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# Alternative education spaces and pathways: Insights from an international Christian school in China

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# Alternative education spaces in China: The case of an international Christian school and its students' alternative higher education pathways

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| Abstract: | The nascent scholarship on geographies of alternative education focuses on alternative education spaces, most located in the UK, that resist and/or negotiate neoliberal restructuring of education, some of which cater to socially marginalised groups. In contrast, through an ethnographic focus on an underground Christian international school in China, we examine an alternative education space that responds to parents' aspirations for their children to be inculcated with global cultural capital, Chinese values and Christian beliefs. These aspirations are not fulfilled in mainstream state schools or international schools in China, but are demanded by parents looking for a "superior" set of skills for their children to navigate the increasingly neoliberal, and global, higher education and employment landscapes. The discussion reveals the incongruities in the school's claim to simultaneously instil global, local and spiritual forms of cultural capital, which leads to two visions of the pathway to higher education. The paper expands the geographies of alternative education in three ways. First, it shows how international and faith-based schools can provide alternative schooling. Second, it shows how the departure of alternative education spaces from their mainstream counterparts can reveal the inadequacies of the latter. Third, it draws attention to how the cultural capital inculcated through alternative education can lead to alternative international higher education pathways within and beyond China. |
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## Introduction

Alternative education spaces offer students an alternative to mainstream, state-funded education by adopting unconventional curriculum, pedagogies, financing and/or physical layouts for the school and classrooms (Kraftl, 2014). The nascent literature on these spaces examines how certain schools, predominantly in the UK, negotiate the neoliberal restructuring of education, while at times addressing the needs of socially marginalised groups such as youths-at-risk (Kraftl, 2013; Gorman and Cacciatore, 2017). Another characteristic of such scholarship is that it speaks from and to western contexts. The scholarship's anglocentric focus leaves a significant gap in the understanding of alternative education space in terms of how milieus of other geographical regions create differing forms of the phenomenon. Through the case of Pioneer Academy (pseudonym), an underground Christian international school in urban China[1], this article explores how alternative education can be conceptualised in a particular non-western context.

Pioneer Academy is private, and is considered underground due to the explicit integration of Christianity into its curriculum despite the Chinese government deeming public evangelism, and the provision of religious education to children less than 18 years, illegal. By examining the particularities of Pioneer Academy, the article contributes to the literature on geographies of alternative education in three ways. First, by examining the role played by international schools and faith-based schools in providing an alternative form of education. Second, instead of focusing on formally recognised educational providers that challenge the promotion of state-sanctioned values, it highlights a scenario where the state restrictions lead to the creation of underground alternative education spaces. Third, it reveals how alternative education spaces lead to alternative pathways of higher education.

We start by reviewing the ways in which alternative education spaces are positioned within mainstream society and inculcate particular values in their students. Through

Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital, we discuss the manner in which global cultural capital and spiritual capital that are inculcated through international schools and faith-based schools respectively are dis(similar). We then outline the particularities of China's educational landscape and Pioneer Academy. Finally, we examine how Pioneer Academy instils an alternative form of cultural capital which motivates its students and their parents to seek alternative forms of higher education within and beyond China.

**Expanding the scope of alternative education spaces**

Through his work on geographies of alternative education in the UK, Kraftl (2013, p.238) reveals that alternative education spaces oppose and/or negotiate values associated with neoliberalism, and promote alternative "visions and versions of life-itself". Some schools work toward these ideals by cultivating dispositions such as being "open, welcoming, generous and responsible to strangers near and far" (Kraftl, 2013, p.251); qualities that are deemed to be stifled by standards-driven neoliberal practices of education, which emphasise instead competitiveness. Others focus on students who are marginalised within mainstream education such as economically-disadvantaged children, teenagers at risk, and persons with learning difficulties (Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Kraftl, 2016). However, Kraftl (2013) emphasizes that alternative education spaces in the UK do not function as separate entities, and reveals how their spatialities both connect and disconnect from mainstream education, society and life trajectories. For example, care farms – farming spaces that incorporate learning into therapy – have to negotiate between protecting their vulnerable clients and conveying openness to the public in order to gain financial support and recognition within the local community (Kraftl, 2013).

