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DRAFT

Chinese Responses to Shanghai's Performance in PISA

Abstract

This article analyses the public responses in China to Shanghai's performance in the 2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Based on data obtained from media accounts and other materials published between 2013 and 2016, the research findings show that the responses in China are generally reflective, measured and self-critical. Drawing upon Gadamer's notions of 'tradition', 'horizon' and 'prejudice', this paper contends that the responses reflect the prevailing worldviews in China that perceive Shanghai's education system to be academically rigorous but too exam-oriented and burdensome. It is further argued that Confucian knowledge traditions and structures in China shape the Chinese interpretations of the PISA assessment format, leading them to downplay Shanghai's success. This study introduces the metaphor of 'traidic eyes' and highlights the mediating effects of the 'local eyes' of policy actors in an era of global educational governance.

Keywords: Chinese responses, China, Gadamer, Shanghai, PISA

Introduction

Shanghai has been hailed as a "new poster child of excellence" (Kamens 2013, 131) in the light of its performance in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) where its students emerged top in mathematics, reading and science in 2009 and 2012 (OECD 2010, 2014a, b). Shanghai's success has produced a 'shock' on a broader global scale, prompting countries such as Australia, UK and USA to turn to it as well as other Asian schooling systems as "an external rationalisation for national reforms in schooling" (Sellar and Lingard 2013a, 466; also see McKinsey and Company 2010; Tucker 2011; Alexander 2012; Jensen *et al.* 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2013; OECD 2014a, b; Gorur and Wu 2015; Jerrim 2015). While there is a growing body of literature on policy transfer and education reform using Shanghai and other top performers in PISA data as a reference (e.g. see Waldow 2012; Tan 2013; Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014; Auld and Morris 2014; Crossley 2014; You and Morris 2015), what is less researched is how the Chinese themselves look at Shanghai's PISA achievement. To date, there are only three academic publications in English that examine the Chinese responses to Shanghai's PISA performance. The first article was authored by Zhang and Alexander (2012) who discussed how the local education authorities capitalised on the 2009 PISA data to legitimise their reform stance. The second article, by Baird and colleagues (2016), included Shanghai in their review of policy and media reactions to the 2009 and 2012 PISA results in six countries. But their analysis of Shanghai was brief and focused only on the responses of Chinese policymakers and not other educational stakeholders. The third article was written by me where I argued how the Chinese education officials leveraged on selective information from PISA to validate contested reform messages and initiatives in Shanghai (Tan 2017).

This article aims to fill the gap by exploring the public perceptions in China on Shanghai's 2012 PISA performance. Although this article covers the same topic – Chinese responses to Shanghai's PISA performance – as my recently published article (Tan 2017), they differ significantly in terms of the research question, theoretical framework, research findings and implications. First, the research question of the published article, as suggested by its title, 'PISA and education reform in Shanghai', centres on how the Chinese education officials interpret and utilise the information from PISA, especially the 2012 PISA results, in relation to on-going reform initiatives in Shanghai. The research question for this article, however, goes beyond the perceptions of the local authorities to include the responses of the Chinese academics, educators and the general public to Shanghai's PISA performance. Secondly, the published article relies on the theoretical framework on policy borrowing and externalisation whereas this article draws upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's analytical tools of 'tradition', 'horizon' and 'prejudice'. Thirdly, in terms of research findings, the published article reports that the Chinese officials turn to PISA data to garner support for on-going reform initiatives that seek to redefine the aims and nature of education in Shanghai. That article also highlights the implications from the Shanghai example on the symbiotic relationship between PISA/Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the domestic education system. In contrast, the research findings and implications for this article, as I shall elaborate later, draw attention to the prevailing worldviews in China on Shanghai's education system and the usefulness of Gadamer's concepts in elucidating the mediating effects of local policy actors in an era of global educational governance. The research data for this study are derived from relevant newspaper articles, official documents, academic essays and online resources in China that were published between 2013 and 2016. The first part of this article introduces the theoretical framework for the research topic. This is followed by a discussion of the study in terms of its research method, findings and implications.

