Unlike pure economics which assumes that optimal economic outcomes can be achieved by implementing computational solutions to the distribution of wealth and resources, political economy is based on the belief that ideal policies can rarely be the same as optimal ones. Within the political economy, an important conceptual distinction that has to be made is between actual policy reality and its optimal alternative. Optimal policy solutions cannot be calculated simply through mathematical means, but must incorporate multiple aspects, including ethics, social welfare and balanced interests of various groups alongside economic growth. In reality, therefore, such policy solutions are difficult to substantiate because of the existence of heterogeneity and coalitions of interest among members of society.

On this point, political economists have highlighted the concept of 'political constraints', which refers to 'the constraints due to conflict of interests and the need to make collective choices in the face of these conflicts' (Drazen, 2000, p. 7). The study of political economy is thus engaged in understanding the nature and social mechanisms of the political constraints in the collective decision-making about a social phenomenon. In this sense, political economy is closely related to public choice theory, because both are concerned with how policies are made in the face of various constraints. However, unlike public choice theory which focuses on the political behaviour of self-interested agents in bringing about specific policies, political economy has a more profound concern for the policies' systematic consequences at political, economic and social levels, which can be understood as the gaps between optimal and objective realities. Therefore, as Drazen (2000) and many others (e.g., Adam & Dercon, 2009; Mosco, 2009) have suggested, to conduct a political economy analysis entails, firstly, understanding what 'political constraints' there are and how they may impact the choice of policies that make economic outcomes differ from the ideal situation, a

process called *positive* political economy analysis. On this basis, *normative* political economy constitutes a step forward, which concerns how to overcome the existing political constraints and re-design the institutional framework that they depend on, in order to better achieve specific economic and social objectives.

In today's usage, the phrase of political economy can sometimes be taken to refer to Marxist political economy, which also involves positive and normative discussions regarding political constraints. However, instead of illuminating open-ended processes for identifying the political constraints, Marxist political economy has provided relatively fixed answers to the questions with reference to the class conflicts between capital and labour (*positive analysis*); and the given policy solution is to establish a new political institution based on collective ownership of the means of production (*normative analysis*). In this article, the discussion on the political economy of international education will not be limited to a monistic view as one offered in the Marxist political economy (though it may be correct in many cases, especially in Marx's time). Instead, it aims for an open discussion that explores the political factors that have restricted international education to a Western-centric and elitist *status quo* and meanwhile suggests ways to achieve its optimal goals.

The Political Economy of International Education: A Diagnosis

The Optimal Roles of International Education

As noted, an important basis for the political economy analysis is to identify the distinction between actual policy reality and its optimal alternative when it comes to distributing resources among social members. In this regard, it is necessary to begin our discussion on the political economy of international education by clarifying what optimal roles – globally and locally – that international education is supposed to play as cultural and economic resources. Earlier in the text, I have shown that systematic Western dominance and elitist tendency have characterised the developmental reality of international education that we are witnessing. Despite ongoing criticism about such phenomena, however, it has not been easy to reach a consensus among researchers that can specify an optimal form of international education for all.

One way to approach this conundrum is to return to the organising principles of political economy, which are based on heterogeneity and conflict of interests in society. An optimal reality in political economy, therefore, is constituted by policies that represent the interests and maximise the welfare of heterogeneous groups for social and economic development. It is assumed that an optimal policy would encompass demands as extensively as possible without prioritising any advantaged group to the detriment of others. In the realm of international education, heterogeneity and conflict of interests exist at multiple levels because nation-states, educational sectors and social groups are essentially self-interested agents situated at different positions and developmental stages. Therefore, an ideal form of international education imagined from the vantage point of any particular nation, educational system, or social group cannot be one that fits all. From the perspective of political economy on optimality, it is nevertheless reasonable to summarise some common grounds from existing conceptualisations about international education.

In theory and practice, researchers have proposed different indicators for the fulfilment of international education, which fall primarily into an ideological/aspirational or a pragmatic/instrumental dimension (e.g., Cambridge & Thompson, 2004; James, 2005; Tarc, 2019; Tate, 2013). Some key indicators include education for international mindedness and global

citizenship, multilingualism, education involving multi-national collaboration and exchange, use of international curricula, and establishment of cross-national standards and certifications in education. Collectively, these indicators convey a grand vision for international education that is culturally and intellectually decentralised, interactive and inclusive. Meanwhile, international education is also locally embedded because it almost inevitably has to be delivered in specific national contexts and become part of the local education system. Regardless of its international orientations, education as a public good is expected to function in support of local educational development and reform. As specified in the fourth of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), education has a crucial role in enabling upward socioeconomic mobility by increasing access to quality education for students at all levels. Overall, although these visions are by no means definite, they do reflect some favourable forms of international education that different communities have looked forward to, and they demonstrate considerable gaps between international education's Western-centred and elite-focused *status quo* and its optimal alternatives.