The position an alternative education space occupies within a nation's educational landscape indicates the value placed on the cultural capital inculcated through its education,

which in turn signals its students' social position (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, some care farms have considered a system of accreditation that would provide recognition for their students' skills within mainstream schools and the job market (Kraftl, 2013). These strategies are aimed at fostering a connection between marginalised groups and their local communities with the intention that they will eventually integrate into mainstream society. Waters and Brooks (2015) complicate this integrative understanding of alternative education spaces by foregrounding the separateness deliberately maintained by English elite boarding schools through geographical and symbolic isolation. This distinguishes its students as being distinct from – and implicitly superior to – those of mainstream schools. Within these spaces, students are inculcated with particular traits that would give them access to opportunities that are not accessible to others, and signals their privileged status within British society.

Geographers have signalled how international schools and faith-based schools need more attention within the geographies of education (Kong, 2013). Although these educational spaces are rarely considered similar, the lens of alternative education brings their commonalities to the fore. Both maintain differing levels of geographical and symbolic distance from mainstream education, and aim to create individuals who are socially distinct from mainstream society. International education extends beyond national borders either by students moving abroad for studies, or "incorporating foreign ideas or ways of thinking into curriculum, diverging from a focus on the nation-state in which the school is located" (Young, 2018, p.159). Non-geographical studies reveal the tensions that emerge when international schools attempt to build more inter-cultural connections with the local communities they are situated in (Heyward, 2002), while also fearing the "possibility of a damaging 'cultural clash'" due to their affinity with a distant or global community (Bunnell, 2005, p.49). Faith-based schools are distinguishable by the extent to which religion is integrated into their curriculum. Similar to the alternative education spaces in UK that are not

wholly disconnected from mainstream education (Kraftl 2013), classifying a faith-based school as an alternative education space is dependent on, and reflective of, the local context (i.e. the extent to which religion is included in the cultural capital transferred through mainstream schools). Drawing largely on examples from the UK, geographers have interrogated the idea that faith-based schools promote alternative beliefs that are not aligned with broader societal values (Dwyer and Parutis, 2013; Hemming, 2011).

However, international schools and faith-based schools diverge in terms of the value placed on the alternative cultural capital they inculcate; that of the former is greatly sought after, while the latter is frequently a point of contestation. Students of international schools are often privileged because of their Western education, cosmopolitan outlook and bilingualism, even though it is also acknowledged that they can account for feelings of rootlessness and alienation from cultures of their home country (Moore and Barker, 2012; Sears, 2011). Despite these drawbacks, this 'global cultural capital' is sought after to ensure better life opportunities and social mobility. In Asian countries an international education is deemed to provide a superior form of cultural capital in comparison to that inculcated through the local school system (Cheng, 2018). Waters and Leung (2017) observe how research on international education focuses on the experiences and mobilities of privileged expatriates. In comparison, the focus on non-elite locals who seek international qualifications as an alternative to mainstream education and the "the multiple and hybrid ways in which students are involved in international education" is lacking (Madge et al., 2015, p.683).

Issues related to faith-based schools are examined in the context of globalization and immigration, where the state seeks to promote multiculturalism and a shared national identity. Although the cultural capital inculcated in these schools fosters a sense of belonging to a local and/or global religious community, they simultaneously align with state discourses of a shared national identity (Kong, 2005). Yet, neoliberal and secular ideologies promoted

through state policies and mainstream education are sometimes resisted by faith-based schools. Known in the U.S. as 'cultural wars' between liberal and conservative proponents, some faith-based educational institutions have gained legal permission to teach creationism as an alternative to evolution (Hemming, 2015). Further, Qian and Kong (2017, p.807) reveal how a Christian faith-school in Hong Kong engages in both "overt resistance" and "flexible accommodation" to negotiate the state's neoliberal restructuring of education. These negotiations highlight faith-based schools' anxieties about the promotion of secular values, which would undermine the 'spiritual capital' these schools attempt to inculcate in their students; that is, the "source of empowerment […and] guide [of] judgement and action in the mundane world" (Grace, 2010, p.119).

Admittedly in these studies, the faith-based schools' departure from mainstream education are not as prominent as in the case of international schools. These (dis)connections are shaped by the state's policies towards religious education and the level at which faith-based schools are funded. Therefore, alternative cultural capital and visions of the future transferred through these schools tend to be nuanced and circumscribed by the state. However, exploring faith-based schools in countries where religious-education is not funded (France), or prohibited (China), would offer novel conceptualisations of alternative education spaces, including the intersection of international and faith-based schools.