PISA and Gadamer's Notions of 'Tradition', 'Horizon' and 'Prejudice'

PISA has triggered a 'horse race mentality' (Kamens 2013) among participating countries/economies within an assessment framework that defines and determines the 'winners' and 'losers'. With the status of PISA as a 'public policy instrument' (Lascombes and Le Galès 2007), scholars have noted the phenomena of diminishing control of local governments and global policy convergence. Meyer and Benavot (2013) aver that "the pressure for accountability and the shift to market-based governance mechanisms leaves the states, which once controlled education in the name of nation-building, loyalty and patriotism among its citizens, increasingly dependent on global forces" (12). The hegemony of PISA has given rise to a 'medicalised research paradigm' (Tröhler 2015) that exalts the macro-level decisions and measures made by test experts and policymakers. National governments are looking up to international bodies such as Organisation for Economic and Cooperation and Development (OECD) for "putative universal, independent, expert knowledge" (Carvalho and Costa 2015, 644). Scholars have used terms such as 'global educational governance', 'worldwide educational standardisation', 'audit culture', 'governing by numbers,' 'policy as numbers,' 'governing by examples', 'governing through "what works"' and 'steering by evaluation' to describe the current modes of governing education (e.g., Lawn and Lingard 2002; Lindblad and Popkewitz 2000; Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013; Ozga 2009; Kamens 2013; Meyer and Benavot 2013; Simons 2015).

While it is true that domestic education systems are increasingly dependent on organisations such as OECD, it is important to remember that policymakers are not the only

policy actors. Other local educational stakeholders such as academics, educators, students, employers and parents are also key players in the processes and outcomes of policymaking. The deliberations and (counter)measures made by informed citizens actively mediate, moderate and circumvent the governance of national systems and international organisations. For the same reason, global policy convergence through ‘worldwide educational standardisation’ (Meyer and Benavot 2013) initiated by OECD is inevitably countered by local actors and factors. Although it is tempting to search for ‘best practices’ from ‘best systems’, it is difficult, if not impossible to transfer local histories, political structures, educational institutions and norms from one schooling system to another (Lewis and Lingard 2015). Sellar and Lingard (2013b) highlight the risk of overlooking cultural and social considerations when consulting the comparative analyses facilitated by the OECD’s statistical work. Carvalho and Costa (2015) identify two major factors that shape the local receptions towards PISA findings: indigenous knowledge traditions and structures within the field of assessment in a locality; and their philosophical and methodological proximity-distance with respect to PISA international comparative assessment framework. It is therefore necessary, in understanding the disparate and often conflicting responses of different education actors to PISA results, to consider the socio-cultural worldviews in a locality and their implications for education policy transfer and enactment.

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notions of ‘tradition’, ‘horizon’ and ‘prejudice’ are instructive in illuminating the nature and effects of indigenous knowledge traditions and structures in a given policy context. Rejecting the Enlightenment’s search for ‘pure’ reason, Gadamer (2004) maintains that reason is “constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates” (277; all subsequent citations are taken from this text unless otherwise stated). Human understanding, according to Gadamer, is always situated within a particular *tradition* that encompasses what is treasured and handed down from the past (Chan 2000, 198). Claiming that tradition has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding, Gadamer posits that it “in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes” (282) and is “always part of us, a model or exemplar” (283). It follows that understanding a text or event inescapably involves interpreting it from the perspective of one’s tradition. This process of understanding is dialectical in the sense that the past and present are constantly mediated (291). Through such interactions, we not only affirm and cultivate our culture but also modify and extend it. In Gadamer’s words, we produce tradition ourselves when “we understand, participate in the evolution of traditions, and hence further determine it ourselves” (293; also see Gadamer 1977).

