

Modes and Trajectories of Shadow Education in Denmark and China: Fieldwork Reflections by a Comparativist

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Abstract

Purpose: In the domain of shadow education (private supplementary tutoring), Denmark and China may be placed at opposite ends of a spectrum. Denmark has a recently emerged, small, and high-cost sector that mostly serves low achievers, while China has a more industrialized sector with a long history and economies of scale. The paper juxtaposes the two to shed light on each.

Design/Approach/Methods: The article is a personal narrative of the author's research experiences. She grew up and had initial education in China before moving to the Nordic realm for 2 years. This provided a set of initial lenses, which were subsequently deployed in research partnership from her current base in China with colleagues in Denmark.

Findings: The juxtaposition raises questions that might otherwise not have been asked and provides insights that might otherwise not have been gained. Danish families hesitate to use shadow education for advantages in the egalitarian society, in contrast to Chinese patterns that stress competition and achievement. These facets have implications for the modes of shadow education and even the names of tutorial companies.

Originality/Value: The paper has a methodological value in addition to its substantive insights on the trajectories of shadow education in the two countries.

Keywords

Denmark, China, shadow education, private tutoring, comparative education, personal narrative

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In its short history, the *ECNU Review of Education* has already published one special issue on shadow education (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2019), and the present special issue is therefore the second.¹ The first special issue, coedited by myself and a colleague in the East China Normal University (ECNU) Centre for International Research in Supplementary Tutoring (CIRIST), focused on the world's largest and probably fastest-growing collection of shadow education systems, namely those in Chinese mainland and in the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions (Zhang & Bray, 2019). Now this second special issue is coedited with a colleague in Denmark's Aarhus University, to which in 2020 I was appointed an Honorary Professor. It focuses on perhaps the world's smallest and youngest collection of shadow education systems, namely those in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

Among prevalent (mis)perceptions about shadow education is that the phenomenon mainly thrives in East Asian countries dominated by Confucian cultures (see, e.g., Dang, 2008; Kwok, 2001; Lei, 2005). The comparative literature shows that shadow education actually has considerable scale and deep roots also in other world regions, such as South Asia and North Africa, that do not have Confucian cultures (see, e.g., Bray, 2009; Sobhy, 2012; Zhang & Bray, 2020). Nevertheless, it is true that shadow education has been particularly prominent in East Asia.

Historically, the Nordic countries have not had a significant scale of shadow education, but as shown by the other papers in this special issue of the journal the phenomenon has emerged there too. Its existence in the Nordic countries has particular significance in the context of societies in which egalitarianism is valued, examination-oriented education has been discouraged, and much trust has been placed in education as a public good (Booth, 2016).

As a comparative education researcher who grew up and currently works in China but who has also lived in Norway, I have long wanted to compare patterns of shadow education in the two extremes. One reason has been to show that the Nordic culture widely considered to be most different from Confucianism also provides the soil for shadow education. Another reason is to demonstrate that comparing extremes can in some circumstances be as informative as comparing societies with strong similarities.² The opportunity arose through the collaboration with Søren Christensen, my research partner in Denmark and lead editor of this special issue. In 2019, I returned to the Nordic culture for work with Christensen, a decade after I had left Norway following 2 years in exploration as a post-graduate student (2007-2009). During my two visits to Aarhus University in 2019, Christensen and I interviewed numerous stakeholders in the shadow education sector and in schools, government, and professional associations. This included visits to two tutoring companies, MentorDanmark and GoodGrade (subsequently renamed as GoTutor); and I participated in a pair of symposia led by Christensen with other researchers from India, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia.

As a historian with deep insights into the Danish culture, Christensen introduced Denmark to me in formal and informal ways. During these occasions, I found myself constantly comparing Denmark with both Norway and China. Conducting fieldwork as a pair of Danish and Chinese researchers, our discussions and interactions before, during, and after each visit and interview generated many comparative reflections.

