Enrolling Foreign Children in Public Schools in Shanghai: Policy and Practice

Keywords: foreign children, admission, immigration policy regime, separate schooling

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1. Introduction
China has experienced an increasing influx of foreign nationals since the implementation of Reform and Opening in 1978. Official figures suggest that the number of foreign residents in mainland PRC (hereafter China) has reached approximately 593,000, excluding people from the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions and foreigners on business or tourist trips of three months or less (2010 Population Census). Shanghai, China’s most cosmopolitan city, accommodates the largest foreign population of any Chinese metropolis. This dissertation analyzes the extent to which public schooling is accessible to foreign children in Shanghai, and factors affecting this. Specifically, it investigates the following questions:
Q1. How have official policies relating to the admission of foreigners into public schools been framed?
Q2. How do individual schools interpret these policies and manage the enrollment of foreign students?
Q3. What institutional factors influence the level of foreign access to public schooling?

2. Literature Review
Hammar (1985:7-9) proposes two subcategories for the analysis of immigration policy: immigration control policy, referring to “the rules and procedures governing the selection and admission of foreign citizens”; and immigrant policy, representing the conditions provided to resident immigrants, including work and housing conditions, welfare provisions and educational opportunities. Boucher & Gest (2014) argue that the immigration policies adopted in different host societies are conditioned by historical legacies, situated norms, institutional constraints, popular will, the character of sending states, and situated economic forces.

Regarding the response of host societies to the educational needs of immigrant children, Glenn et al (1996) propose three models. The first involves
little or no effort to adapt schooling to the needs of
the children accompanying guestworkers, on the
presumption that they will return to their
homelands once the labor of their parents is no
longer needed; the second involves setting up
programs to help immigrant children adapt rapidly
to the host society and its educational system
without emphasizing their separateness or
distinctiveness. Then, according to Glenn, there is
a third model that has appeared especially in
countries receiving large numbers of immigrants
from their former colonies, who have often sought
to claim official recognition of their minority
languages (Glenn, 1996). This research suggests
that concerns over immigrants’ cultural
background and the likelihood of remigration are
significant determinants of policy on schooling for
immigrant children.

Luchtenberg (2004) also proposed two main issues
that have influenced the educational approach to
children of international immigrants based on the
experiences in six European countries: France,
Germany, Great Britain, Greece, the Netherlands
and Sweden. Firstly, one important issue is to
integrate migrants versus separating them with the
assumption of remigration. This is strongly
connected with language education for immigrant
children and the acquisition of the majority
language of the host society (Luchtenberg, 2004).
The second important issue is the “question of
whether there is only a need for the education of
migrant children or a need to change the
educational system as a whole due to the new
diversity” (Luchtenberg, 2004: 7).

Existing literature on education for immigrant
children has tended to focus on the experience of
relatively prosperous western liberal democracies.
Considering the different political and social
context within China, an inquiry into educational
 provision for foreign children (specifically those of
compulsory school age) will broaden our
comparative understanding of education for
international immigrant children.

3. Methodology
This dissertation employed a qualitative
methodology, involving a combination of
documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews,
and non-participant observation. Documents
analyzed consist of publicly available policy
papers, statistical information, and official reports
related to foreign children’s education. Semi-
structured interviews and non-participant
observations were conducted in three public
schools that either currently or used to enroll a
relatively large number of foreign students in
Shanghai.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Administration</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y School</td>
<td>Public 9-year school</td>
<td>Pudong New Area</td>
<td>Foreign students in the International Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J School</td>
<td>Public 9-year school</td>
<td>Minhang District</td>
<td>Foreign students assigned in regular classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F School</td>
<td>Public primary school</td>
<td>Pudong New Area</td>
<td>Ceased the admission of foreign students</td>
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I interviewed five school leaders, three teachers
and two parents in total, discussing admission
procedures and the school experience of foreign
children. In Y School, I followed one international
class and observed foreign students’ school
experience over one day. In J School, I observed
foreign students’ experience in five different
classes because foreign students were dispersed
across different classes.

4. Treatment of foreign residents
An analysis of central government policy
demonstrates that China has implemented a
selective immigration model to attract foreign
professionals on the presumption that foreigners
will stay in the country temporarily, and will not settle permanently. In Shanghai, the rapid expansion of Foreign Direct Investment has brought a sizeable increase in the number of foreign residents since 2000, the majority of whom are highly-skilled workers with relatively high social and economic status. In response to this inflow, the Shanghai municipal government declared to improve public services for foreign nationals in terms of medical services, educational provision, administrative procedures and religious activities. Since 2013, Shanghai promulgated a series of preferential policies for foreign talents. For example, Shanghai municipal government formulated the *Shanghai Residence Card of Overseas Talents*, enabling the cardholders enjoy the same public services such as health insurance and education as Shanghai citizens. Particularly, following the developmental goal of turning Shanghai into an excellent global city in 2035 (*Shanghai Master Plan: 2017-2035*), measures ostensibly designed to better integrate foreign talents into the local community were introduced from 2019.