Gadamer further points out that our tradition provides us with a *horizon* from which we may view the world. A ‘horizon’, according to Gadamer, refers to “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage” (301). A horizon comprises “all the values, beliefs, norms, experiences that frame our expectations and representations of ourselves and others, our interactions with them and the context in which these occur” (Tsirogianni and Andreouli 2011, 7). Hekman (1984) uses the example of Plato’s *Republic* to illustrate the nature of horizons: “Although the horizon of the text itself remains the same, the changing horizons of the interpreter will result in different interpretations” (339). Any attempt to understand a text of discourse always reflects the interpreter’s historical worldviews and takes place through the concepts and issues that are brought to the investigation (Hekman 1984). Gadamer claims that “the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning” (269). That we invariably bring with us our expectations when making sense of a text or event is due to our *prejudices* – fore-judgments that are “rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined” (273). Our consciousness is ‘historically effected’ in the sense that to understand anything is already to have a pre-

understanding of the topic involved, of the language, of the question involved” (Palmer 2006, 87). This pre-understanding is constitutive of the historical reality of one’s being; they are the “conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us” (Gadamer 1977, 9). Rather than viewing prejudices negatively, Gadamer contends that prejudice is a necessary condition of understanding since “there is undoubtedly no understanding that is free of all prejudices” (Gadamer 2004, 484). Given that our prejudices can be desirable (which lead to comprehension) or undesirable (which lead to misunderstandings), they need to be surfaced so that we can understand ourselves, our culture and biases, as well as those of others (Rees 2003).

Applying Gadamer’s insights to the Chinese context, the ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ of policy actors in China stem predominantly from and are shaped by Confucian knowledge traditions and structures. The term ‘Confucianism’ is defined broadly to refer to a plurality of socially constructed, living and syncretic traditions that originate from Confucius (Tan 2016). Variants of ‘Confucian pedagogic cultures’ (Kim 2009) exist across East Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. Despite their differences, they share the following primary pedagogic patterns: ‘the [high] status of teachers, exam-driven schooling, the culture of patriarchal authority and hierarchy, respect for seniority, conforming to group norms, and individual success in education tied to “family face”’ (Kim 2009, 869). Jerrim (2015), based on his research on East Asian students, similarly identifies the Confucian influences of a high value placed upon education, hard work ethics, a belief that anyone can succeed with effort, and high aspirations for the future. Related to the indigenous knowledge structures in China are the knowledge structures within the field of assessment. China’s 1300-year civil service exam (605–1905) has given rise to an educational environment that is exam-centred, teacher-centred, classroom-centred and textbook-centred. The present-day *gaokao* (national college entrance exam) in China perpetuates the civil service exam’s centralised, high-stakes and traditional assessment format (summative and written) (Niu 2007). In addition, the premium placed on academic excellence in standardised exams has encouraged the prevalent practices of long hours of studying and after-school supplementary private tutoring in Shanghai/China and other East Asian societies (Bray 2009; Byun and Park 2012, both cited in Feniger and Lefstein 2014).

The Study

As the research topic is on the Chinese responses to Shanghai’s performance in PISA, the data were derived from media accounts and other relevant sources published between 2013 and 2016 in China. Although the media in China are controlled by the government, the extent of state surveillance and interference depends, among other factors, on the issue concerned, the content of the publication, and the profile and agenda of the author(s). Publications that are censored in the mass media in China tend to be those that contain subversive, seditious or politically sensitive content (Xu 2015). In the case of this study, the topic of Shanghai’s PISA success was widely reported and commented on as it was not considered a controversial subject matter that could threaten political or social stability. Not only did the local educational officials articulate their stand on this issue, other educational stakeholders such as academics, educators and the general public were also forthcoming in articulating their views through various types of mass media in China, especially print, broadcast television and the internet.