Given the emergent nature of the geographies of alternative education, the intertwining of work on international schools or faith-based schools, presents opportunities to expand this scholarship in two ways. First, existing work demonstrates the ways in which formally recognised alternative schools are positioned within the broader educational landscape and attempt to resist neoliberal restructuring. In contrast, Pioneer Academy is hidden from the national educational landscape and aligns with neoliberal ideals of inculcating students with global cultural capital. Second, the scholarship signals that

alternative education enables its students to change their social position by gaining cultural capital that would give them elite status (Waters and Brooks, 2015) or progress from their marginalised position and be better integrated with mainstream society (Kraftl, 2013). However, few studies explicitly focus on how the students' alternative cultural capital shape their aspirations and (potential) lifepaths. Therefore, we examine how a Christian international school inculcates its students with a particular brand of cultural capital that is simultaneously desired and frowned upon by Chinese mainstream society, and which motivates its students to pursue alternative pathways to international higher education.

**The place of alternative education in China's educational landscape**

Due to China's shift from socialism to a market economy since the 1990s, educational policies have attempted to strike a balance between inculcating students with "Western ideas of independent and free civil personalities" and "the virtue-centred Chinese traditional education" (Zhu and Feng, 2008, p.6). The present-day educational system is highly standardized where mainstream schools in China adhere to a curriculum regulated by the central government and students must sit for competitive entrance examinations to qualify for higher education (Young, 2018). Dissatisfactions with the competitive mainstream education system and the recent emphasis on "21st century skills" have increased the popularity of international schools among the local population and led to a diversification of the types of international schools available in China. International schools with curricula that provide entry into North American and West European universities (e.g. Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate Diploma programmes) are perceived as better equipped to teach students the skills necessary to navigate a globalised world (Wright and Lee, 2014). The expansion of the private international schooling sector is curtailed by its high fees and the government's policy that restricts Chinese nationals from attending these schools (Wright and

Lee, 2014). Since only a few state schools offer an international curriculum, elite Chinese nationals and children of expatriates represent a privileged minority within Chinese society. Colloquially, the international education system is called the 'international exit solution', where students forego the chance of entering Chinese universities, and opt for international higher education instead (Schulte, 2018).

Given these restrictions to accessing global cultural capital, many Chinese seek alternative avenues for an international education, despite these schools' "muddy legal status" (Young, 2018, p.160). Some international schools offer baseline educational qualifications to children of internal migrants who, though affluent, lack an equally important indicator of social status in China – an 'urban' local household registration, or *hukou* (Young, 2018). Due to China's decentralized fiscal and education system, rural-to-urban migrants' children face difficulties in accessing free compulsory education in destination cities, and a significant body of work examines underground schools that cater for low-income children (see Yuan et al., 2017 for a review). These schools are unlicensed, private, migrant-run schools that are housed in dilapidated buildings. Although these schools attempt to follow mainstream schools' curricula, they are challenged by poor facilities and inexperienced teachers. In comparison, studies that examine schools that are covert due to their religious affiliations, and the future pathways they may pursue, are rare.

Since the late 19th century, religious beliefs have been constructed as an obstruction to China's modernizing projects (Cao, 2018). This secular ideology remains predominant within Chinese society. However, the state has removed restrictions on the practice of selected religions, i.e. Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism, due to their diplomatic value and perceived benefits for the country's economic development (Sun, 2017). Despite being sanctioned, religious activities are restricted to the premises of registered religious institutions. Yet, in reality, many religious practices and gatherings occur

underground; for example, McDonald's restaurants have been identified as clandestine meeting places for Bible study (Yang, 2005) and house-churches are a growing trend (Bregnbæk, 2018). Since the Chinese government bans religious education to children under 18 years, Christian churches are prohibited from conducting Sunday school (Sun, 2017).

Pioneer Academy is considered an international school because it offers the Advanced Placement programme that sets the students on the path of pursuing tertiary-level education in American and Canadian institutions. Most former students of Pioneer Academy have migrated to the U.S., Canada and Hong Kong. Its curriculum is based on home-schooling textbooks, which are published by the John Paul University (pseudonym), a private evangelical university in the US. The school is registered as a business and occupies several floors of a business complex. Since its establishment in 2007, Pioneer Academy has expanded to 140 students and 40 teachers, and its principal plans to build another campus in the region. While 90% of the students are Chinese citizens, the school attracts expatriates of Chinese-descent (from Hong Kong) and from other countries, such as Ethiopia. Approximately two-thirds of the teachers are Chinese, while the remainder are Americans. Since the institution identifies as a Christian school, only Christians are recruited as teachers; 70% of students adhere to the Christian faith.