Several interviews were conducted in partnership with a junior partner in Christensen's research network, Lucas Cone, who has his own paper in this special issue. Cone shared with me insights on the changing work conditions of teachers and on public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the Danish education system. The conversations led me to ask how the concept of private and public had been constructed in Denmark, and how neoliberal changes had challenged and been resisted by traditions. The nature of PPPs in shadow education had been a focus of my empirical research in Japan and China from 2013 to 2016, and an enduring interest since that period. A starting point for an understanding of PPPs in shadow education is scrutiny of PPPs in schooling and the values underpinning the social conception of the public and the private.

The 3 months of fieldwork in Denmark generated rich data that affirmed my desire to compare the extremes. A further opportunity to view China through an external lens was provided when the chief executive officer (CEO) and chief financial officer (CFO) of MentorDanmark visited China. As noted by Kany in this special issue, MentorDanmark is the largest tutoring company in Denmark. I welcomed him and his colleague first to Shanghai and then to Beijing (which also has a firm place in my personal history, from undergraduate study at Peking University). During my fieldwork in Denmark, Kany had shown strong interest in Chinese patterns of shadow education. He had himself looked closely at shadow education in the Republic of Korea and shared with me insightful observations about cultural differences.

When Kany and his colleague came to China, I linked them to tutoring companies of different types and joined the visits as a guide, interpreter, and researcher. These visits put the managers of the Danish company squarely in front of the managers of Chinese companies (the largest and some medium-sized ones), for sharing and reaction to each other. Visiting these companies and observing the space arrangements and procedures for tutoring also generated instant comparison by Kany and his colleague. After their return to Denmark, Kany generously kept me updated with his leadership decisions, including new programs among which were responses to the outbreak of COVID-19. Since the outbreak, I have been collecting data on the impact of the pandemic on tutoring and on policy responses in China, Denmark, and elsewhere. The Chinese market moved in an almost opposite direction from the Danish one.

The above background sets the context for what follows. In this article, I will share reflections from the fieldwork on forces shaping shadow education from a comparative perspective.

Elitism versus egalitarianism: Tutoring for excellence versus sameness

Denmark's famed egalitarian context and relatively low level of social competition are facilitated not only by historical and cultural forces but also by its relatively low population density. By contrast, elitism and value placed on diligence for excellence are part of the Chinese culture that still shapes contemporary features despite a government commitment to education for all. Further, China's huge population in the context of accelerating social development has intensified social competition for limited merit resources. In the education sector, this competition has fueled anxieties that required families to embark on strategic planning. These contextual factors have shaped the different nature of shadow education in the two countries.

In China, much tutoring could be described as part of an "insecurity industry" parallel to that portrayed by Dierkes (2013) in Japan. First, parents want to ensure that their children do not "lose at the starting line" by failing to have the necessary out-of-school support; and then they (especially the rapidly growing middle classes) want their children to remain competitive throughout their school careers (Zhang, 2020). The peer pressures driving many families to secure tutoring reflect the mindset that if the competitors are getting extra support, they should not be left behind (Liu & Bray, 2020).

Of course, tutoring in China is very diverse. The sector has as much remedial tutoring alongside tutoring for advancement, to help students to catch up with peers and get the support that schools do not provide. Thus, students of all academic levels receive tutoring. Low achievers secure tutoring to avoid stigma, average students secure tutoring to become higher achievers, and high achievers secure tutoring to remain high-achieving or to become the top. Further, tutoring is not just for educational needs. Some tutoring serves social needs such as childcare more than educational needs. However, the rapid expansion of shadow education and the livelihoods of the largest Chinese tutoring companies (at least until 2021, when strong state intervention was launched) have largely fed on the demand for tutoring to get ahead in the competition and to excel in high-stakes examinations. Education to many families, especially to middle-class families, is a brutal race to limited places for winners who would be labeled as successful social elites.

In Denmark, by contrast, family investment in tutoring is more concerned with the children's internal needs for personal development than external pressures to excel or remain ahead in comparison with others. This is demonstrated by several papers in this special issue of the journal as well as by the interviews conducted by Christensen and myself. The social norms underlying the Danish nature of shadow education include the perception that "social norms value sameness over distinction, and thus feelings of superiority or ambitions to excel should be critiqued and suppressed," which is a sharp contrast to the idea in China that "you can do better and become the best if you work harder." The so-called *Janteloven* (the law of Jante), valuing behaviors prioritizing

public interests over private ones and being modest about individual accomplishments (Gullestad, 1986), persists in the culture that shapes both schooling and shadow education, and intimidates both competition and aspirations for excellence.