Research data were obtained through a keyword search of the term ‘Shanghai PISA’ (in Mandarin) on three online academic research databases for publications in Mandarin. The first was *China Core Newspapers Full-text Database* (*Zhongguo zhongyao baozhi quanwen*

shujuku) that compiles articles published in 618 newspapers in China since 2000. Data were also obtained from two other databases: *China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (Zhongguo zhiwang)* and *Wangfang Data (Wanfang shuju)*. Further research was conducted using Google search engine that directed the researcher's attention to two useful websites. The first was the homepage of Shanghai Academy of Educational Sciences that collated reports and academic essays on Shanghai's participation in the 2009 and 2012 PISA (<http://www.cnsaes.org/homepage/html/SHPISA/>). The other website was managed by Tencent Inc. that claims to be China's largest and most used Internet service portal; it contained a dedicated section on media accounts, internet surveys and online discussion concerning Shanghai's PISA performance (<http://sh.qq.com/zt2013/pisa1/>). 56 documents that comprised newspaper articles, official documents, academic essays and online opinion pieces were chosen for data analysis as they contained direct references to and information on the Chinese responses to Shanghai's PISA performance. The research method involved examining and interpreting the data for the purpose of extracting meaning, obtaining understanding and presenting empirical knowledge (Bowen 2009; Prior 2003).

Findings and Discussion

A content analysis of the data reveals that the public responses in China are generally not enthusiastic and self-congratulatory but reflective, measured and self-critical. The responses can be classified into three broad themes, with overlaps between them: (1) Shanghai's PISA performance is not a success and has instead exposed the municipality's educational weakness; (2) Shanghai's PISA performance is only a minor success as it does not represent all aspects of holistic education; and (3) Shanghai's PISA performance is a success but there are still some areas for improvement.

The first finding is a highly critical response that regards Shanghai's PISA achievement *not as a success but as exposing the municipality's educational weakness*. The argument here is that the top-notch PISA performance of Shanghai students in mathematics, reading and science is the product of an educational system that is too exam-oriented and burdensome. A school leader comments that Shanghai's PISA success is an "indication of weakness" and a "sign of problem" as it shows that China is good at helping students ace standardised assessments such as PISA but not prepare them adequately for the knowledge economy (cited in Anon., 2013). A prominent advocate of this view is Xiong Bingji, the deputy director of *21st Century Education Research Centre*, who is a well-known blogger (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/bqxiong>) and a frequent columnist for a number of newspapers in China. He critiques Shanghai's 2012 PISA achievement as follows:

A lot of people are excited that Shanghai has once again emerged top in PISA. But do not forget that the one-sided emphasis on exam scores and demand for students to excel reflect the serious problems of an exam-oriented education. Schools, family and society are all fixated with exam scores in order to be number one. Should we be proud of this? (cited in Anon 2013).

Referring to the criticism by Western observers that Shanghai's PISA achievement is the result of rote-memorisation, a social commentator in China responds that "this remark will not damage the dignity of Chinese society as the Chinese's criticism of their own exam-oriented education is even more vitriolic and aggressive than that from the foreigners" (cited in Wu 2013). Another commentator adds that "rote-memorisation, 'fixation with exam

scores', 'stifling of creativity' ... it is easy to find these words to criticise the education, schools and teachers in China" (Jiang 2016).

A dominant perception in Shanghai/China is that the high PISA scores have come at a price of heavy schoolwork burden and excessive academic stress for students. It is noteworthy that alongside the news of Shanghai students' impressive achievement in PISA is the OECD report that Shanghai students spent an average of 13.8 hours on homework which was the highest and almost three times the average of 4.9 hours (OCED 2014a, b). A local daily comments that "there is a close connection between high test scores and heavy [academic] burden; the latter is detrimental to the students' spirit of curiosity, lifelong learning ability and joy of childhood innocence" (cited in Wu 2013). A 2014 survey conducted with 5000 high school students across Shanghai also reported that students lacked sufficient sleep due to the long hours spent on completing school assignments (Wang 2014).