This case study is drawn from a larger project on international education in China, which was conducted in 2015. Pioneer Academy was identified through networks developed in the field. The paper is based on interviews with the principal and focus group discussions with eight students, four teachers, and four parents, as well as an examination of the teaching materials used, and observations of school activities. Since the researcher was permitted to interview a limited number of students and teachers, researching the underground school was challenging. Some students were reluctant to have their responses recorded; on these occasions, notes were taken. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

**From alternative education to alternative visions of life**

According to the principal of Pioneer Academy, Hong, and the parents who were interviewed, the institution's curriculum that inculcated global, local and spiritual forms of cultural capital distinguished it from other mainstream and international schools in the region. They explained that global cultural capital is not instilled adequately in Chinese mainstream schools and an international curriculum is most suited to the task (Young, 2018). Hong opined that learning in Chinese is a drawback in a globalised environment, and gives priority to teaching students to speak "English as if it's their mother tongue". Although these parents avoided placing their children in mainstream schools due to the desire for their children to be equipped with global skills, they also voiced concerns that an alternative education may not adequately inculcate their children with Chinese values and culture. Hong shared similar concerns about being "utterly American [and not] unswervingly Chinese" and explains that Pioneer Academy's "unique bilingual approach" is expected to develop its students' local cultural capital as well.

The parents conveyed that the priority given to spiritual development was Pioneer Academy's greatest attraction, and addressed a need that both mainstream and international schools in China fail to provide. They explained that due to the competitiveness promoted within local schools, "character building… [is] completely absent, or even counter-productive" (Shen, parent). Although these parents are affluent, they signalled a distinction between Pioneer Academy and international schools that cater for expatriates' children. In Chan's (parent's) words: "other international schools enrol children from privileged or rich families, so we worry about the school ethos and discipline; in those schools, it's a bit anarchic." These parents' tendency to view evangelical Christianity as solution to the "moral vacuum" and "feeling of an inner emptiness as a result of the constant striving for outer

success" resonates with research on Chinese working-age youth (Bregnbæk, 2018, p.180).

Despite Pioneer Academy's claim of transferring two different forms of cultural capital, its curricula privileges inculcating global cultural capital. Contrary to its philosophy of celebrating Chinese culture and Confucian values, the school gives precedence to familiarising students with American culture. As Hong explained: "in each semester, we hold many activities, which to many Chinese kids are unheard of; we'd have a Thanksgiving lunch, for example". The classroom activities, such as dressing up as characters from Western fiction (e.g. Peter Pan, Harry Potter and Scarlet O'Hara) and watching Western movies, also contribute to a deeper understanding of Western/American culture and social norms. American teachers shared that a significant part of their teaching aimed at addressing their students' lack of familiarity with American culture that affected their grasp of the subject matter. In the context of teaching a novel, set in the 1960s Midwest, Marilyn (teacher) explained:

> These girls are from Ethiopia, China, Hong Kong, so their background experience is not going to be the same as an American student's […] Grade 7 kids have no idea about the Midwest.

She remedies her students' lack of exposure by showing them video clips of Elvis Presley and fashions and expressions of the 1960s. In comparison to the holistic manner of learning about American culture, an understanding of Chinese culture is developed through classroom lessons on Chinese language, geography and history. The desire to balance the acquisition of global (interpreted as American) and local cultural understanding is, in practice, not evidenced in the educational approach, perhaps because of an assumption that the family context and pre-school upbringing would have provided the Chinese cultural exposure for the students of Chinese origin. Therefore, the cultural capital of Pioneer Academy's students is

better aligned with students of American public schools than with their peers from local schools.

The challenges of inculcating local cultural capital are compounded by Pioneer Academy's covert position within the nation's educational landscape. Within Chinese mainstream schools, 'patriotic education' has a significant influence on its students' identity and sense of belonging, and views about cultural heritage and foreign relations (Wang, 2008). Patriotic education is supplemented with state-sponsored cultural heritage fieldtrips and educational competitions (Walton, 2018). As an unregistered educational institution, Pioneer Academy is unable to tap into this holistic way of inculcating local cultural capital in its students.

Moreover, the principal's integration of Confucianism and Christianity, which is in stark contrast to the predominantly secular ideologies promoted by the state, further alienates its students from their local community. This spiritual capital is cultivated through the school's Bible-based Christian curriculum, Bible lessons and prayer. Further, the teacher's training programme reinforces this Christian mindset through topics titled 'Confucianism and Christianity' and 'Thinking in God's Way'. As Hong justifies, "we are a Christian school, our teachers need to know how to integrate God into everything." Notably, neither the parents nor the principal commented on the illegality of providing religious education and the challenges students might face when integrating into mainstream society with such alternative cultural capital.