Thus, Danish families that do secure tutoring seek two major types: (1) the “normal” tutoring to help the students catch up with school work, offering support that schools/teachers and parents cannot provide, and (2) preparation for assignments and examinations for college admission. The two types of tutoring have parallels in China, but in Denmark the shapes of such tutoring reflect different parental motives and learning goals. In both cultures, families secure such tutoring because of the perception that their children cannot get the help needed in school and they cannot provide it themselves. Rather than the emphasis on tutoring outcomes quantified by academic achievement (which is the focus for many Chinese parents), Danish parents are more inclined to focus on their children’s learning interests, confidence, motivations, and development of learning habits. They usually prioritize the need for their children to become good learners and confident holistic persons rather than stressing academic performance. Overall, Denmark has more tutoring for children to catch up and improve at school than for children who are already doing. Equity is perceived as sameness (Gullestad, 1986). Parents and teachers interviewed felt that motives for remedial tutoring to catch up in school did not so much reflect fear of being left behind in competition so much as a desire to remain the same as others. Similarly, the examination preparation was more about securing personal achievement and less about anxieties to win in the competition.

One shocking dimension for both sides during the visit to Chinese companies by the MentorDanmark CEO and CFO related to a pyramid that they drew (Figure 1). The representatives of the Chinese companies said that most of their clients were in the top 20% at school, together with some from the upper middle. Yet MentorDanmark mostly served the bottom 20%, and particularly the bottom 10%, to move them upward to the average. The relatively low proportion of high achievers receiving tutoring in Denmark also reflected the belief in sameness as set out in the *Janteloven*.

Again reflecting the contrasts, in China improvement of grades and examination performance is a core emphasis for companies’ advertisements. Some companies advertise their tutees’ entry to elite universities, and their sharply increased examination results “after using our tutoring.” MentorDanmark by contrast did not even use “tutor” in its company name. The founders’ preference for the word “mentor” reflected their mission; and their advertisements focused on finding learning companions, role models to help the children grow with confidence, and learning motivation.

Such matters were also reflected in the names of other Danish companies. One had commenced with the name GoodGrade. I learned from my visit to that company that its name gave a negative impression that the company focused on grades rather than real education, and not long after that meeting the company changed its name to GoTutor. Another company called FixMyAssignment aimed to help students with the assignments that were part of the assessment for college admission

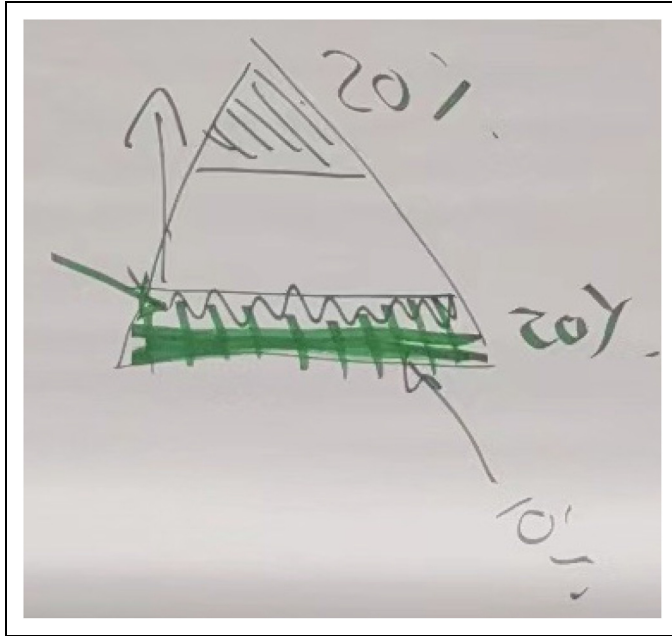


Figure 1. Sketch of the pyramid—which groups are served by the tutorial companies?

but closed down in the face of critique about facilitating plagiarism and giving unfair advantages for those who could pay. Yet companies in China had not hesitated (until the 2021 fierce regulations [China, 2021]) to boast about and exaggerate their capacity to provide special privileges and to enable their customers to excel in examinations. The very different discourses demonstrated in these examples showed what was valued and accepted by parents, students, and the wider society.