The second research finding is a response that is less negative compared to the first. Instead of viewing Shanghai's PISA achievement as a failure, this position sees it as *only a minor success that does not fully capture all aspects of holistic education*. A newspaper in Shanghai reports that the Chinese population is not surprised at Shanghai's performance in PISA, given that their students are well-versed in test-taking and possess strong content mastery in mathematics, reading and science – attributes that have helped them to excel in PISA (Dong 2013). In an internet survey involving 1173 respondents by Tencent Inc., 64.54% agreed that Shanghai's success "is to be expected because China's basic education has always been great" (Tencent Inc. 2016a). A Chinese commentator notes that "PISA test questions take the form of written assessment and this is precisely the advantage of China's primary and secondary students who have devoted much time and energy to become 'skilled workers'" (Wu 2013). An academic in Shanghai credits Shanghai's PISA success to Confucian education:

Shanghai students, in topping PISA twice, demonstrate their unique characteristics, especially in memorisation, comprehension and skills in answering test questions. These affirm that the influence of traditional Confucian education remains strong in China today (cited in Shi 2015, 126).

The reference to Confucian education reflects a general belief among the Chinese that Confucian pedagogic cultures, with their accent on academic excellence, have prepared the Shanghai students well for PISA. The Confucian virtues of modesty and self-cultivation motivate the Chinese students to study hard for the sake of self-improvement and perfection (Shen 2014b). The commitment to spending long hours in studying is also rooted in Confucian pedagogic cultures. A professor from Shanghai Normal University attributes the academic pressure to the Confucian emphasis on the value of hard work, represented by proverbs such as 'one's stupidity can be compensated with diligence' (*qinneng buzhuo*) and 'practice makes perfect' (*shuneng shengqiao*) (Xia 2013).

Accompanying the view that recognises Shanghai's PISA achievement is the perception that Shanghai's PISA success is only a minor one as PISA does not capture all aspects of holistic education. An academic in Shanghai posits that "the essence of PISA does not examine creativity and higher-order thinking; its questions are basic and not challenging as they are concerned with solving everyday problems" (cited in Shi 2015, 129). Echoing the same view is another academic who argues that PISA "can only reflect the outcome of a knowledge education but not the students' character as well as physical and mental states" (Xiong 2013). A school principal in Shanghai concurs that PISA does not assess non-academic domains such as knowledge application in everyday life and lifelong learning ability (cited in *Xinwen Wanbao*, 2013 Dec 6).

The third research finding is the most positive response of the three in that it *celebrates Shanghai's success in PISA while acknowledging some areas for improvement*. This view is forwarded primarily by Chinese education officials, in particular the leader of Shanghai PISA team for both 2009 and 2012 who was deputy director of Shanghai Municipal Education Commission at that time. He states, "We can see with self-confidence that decades of perseverance in implementing balanced development in basic education has led to better schools and the effects of elevating the baseline and raising the overall standards" (cited in Dong 2013). He also gives credit to Shanghai teachers for their efforts at "increasingly emphasising a change from the traditional method of rote-memorisation to problem-solving learning methods" (cited in Wang 2013). The secretary-general of the Shanghai PISA team adds that Shanghai's 2009 result testifies to the effectiveness of the implementation of quality-oriented education and promotion of educational balance (Lu 2013). But the accolades given to Shanghai's PISA achievement were balanced by the observation that Shanghai's educational system is not perfect and requires further refinements. The leader of Shanghai PISA team informs the public that "PISA enables us to know the obvious advantages of Shanghai students as well as the weakness in our basic education" (cited in Gong 2013). Taking the same stand is the Minister of Education in China who comments that "we have obtained outstanding results and nurtured some talents, but we indeed have our own deficiencies, such as excessive schoolwork burden for primary and secondary students, weak innovative spirit in our students, and inadequate practical ability" (cited in Anon 2016).

