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# NewsLetter

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## Chinese Nation-Building and the Rethinking of Globalization and Education

ANDREW KIPNIS

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**ABSTRACT** Social, educational and political theorists increasingly portray today's world as one in which the globalization of Western forms dominates social, political and educational processes everywhere. According to this view, nation-building, though important in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is no longer an important social process. This view elides the recent importance of Chinese nation-building to both contemporary and future global trends. With a focus on educational phenomena, this article explores the ways in which Chinese nation-building is being globalized and coming to influence non-Chinese actors.

In reductive theories of globalization, it is assumed that the governing institutions and discourses and cultural forms that are currently spreading around the world all originated in the West. John Meyer and Francisco Ramirez (2003), for example, suggest that a series of interrelated global models of educational practice, all of Western origin, are coming to dominate the globe. Theorists like Mitchell Dean define the very notion of governmentality as 'the different ways that governing is thought about in the contemporary world which can in large part be traced to Western Europe in the sixteenth century' (Dean, 1999, pp. 209-210). It is also commonly assumed that the era of nation-building in the West preceded the current period of globalization – that the forms of standardization and institutionalization worked out in the process of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western nation-building led to the forms of standardization and institutionalization that have increasingly spread around the world since the mid-twentieth century and that, conversely, the power of what is being globalized today is so strong that independent projects of nation-building no longer matter. In this vein, Saskia Sassen argues that since the 1980s 'building national states' has been replaced by 'building global systems inside of national states' (2006, p. 16) as the most important form of global structuring. The powerful forms of nation-building taking place in China today, however, are beginning to influence the globe in ways that cannot be explained in terms of the globalization of Western practice. They illuminate the ongoing importance of nation-building projects, at least in populace countries.

A few statistics illustrate the extent of nation-building in reform-era China. Over the past 20 years the percentage of children entering senior middle school has more than doubled (from 38% of the population age cohort in 1988 to 86% in 2009), while the number of new enrollments at the tertiary level increased tenfold (from .59 million in 1989 to 6.39 million in 2009, which is more than 25% of the age cohort born in 1990).[1] Three years of pre-school has also been popularized in many parts of the country, bringing the total number of years spent in educational institutions to 15 for the majority of young people and to 19 for the significant (no longer elite) minority of those who attend university. During the same period the number of internet users has increased (from zero) to 384 million (China Internet Network Information Center, 2010, p. 3), mobile phones have become ubiquitous, the number of kilometers of roads has quadrupled (with the number of kilometers of interprovincial superhighways going from zero to nearly 60,000), and the length of

electrified railway lines has increased five-fold (ZhongguoJingjiNianjianWeiyuanhui, 2008, p. 907). This massive increase in education and communication and transportation infrastructure has caused particular communicative and interactive dynamics to emerge across China's immense population, facilitated the establishment of nation-wide labor markets and the active movement of hundreds of millions of workers across the nation in search of work, and led to a rapid increase in the use of standard Mandarin instead of local dialects in everyday conversation.

The potential effects of Chinese nation-building on the rest of the world can be seen from many angles. Karl Gerth (2010) argues that simply because of market size, the tastes of Chinese consumers are coming to drive engineering and design trends in industries such as automobile manufacturing, cosmetics and food processing. Many have depicted the influence of Chinese actors in Third World countries (particularly in Africa) and debated the extent to which Chinese actions abroad mimic earlier Western colonists or present an original and unique development model (see, for example, the September 2009 (#199) special issue of the journal *China Quarterly*). Chinese techniques of governing the internet may also spread more widely as more and more governments attempt to regulate what they see as improper speech (child pornography, racist ranting, or simply political opposition) in cyberspace.

In the area of education, the potential influence of Chinese norms and practices on the rest of the world is likewise broad. Already it is the version of the Chinese language that has been standardized in the People's Republic of China that is taught in Chinese language classes all around the world. Mandarin language teaching is, in fact, actively promoted by the People's Republic of China through the 'Confucian Institute', which, according to the official website, had 691 branches spread across 91 countries in October 2010.[2] There is perhaps no other language in the world today that attaches so closely to a single nation-state but is so widely studied by foreign students. The number of foreign students studying in China has also rapidly expanded, totaling 240,000 from 191 countries in 2009.[3] When studying in China, foreign students not only improve their Chinese language skills, but also learn a wide variety of technical skills and subtleties of educational and social interaction. Some of the disciplines studied in China, such as Chinese medicine and acupuncture, are taught and institutionalized in ways that differ considerably from other countries.

Other particularities of Chinese educational practice relate to the intense exam-oriented competition at Chinese schools. These also have considerable potential to influence educational practice outside of China. As China becomes wealthier, more Chinese parents send their children abroad for high school. By bringing exam preparation methods learned in China with them, these students are often successful in areas like math and science, increasing the level of competition in these subjects and thus providing incentives for other students to emulate their study habits. Such is the case at some high schools in Australia, where Chinese students dominate subject areas in which their relative lack of English language skill does not disadvantage them.

Another aspect of Chinese education that appears to be more 'advanced' than Western education is its use of standardized exams. In the United States, the use of standardized exams to evaluate teachers and measure the progress of students has been a vexed issue. George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, which mandated annual standardized exams in reading and math in years three through eight, has elicited much debate. But in the Chinese county where I did research from the late 1990s to 2007, there were standardized exams in every subject, at every grade level, twice a year. Teacher bonuses and evaluations were tied in a wide variety of ways to these exams (Kipnis 2011). In 2008 and 2009, however, some members of the education bureaucracy fought to reduce the use of standardized tests to once a year, in order to reduce exam-oriented competition among teachers and schools. Despite the fact that China has much more experience with standardized testing than almost any other educational arena in the world, the debate over NCLB made almost no reference to Chinese experience. If the world is headed in the direction of ever more standardized testing, then surely China is place to look to understand the social implications of this trend.

Two broad conclusions may be drawn from examining the potential global influence of nation-building in China. The first is that processes of nation-building and globalization have no fixed start and end dates. Yes, nation-building everywhere is influenced by processes of globalization, but, especially in large and powerful nations, ongoing processes of nation-building will influence future aspects of globalization. Nation-building should not be seen as something that happened only prior to globalization. Second, at least for the next several decades, no single

country is as likely to influence future global trends as much as China. In terms of population, only India is comparable, but India is less uniform than China (18 languages are officially taught in Indian schools), less developed than China, and, because of the history of British colonialism, in some ways more integrated with already extant aspects of Anglo-driven globalization than China. During the twenty-first century, the forms of commonality built through Chinese nation-building will matter beyond Chinese borders.

### Notes

- [1] See the All China Data Center (2010) for statistics on student enrollments. The age cohort born in 1990 was 23.9 million people. See Institute of Population and Labor Economics (2007, p. 365).
- [2] See the website [http://college.chinese.cn/article/2009-10/23/content\\_77852.htm](http://college.chinese.cn/article/2009-10/23/content_77852.htm) (accessed 22 March 2011).
- [3] See the website [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-09/28/c\\_13532971.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-09/28/c_13532971.htm) (accessed 22 March 2011).

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