Political Constraints and Their Effects

From the perspective of political economy, gaps between actual and optimal realities of international education indicate possible political constraints that have prevented policymaking and practices in the field from generating intended outcomes. In the case of the two problems of international education, some corresponding and interrelated political constraints may be identified at global and local levels.

In the global arena, contemporary processes of Western-centric internationalisation in education cannot be separated from the geopolitical power structure. This power structure is historically constructed and consolidated through colonialism and then spread through globalisation (Rizvi, 2007). Though the colonial era is generally considered to be the past, colonialism has persisted and morphed in decolonised contexts, continuing the 'patterns of power' that 'define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). In ex-colonies and many vicariously colonised societies, which encompassed 84% of the globe (Hoffman, 2015), modern institutions related to politics, economy, education were established as part of the subordinate installations under the jurisdiction and influence of former European colonial powers. The *longue durée* of imperial control and management had deprived the colonised autonomy and resources of developing outside of exogenously-defined frameworks, leaving some permanently crippled in self-government even decades after gaining independence. During the past half-century, the historically accumulated advantage of the West had helped establish a world order based on the international division of labour, where underdeveloped and mostly formerly colonised states provide resources and market access to wealthy industrialised states, thus enriching the latter at the expense of the former. These capitalist structures have permeated every aspect of society and produced profound inequalities and hierarchies that remain strong in the postcolonial world.

Sociologists have often used dependency theory to analyse the above situation, emphasising 'a descending chain of hegemony and exploitation by the metropolitan countries over the countries on the periphery' (Selvaratham, 1988, p. 43). The outcome in the age of globalisation is that advanced capitalist countries are continuously empowered to perpetuate a state of dependence through 'the transnational networks of production, the circuits of the world market, and the global structures of capitalist rule' (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 239). In the 21st century, although there are many challenges to Western domination from emerging economies like the

BRICS, a post-Western world order has yet to be fully established, especially with the monetary hegemony of the US. Path-dependence in the economy has more insinuating outcomes in connection to cultural imperialism, which is integral to the sustained exercise of Western influence across the globe through politics, media, cultural commodities, education, and other means of human resource development.

The global spread of English is one crucial factor in facilitating the crystallisation of power in the cultural realm, though the phenomenon has a paradoxical effect that enfeebles the cultural and linguistic capital in non-English speaking countries in the West, such as France, Germany and the Netherlands. In international education, it is mainly the Anglo-American HEIs that reside in the core and exert the most sweeping influence in driving global convergence in institutional arrangements and academic language, methodology, standards, and authority. The status of these English-speaking centres of scholarship is further enhanced through the global university ranking system, which has considerable 'bias effects' (Marginson, 2010, p. 37), favouring universities in the core countries in 'essentially all of the measures' (Altbach, 2006, p. 3). The sustained concentration of elite researchers and attraction of international students under this system have extended stratification and exclusion amongst HEIs in the world, with echoes to the international education communities at regional and national levels (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Marginson, 2016).

The political constraints concerning the Western-centric challenges of international education are rooted in both the historical process and contemporary development of the Western-dominated world order. At the heart of the whole mechanism are two distinct paths of flow that formulate a cycle of asymmetrical relations in international education. To use Knight's (2012) categorisation of mobility, the first path concerns mainly the flow of *programmes* (courses and degrees), *providers* (institutions, organisations and companies), *projects* (academic projects and services), *policies* (academic, management and qualification frameworks), and to a lesser extent *people* (mostly English-speaking teachers) from Western to non-Western countries. Most of these cross-border supplies of educational resources are provided on a liberal market in the form of commercialised educational products and services, and they are increasingly consumed by prospective international students in the Global South (H. Kim, 2019). At the same time, a reversed path of flow is the flow of international students as future knowledge workers and the substantial economic assets they bring. Since the mid-1980s, Australia and Canada had already started to shift policies on international students from 'aid to trade' (Cudmore, 2005, p. 47). In many Western countries with declining government funding on higher education, tuitions for international students are unregulated and are justified by policymakers in terms of their financial benefits to host institutions and local communities (Adnett, 2010). During this process, the framing of international students as 'cash' has become a 'dominant global imaginary [which] presumes the universal worth of Western education' (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016, p. 231).

Combined, these two paths of mobility constitute a political-economic cycle as a critical infrastructure of international education. Through this cycle, established centres in the West can syphon human resources and capital through a global education market while using this advantage to develop further and consolidate leading positions. In this process, a Western-centric international education landscape is one of many ramifications of a Western-dominated geopolitical order. This extensive system is a significant factor that hinders international education from changing to its optimal alternatives on the global stage.