The preceding shows that the responses from the Chinese educational stakeholders on Shanghai's PISA performance are generally reflective, measured and self-critical. In comparing the three dominant views, it can be observed that the first view which is the most sceptical and extreme is the least articulated in the mass media in China. Most of the responses belong to the second category where the Chinese adopt a moderate position by highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of Shanghai's educational system and quality. The third view which is the most positive is mostly expressed by Chinese education officials who are keen to attribute Shanghai's success to its educational reform. But even these officials voice their awareness of the problem of long hours spent by Shanghai students on homework and call for measures to address this issue. The overall calm and restrained responses from the Chinese are contrasted with the excitement, interest and other strong reactions – whether praising or criticising Shanghai's achievement – from other countries (for details, see Loveless 2014; Tucker 2014).

To further examine the Chinese responses to Shanghai's PISA performance, it is helpful to turn to Gadamer's concepts of 'tradition', 'horizons' and 'prejudices'. We have noted the Gadamerian assertions that our interpretation of a text or event is always circumscribed by our tradition that provides us with horizons that shape our institutions and attitudes. We have also learnt that the 'horizons' and 'prejudices' of the Chinese are primarily rooted in and framed by Confucian pedagogic cultures that privilege solid content mastery that is tested in high-stakes, written and summative assessments. Influenced by their prior knowledge, presuppositions and expectations, the Chinese naturally interpret Shanghai's PISA achievement in ways that conform to their 'tradition'. Consequently they are not surprised at and not too impressed by Shanghai students' PISA performance, viewing it as attesting to what they *already* know about the high standard of basic education in China and the merits of Confucian education.

It is also through their 'horizons' that the Chinese make sense of and draw conclusion from the OECD report that Shanghai students spent the most time on homework. The Chinese's strong disapproval of the long homework hours put in by Shanghai students is symptomatic of their prior frustration with the academic stress in the municipality. It is a

significant point that the report by OECD does not criticise the long hours spent by Shanghai students on homework (Tan, 2017). Instead, the report claims that there are “very solid reasons” why the assignment of after-school work is beneficial, such as helping underachieving students to learn the content and providing greater stimulation to high performers (OECD 2014b, 1). But in Shanghai, this causal relationship is interpreted negatively in accordance with the prevailing ‘prejudice’ that Shanghai students are overburdened with homework and have paid a heavy price for their academic and PISA success. The root cause of heavy schoolwork burden in China, from a Chinese’s ‘horizon’, is an ‘exam-oriented education’ (*yingshi jiaoyu*) that results in studying stress for students, high educational expenses for parents, ‘teaching to the test’ for teachers, and intense pressure to produce high test scores for schools. Such a paradigm is also blamed for a neglect and suppression of students’ critical, creative, innovative and problem-solving abilities.

Rather than merely focussing on exam preparation, many parents and students hope that schools could work towards a quality-oriented education (*suzhi jiaoyu*) that fosters all-rounded development in students. In an internet survey involving 459 respondents by Tencent Inc, 79.69% of respondents agreed with the statement “I am not satisfied with the current education in Shanghai and do not admire such a system because the children are exhausted” (Tencent Inc. 2016b). Only 12.5% of respondents indicated that “I am satisfied with the current education in Shanghai and I am very confident about Shanghai’s education system”. When asked about areas for improvement for Shanghai’s education system, more than half (52.22%) opted to “introduce quality-oriented education and not solely emphasise exam results”. The other quarter (26.6%) supported the proposal to “reduce burden and cut down on the hours spent by children on homework” while the rest favoured the policy to “abolish the college entrance exam” (16.75%) and other changes (4.43%). The findings resonate with other survey results in China. For example, in a 2013 survey conducted with 2054 parents and 958 students, the top wish by students was for their teachers not to teach by rote but to make the lessons interesting (*China Education Daily* 14 January 2013). The Chinese have therefore read the PISA findings selectively through their ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’, playing up some indicators (e.g. long hours spent in school and on homework) and downplaying others (e.g. topping PISA in all three domains). The Chinese responses parallel those in South Korea, another high-performing East Asian society, where the locals relate their students’ PISA achievement to the excessive competition and ‘exam fever’ in their country (Waldow, Takayama, and Sung 2014, 315). In both Shanghai and South Korea, the ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ that reside in Confucian pedagogic cultures inform the locals’ interpretative stance on the performance of their students in PISA.