Indeed, the students' aspiration to pursue undergraduate degrees abroad, and their parents and educators' interest in seeking opportunities for alternative international higher education within China highlight this disjuncture. None of the students who were interviewed expressed an aspiration to pursue higher education and/or employment in China. They shared their intentions to study in American colleges and universities, particularly those that

identified as Christian institutions. The students' preference for these pathways to international higher education is shaped by three factors; their inability to apply to local universities, the cultural capital the students are inculcated with at Pioneer Academy and the school's strategy of introducing avenues to pursue higher studies in Christian universities in the U.S. Pioneer Academy's isolation from the predominantly secular local community and its intensive transfer of spiritual capital influences its students' visions of their future. For example, Izara (Ethiopian, student) explained how she has fostered a sense of belonging to a global Christian community, which can help allay the anxieties of studying abroad:

> I think the Christian environment is a very comforting thought because […] when you talk about university it's a scary kind of thought, so maybe the Christian environment will provide comfort.

The spiritual cultural capital that alienates students from their local community is conversely what the students seek to draw on in adapting to a for
eign university setting. So strong is the inculcation of spiritual capital that none of the students interviewed aspired for global opportunities through secular educational institutions. A similar pattern is observed by Bregnbæk (2018) where the combined effect of competition within Chinese society, the solace offered through evangelical house churches and the restriction on attending these churches result in young Chinese Christians longing for a better life abroad. The students' preference is encouraged by Pioneer Academy's ability to provide them with networks to tap into Christian universities in the U.S., e.g. through talks by the president of the John Paul University. Notably, this private evangelical university publishes the textbooks used by Pioneer Academy, which reveals the emergence of a transnational space of alternative education rooted in shared values (Longhurst, 2013).

Despite the students' alternative educational and cultural capital, some parents and teachers expressed desire for the students to remain in China while pursuing international

higher education through brand campuses of foreign universities. Indeed, Wu, a Chinese teacher at Pioneer Academy, expressed a desire for "Hong's students [to] go to good universities right here in China". These two territorialised visions of alternative international higher education are shaped by the differing subject positions occupied by Pioneer Academy's students, and their parents and teachers. The students' relative disconnection with the local cultural milieu, coupled with the privileging of global cultural (and spiritual) capital, has enlarged, but ironically also limited, their aspirations to attend faith-based international universities. In contrast, parents and teachers convey a preference for the students to be global-ready individuals who remain within China.



**Conclusions**

Alternative education spaces defy straightforward definitions due to the complex ways in which they both align with, and deviate from, state-funded, mainstream education spaces, and the way in which local-contexts shape the understanding of what constitutes alternative education. By exploring the case of an underground Christian international school in urban China, this article expands the scope of alternative education spaces and examines the alternative versions of life its students adopt. In addition, it expands the empirical focus of the scholarship that is largely based on the UK experience. The paper offers three contributions to the geographies of alternative education.

First, the paper interrogates how the intertwining of characteristics associated with international and faith-based schools create an alternative education space. International schools are alternatives to mainstream education because they offer curricula that are not accessible through the local school system. The extent to which a faith-based school is considered as alternative education space is dependent on the level of religious education transferred through the country's mainstream education. Pioneer Academy offers a rare

intersection of these two forms of alternative schools where its students are provided the highly sought global cultural capital while being inculcated with Christian values, which is prohibited by the Chinese state.

Second, it illustrates a departure from the existing work geographies of alternative education, which focus on spaces that negotiate the boundaries between them and mainstream schools by projecting either a sense of openness (Kraftl, 2013) or separateness (Brooks and Waters, 2015). The case of Pioneer Academy offers covertness as another manifestation of alternative education spaces. Most alternative education spaces promote particular ideals or alternative visions of life through its engagement and attempts at reducing the distance with the local community (Kraftl, 2014). This is precluded for an underground school. Instead, a covert alternative education space fundamentally signals the inadequacies of, and a radical departure from, mainstream education.

Third, the article reveals how these inadequacies also lead to alternative pathways of higher education. Even while Pioneer Academy instils global cultural capital and spiritual capital in its students, it simultaneously generates a loss of local cultural capital. This tension is manifest in the students' sense of belonging to a global Christian community and their aspirations to pursue higher education in (evangelical) Christian universities in the U.S. Ironically, their vision of an alternative future contradicts with their parents and educators' territorialised notion of alternative higher education, which is to be rooted in China and study in relatively more secular international branch universities.

**Endnotes**

1. Given the sensitivity of the topic, we have chosen not to name the city in which our fieldwork was conducted.

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