At the local level, there are different political constraints that restrict international education to an elitist enclosure, and these constraints can be viewed as extensions of the cycle discussed above. Firstly, in most countries in the Global South, various provisions of international education, including international schools, international curricula, certifications, accreditations, and English language training, are introduced to local societies through a highly commercialised chain of export from major English-speaking countries in the West (Bunnell, 2019). The main entities propelling the expansion of international education are for-profit firms and especially transnational corporations, which are active agents in the global education industry (H. Kim, 2019; Waterson, 2016); and the primary consumers are global and indigenous elites at international schools which serve as 'a fast track to the top universities' (Lauder, 2015, p. 172; Lee & Wright, 2016). The ecology of this global industry, as previously noted, is established upon the cyclic flow of international educational products in exchange for economic capital and potentially human capital (international students). In this scenario, the prevalence of for-profit entities and the 'global market logic' (Rizvi, 2015, p. 347) underpinning the field of international education function as dual thrusters for the cost of the international educational programmes, thus reducing affordability. For example, in China, one of the world's largest international school markets, the average annual tuitions of K-12 international schools in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong Province had reached $30,922.05, $28,725.42, and $24,100.09 USD, respectively (NewSchool Insight, 2020).

The second cause for the restrictive access to international education stems from the interdependence between the branding of the international school sector and the social reproductive demands from its primary clientele. In many parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, international schools hold a unique place in local education systems and evoke a social image of exclusivity and privilege (Ayling, 2019; Gardner-McTaggart, 2016; Kenway et al., 2017; H. Kim, 2016). In some Western contexts, too, schools that offer international education, such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), promote 'a brand of distinction to mark niche programs' (Doherty, 2009, p. 82). The sign of distinction is partly related to the liberal educational experience, top-notch facilities, and high tuitions, which have become the norm for a highly commercialised and corporatised sector. The sign is also enhanced by the class-tag of the elite participants, who are filtered in through the tuition thresholds. In this sense, international schools have constructed networks for an exclusive form of socialisation for people with close economic interests, which helps maintain their social positions (Lauder, 2015). Given the fact, the main stakeholders of international education would have little incentive to extend access to a broader student population.

Results from the above two aspects also have implications for local policymaking on international education, which constitutes the third political constraint. Under neoliberal influences, many national governments have deregulated educational governance and encouraged an investment-friendly policy environment, allowing various transnational businesses in education to thrive (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Despite the growing popularity of international education in multiple countries in the Global South, the main provisions are still restricted to international schools, which remain at the margin of national education systems (H. Kim & Mobrand, 2019). This is partly because of the small proportion of student participants in the sector. Since these students have opted out of mainstream education and are prepared to go abroad, they have low stakes in local educational arrangements. Because of the systematic separation between a domestic and an international/Western-oriented track, Western-developed curricula and qualifications – which currently dominate the international education markets – would seldom consider local educational contexts and are thus detached from local developmental goals. This disconnection is

a critical reason for the lack of governmental engagement in the localisation of international educational programmes for more accessible service.

In the context of these political constraints, existing challenges facing international education are likely to endure because of the self-supporting mechanisms discussed above. Both the cycle in the western-dominated global trend and the ground for local elitism in international education would push the current realities further away from the optimal goals, which depict a more culturally diverse and inclusive prospect. In this section, the political constraints are identified and analysed from the perspective of a *positive* political economy. The following goal of this theoretical approach prompts a *normative* discussion focusing on possible ways to overcome these political constraints.

Overcoming Political Constraints: The Alternatives

In political economy, political constraints originate from the heterogeneity and conflicts of interests among different social groups, and any pursuit of optimal goals can be challenged by misalignment of interests during the process. In normative discussions of political economy, overcoming political constraints does not mean the eradication of heterogeneity or conflicts among social groups. Instead, it is about the *re-alignment* of conflicting interests in search of common grounds and mutual benefits. In addressing political constraints in international education, similarly, we may begin by identifying areas of misaligned interests and explore ways to achieve shared goals.

In the current geopolitical geometry, a main characteristic of the field of international education is that its developmental goals are closely aligned with the economic interests of Western countries. Therefore, the first step towards a better alternative is to recognise and incorporate the legitimate developmental needs of non-Western and especially developing countries into a multilateral relationship in education. A relatively direct approach is to reform existing models through local regulation and integration despite the products' Western origins. Attempts have been made in some East Asian countries, such as in China, where international schools at compulsory levels are required to follow local curricula and ensure fair admissions. The Japanese government has made comprehensive efforts to localise the IB Diploma Programme in areas of the medium of instruction, curricular components, and targets of Japanese university admissions (Sanders & Ishikura, 2018). Another indirect approach is to encourage South-South collaboration and sharing of good practices that are locally or regionally designed. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) and the pan-Arab project of the Arab Open University are examples of regional cooperation in education aimed at strengthening human capacities and economies for each region's collective goals. These ongoing efforts exhibit possible ways for countries to develop alternative paradigms for international education without being dependent on a Western-led system.