The Confucian knowledge traditions and structures as embodied in Confucian pedagogic cultures also influence the Chinese’s perceptions and assumptions of the assessment format of PISA and the significance of PISA findings. Far from approaching the PISA findings neutrally, the Chinese read the PISA text, to borrow the words of Gadamer (2004), “with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning” (269). There is a close “philosophical and methodological proximity-distance” (Carvalho and Costa 2015) between China’s indigenous knowledge traditions and structures within the field of assessment and PISA framework. Many Chinese link the PISA assessment format to the written, content-based, standardised and high-stakes exam in China, especially the civil service exam, *zhongkao* (terminal exam at the end of junior secondary level) and *gaokao* (national college entrance exam). Unfortunately for PISA, such an association brings with it pejorative connotations of and grievances towards an exam-driven and stressful education system in Shanghai/China. From a Chinese viewpoint, the assessment system and resources of PISA do not qualify as ‘good’ education, i.e., holistic education that goes beyond high test scores

obtained from pen-and-paper assessments to develop other competencies such as creative problem-solving and communication skills in real-world contexts.

That the local education officials are aware of the ‘prejudices’ of other educational stakeholders regarding PISA is seen in the officials endeavouring to correct the (mis)conception of PISA as just another written and standardised exam that the Chinese are familiar with. The team leader of Shanghai PISA team clarifies that PISA “is not an exam to select scholars but is a form of research to understand the ability of 15-year old students in adjusting to future challenges” (cited in Dong 2013). He and his Shanghai PISA team also carefully explain the nature and purpose of PISA questions and point out how these questions differ from the typical exam questions in China’s terminal exams (for details, see Lu 2013; Dong 2013). At the same time, the authorities signal their cognisance of the local ‘prejudice’ concerning heavy schoolwork burden and advocate more education reform to remedy the situation (for details of on-going education reform in Shanghai, see Tan, 2017). Referring to the OECD report on the long hours spent by Shanghai students on homework, the leader of Shanghai’s PISA team states that participation in PISA has helpfully surfaced the problem of heavy academic burden in the municipality that should be addressed through effective measures (cited in Dong, 2013).

Implications: The Metaphor of ‘Triadic Eyes’ and Mediating Effects of ‘Local Eyes’

This study extends the existing research on the divergent ways in which an education policy is translated to different localities due to varying socio-cultural conditions and norms (Schwinn 2012). It offers a more nuanced account of our ‘audit culture’ and ‘assessment culture’ where countries that perform well in PISA automatically regard themselves as ‘winners’ and those who have not experience the “inevitable sense of ‘crisis’” (Kamens 2013, 133). Rather than seeing Shanghai as a ‘winner’ and an unqualified ‘success’, the Chinese educational stakeholders, including the policymakers, adopt a balanced, reflective and even self-reproving stance on Shanghai’s PISA performance. Informed by their own ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ regarding the definitions of ‘good’ education, assessment and education system, many Chinese do not share OECD’s glowing appraisal of Shanghai’s PISA achievement. Neither do they subscribe to OECD’s soft governance, interpreting PISA as another written assessment that does not fit into their visions of the good. The responses in Shanghai/China demonstrate that PISA’s international circulation is subject to “reinterpretation, negotiation, and re-contextualisation” (Carvalho and Costa 2015, 638), not only between OECD and the domestic education systems but also among the educational stakeholders in a particular social context.

A major implication arising from the study of Shanghai is a need for policymakers, researchers and educators to pay attention to the dynamic relationships between international and domestic sentiments, expectations, demands and (counter)strategies of multiple policy actors. A useful conceptual tool to analyse the character of and relationships between various policy actors (transnational, national and local) is the metaphor of ‘triadic eyes’: local eye(s), national eye, and global eye. According to Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) and Sellar and Lingard (2013a), the ‘national eye’ refers to international comparative measures while the ‘global eye’ denotes national measures such as standardised testing. Our study of Shanghai suggests that a third eye is present: ‘local eyes’ that represents the (re)actions and (counter)measures from local actors who interpret the governing tools through their ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’. While it is true that “the global eye and the national eye come together to govern through comparison” (Sellar and Lingard 2013a, 467), the governing processes are not context-less but are actively interpreted, manipulated and transformed by the ‘local eyes’.