5. Educational policies for foreign children

This chapter reviews the policies relating to foreign children’s education at three levels: national, municipal and district levels. This analysis indicates that a separate system of schools for children of foreign personnel (*Waiji renyuan zinxuexiao*) was originally created to provide education for foreign children, essentially excluding them from public schools. Official reports suggest that 37 schools for children of foreign personnel were established in Shanghai as of June, 2016, providing multiple alternatives for foreign families.

Foreign children started to be officially included into local Chinese public schools from around 2000. This change is largely attributable to an increasing official discourse of promoting internationalization in basic education. However, foreign children are still restricted to a certain range of local schools with relatively good educational resources. It is estimated that only 20% of foreign children in Shanghai schools are enrolled in public schools, which indicates that the latter play a supplementary role in educational provision for foreign children, primarily offering opportunities for those children whose parents are interested in Chinese education.

6. Admission of foreign children in public schools

This chapter first presents two cases of educational provision for foreign children in Shanghai’s public schools. Y School admits foreign students through a selective medium to select foreign children that have little or no living experiences in China, and assigns all the foreign students to its International Division. A combination of the Chinese national curriculum and international courses is provided for foreign children. By contrast, J School assigns foreign students to regular classes, providing the Chinese national curriculum and a school-based curriculum. The latter school places special emphasis on the goal of teaching foreign students about Chinese culture, and has been officially designated a “Base for Promotion of Chinese”.

This survey identified three institutional factors that have influenced foreign access to public schooling in school practice.

(1) Official attitudes: the official intention of encouraging separate schooling for foreign children has contributed to the rapid expansion of international schools, which has substantially reduced foreign children’s demand for local education.

(2) Administrative issues: both the unclear enrollment system for foreign children and language barriers have raised obstacles to enrollment in public schools for foreign parents who have little or no social connections in Shanghai.

(3) School quotas: prioritization of local Shanghai residents in school admission has reduced educational opportunities for foreign children
because of the fierce competition to access high-quality public schools.

7. Conclusion
In terms of the extent to which public schooling is accessible to foreign children in Shanghai, it is argued that foreign students remain largely excluded from public schools by both official policy and school practice. This is closely related to the separate schooling system for foreign children and the assumption that the responsibility of educational provision for foreign children lies primarily with schools for children of foreign personnel, with public schools playing only a supplementary role in offering education for foreign children. Differing from the prosperous western societies that link separate schooling with inequality or discrimination, the separate schooling system for foreign children in Shanghai can be seen not just as the product of official policy, but also as something actively sought by foreign nationals.

A concern over remigration has played a significant influence in implementing educational policies for foreign children, because foreign nationals are admitted as transients rather than permanent residents in China. In this regard, China shares features with the guestworker regime. Additionally, the fact of insufficient high-quality educational resources in Shanghai cannot be dismissed. It is necessary to underline that a relatively large number of rural-to-urban migrants are still denied full residential status and suffer from the institutional closure of education opportunities in Shanghai. This issue makes the case of Shanghai distinctive as compared with prosperous western societies that largely admit immigrants for the reason of labor shortage.

This dissertation contributes to the advancement of two types of literature. Firstly, this research has contributed to helping us broaden understandings of educational responses to immigration in a cosmopolitan city in a newly developing economy such as China. Secondly, it addresses a lack of systematic research into foreign children’s education in China through a detailed description and analysis of educational provision for foreign children in conjunction with the broader immigration policy regime. This has also provided insights to understand the changing role of foreign residents and the current public schooling system in Chinese society, particularly in Shanghai.

Given the limitations of time, finance and social connections in Shanghai, I was unable to access all relevant statistical documents in the schools I visited, particularly in Y School. In addition, while interviews with officials in the local Education Bureau might have provided useful additional insights into the official agenda regarding educational provision for foreign children, it proved impossible to arrange such interviews. Considering the diversity among different regions and cities in terms of economic development and foreign population, future research could usefully investigate the situation in other cities in China, so as to broaden the understanding of a Chinese approach to the management of foreign children’s education.

References