At both global and local levels, an entrenched political constraint is about the commercialisation of international educational provisions. Central to this issue is the misalignment of educational goals and economic pursuit, a widespread phenomenon in the contemporary educational scene. For international education, specifically, a major outcome of this misalignment is that large parts of Western higher education have altered their visions for internationalisation towards the commodification of international student mobility (Nixon et al., 2018). When Western-produced educational goods are sold in non-Western markets, the profit-making target often hinders free or inexpensive participation in such educational provisions. In today's neoliberal

educational policy context, it is undoubtedly complicated to resolve the contradiction between educational and economic objectives. However, there are some possible solutions worth attempting. One way is to encourage intergovernmental organisations to increase investment in education and take the lead to push for non-profit transnational education projects, which help reduce economic barriers for disadvantaged students. The UNESCO and Asia Development Bank, for instance, have long engaged in the promotion of free and open-source online learning platforms, and technological advancement in education is of great assistance to the mainstreaming of these efforts.

An additional aspect of misaligned interests, which is more typical to the Global South, resides between the primary consumers of international education (socioeconomic elite) and others within the national school system. While it is neither realistic nor suitable to decrease existing privilege enjoyed by the former group, it is helpful to increase participation for the latter. As noted, one of the obstacles to the integration of international education to the local school sector is the disconnection of educational contents and objectives between different systems. Therefore, it is necessary to firstly bridge this gap by making international education *more relevant* to local students' needs. Local educators are also encouraged to experiment with useful knowledge and pedagogies from international educational products in their daily work, without merely making replicas. All the other previously mentioned efforts would also contribute to better alignment and coordination of different systems. Ultimately, it is the social imaginary of distinction and divide between an international/elite education and local education that has to be demystified especially in non-Western countries, for there to be a genuinely 'international' education that benefits the development of all.

Concluding Remarks

This paper is concerned with two persisting issues with the practice of international education, namely Western-centrism and elitism. Applying concepts from the study of political economy, it has analysed major political constraints underlying these issues. The paper suggests that the origin of these political constraints is a Western-dominated neoliberal world order, which had powerful accumulations from the past. Within this world order, international education has become culturally homogeneous and increasingly commodified. The analysis has highlighted a *political-economic cycle* based on the West's export of educational products in exchange for human and economic capitals. Reinforced by its extended effects in non-Western societies, this cycle becomes a fundamental reason why international education persists to be Western-centric and elitist despite being continuously critiqued in this way.

On this basis, the paper has also discussed possible ways to overcome the political constraints, focusing on the re-alignment of interests in the field. Admittedly, most of these proposed solutions remain on a conceptual level, and there would be many difficulties during actual attempts. The political constraints analysed in this paper will still be at work, as long as a Western-dominated political economy of international education continues to direct educational choices of advantaged groups in various non-Western societies. This underlying obstacle seems impossible to be shaken because of the perennial pattern of power in the world.

Considering the current political and social climate, however, a set of new and unexpected processes may have a deep-reaching impact on established institutions and shapeshift the existing political economy of international education. For one thing, recent years have witnessed right-wing leaders in major Western powers trying to decouple from international organisations and

sabotage global cooperation in education. Following the US's withdrawal from UNESCO, the former Trump administration had launched a set of policies against international students, which put at risk their stable course of study. In both the US and UK, there has been a significant cut back on international exchange programmes such as Fulbright and the ERASMUS. These policies, while causing widespread disruptions to the internationalisation of education, also have a backlash against these countries. To a certain extent, this process is weakening the foundation of Western supremacy and leadership on the global education stage, with lasting repercussions to push the world toward multipolarity.

At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has severely interrupted international student mobility both physically and psychologically. The compounded situation has posed challenges to all countries in search of practical ways for e-learning and cross-border delivery of virtual educational services. In an unexpected way, distance education seems to represent a more decentralised model for international learning and sharing, away from a traditionally fixed location that usually had strong Western connections. Optimistically, rapid advancement in distance education that has been made during the Covid shock will propel further investment and innovation in the creation of diverse modes of education, including the expansion of open educational resources. These new trends may signal possible directions towards a more inclusive and equitable future of international education.

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Author

Wenxi Wu is a PhD student in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy, Faculty of Education, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research areas include comparative and international education, international schools, and cultural studies in education. Her dissertation looks into the local characteristics of international schooling in Mainland China.

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