Not only do the ‘local eyes’ not necessarily see eye to eye (pun intended) with the ‘national eye’ and/or ‘global eye’, the ‘local eyes’ themselves are comprised of many and competing ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ from diverse agents. The multiplicity of ‘local eyes’ is illustrated in the varied responses in China regarding Shanghai’s PISA performance – interpreting it variously as a failure, a small achievement, and a success – as discussed earlier.

It should be added that the plurality of ‘local eyes’ does not mean that local policy actors in a community do not hold to a common set of values, beliefs or practices. On the contrary, underlying the diversity of ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ held by the Chinese educational stakeholders are shared Confucian knowledge traditions and structures, as noted earlier. In borrowing ‘best practices’ from elsewhere and enacting education policy, decision-makers need to “recognise the element of tradition in research and inquire into its hermeneutic productivity” (Gadamer 2004, 284). In particular, inquiry should be directed to understanding the salient features and influences of indigenous knowledge traditions and structures such as Confucian pedagogic cultures, high-stakes exams and private supplementary tutoring in Shanghai/China and other East Asian societies. Given that the tradition of any society is not static and homogeneous but changing and multi-faceted, research could also be carried out to explore the varieties and evolution of a tradition, its interactions with other traditions, and influences on ‘local eyes’, ‘national eye’ and ‘global eye’.

Our study of Shanghai also exemplifies the usefulness of Gadamer’s ideas in foregrounding the motivations, processes and outcomes of policy borrowing. It is essential, in investigating cross-national attraction and policy transfer, to examine the different and competing ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ in both the referenced/borrowed context and receiving context. For research on the referenced/borrowed context, Gadamer’s concepts are helpful in shedding light on the following: how the ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ of top-performing countries/economies such as Shanghai, Singapore and Finland contribute to its success; how divergent ‘horizons’ determine local receptions to the PISA assessment system and findings; and how various ‘prejudices’ held by policy actors shape domestic education discourses and policy enactment. For research in the receiving context (e.g. countries who turn to Shanghai, Singapore or Finland for policy borrowing), Gadamer’s ideas may offer fresh perspectives on *externalisation* (Steiner-Khamsi 2006): the strategy adopted by policymakers of seeking legitimation of domestic education reform through references to other education system. Pertinent questions for exploration include understanding how the ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ of the policymakers inform their choice of a referenced society and method of externalisation, and how the ‘traditions’, ‘horizons’ and ‘prejudices’ of the local policy actors impact their responses to the reform agenda of the state and soft governance by international organisations such as OECD.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the public perceptions of the Chinese on Shanghai’s performance in the 2012 PISA. It was argued that the responses in China are generally introspective, measured and self-critical, reflecting the dominant paradigm that perceives Shanghai’s education system to be academically rigorous but too exam-oriented and burdensome. It is further maintained that Confucian knowledge traditions and structures in China shape the Chinese’s views towards the PISA assessment format, leading them to de-emphasise Shanghai’s success. This study highlights the value of Gadamer’s concepts in amplifying the essence and effects of historical, socio-cultural and moral conditions, norms, logics and practices in an era of global educational governance. The experience of Shanghai suggests that the ‘worldwide

educational standardisation' (Meyer and Benavot 2013) led by PISA is an accurate description *only in so far as* we put on the 'global eye' and 'national eye'. When viewed through the 'local eyes', however, the façade of policy convergence gives way to discordant voices, worldviews and judgements, bringing to life Gadamer's notions of 'traditions', 'horizon' and 'prejudice'.

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