These remarks do not of course imply that Danish families were free of competitive pressures. Society has become increasingly competitive, even if not to the extent of Chinese intensities, and schooling has also become more competitive as a result of expanded global markets and reforms to improve academic achievement.³ These recent changes have indeed challenged traditional cultural beliefs, and have exposed parents to the dilemma of supporting the public good or pursuing the private good (Booth, 2016).

Tutoring as a class privilege: Public guilt versus private good

Despite the social norms making families feel obliged to support egalitarian ideals and to describe tutoring as necessary support for their children rather than a special privilege, most tutoring in Denmark is received by relatively wealthy groups. In all settings, private tutoring requires payment, and in Denmark the costs are relatively high. In China, by contrast, the massification of tutoring and expansion of online forms have reduced unit costs and permitted access by lower

classes (Zhang & Bray, 2021). Danish costs are higher because families prefer one-to-one home tutoring to large institutional classes. Interviewed parents were therefore conscious that they might be purchasing unfair advantages for their children against the norms of *Janteloven*, and felt shy to discuss it openly. At the same time, they explained in detail why it was necessary to do so, and that they had no choice.

Yet although challenges in schooling were cited as reasons for necessity, and the difficulties described by the Danish parents would be perceived by Chinese counterparts and even by me as insufficiencies in schooling or certain teachers' lack of responsibility, the interviewees always added good words and explanations about the schools and teachers. Examples included:

- (1) The school was actually good and very supportive; just the culture did not fit with my child.

and

- (2) It was not the teacher's fault: she tried her best, and it was beyond her responsibility.

These "defenses" of the schools and teachers showed strong trust in the state, and at the same time were rationalizations for parents wanting still to support than demolish the public good. The observations should be verified and supplemented by more in-depth data, but this preliminary finding echoes and adds to the conceptualization of "moral guilt" by Christensen, Grønbeck, and Bækdaahl in this special issue of the journal. That concept is itself related to the notion of "public guilt" to which Christensen and Cone introduced me during our initial meetings. Public guilt, demonstrated in the above analysis, reflects parental shame when admitting to the use of tutoring as an individual privilege and to pressurizing their children for academic achievements. Allied, I would add, it also reflects the guilt to secure tutoring, which might indicate dissatisfaction and distrust in public schooling or, worse still, an attempt to erode the egalitarian school system for the private good. This also explains the shock expressed by the CEO of MentorDanmark when finding in China companies with such names as "VIP Kid" and "Elite Smart." Parents in Denmark would not feel comfortable purchasing tutoring with such names announcing to the world that the parents think they are superior to other community members.

Yet also needing recognition is that the above description juxtaposed shadow education in Denmark in its initial stage with shadow education in China at its peak of development. In China's history of shadow education development, tutoring emerged to serve students at both the bottom and the top. In the initial development stage during the 1980s and 1990s, tutoring for low achievers was largely seen as a stigma about which families were ashamed to share. By contrast, tutoring for high achievers, especially for Olympiads, was evidence of strong performance that families felt more enthusiastic to share. The institutionalization of shadow education in

China has made tutoring a normal phenomenon about which parents no longer feel uncomfortable, especially when tutoring is perceived to signal distinction and merit (Zhang, 2020). Unlike Danish parents, Chinese families feel entitled to purchase tutoring in the marketplace, with such purchase demonstrating their responsibility and parental commitment to children's success.

The above analyses do not deny Danish parents' individualism or the desire for their children's academic achievement, but show how the perceived social expectations brought dilemmas in decision-making and constrained them in public behavior. In contrast to the generation of parents interviewed, the younger generation seemed less pressurized by such social expectations. They were more willing to express openly their individualistic identities as an expression of freedom. Two students interviewed together shared how tutoring had helped them perform well for college admissions, with no feeling of embarrassment about the pursuit of a private good. Overall, students tended to be more open about their aspirations and ambitions than their parents. Since "pressuring" children is generally perceived as inappropriate parenting behavior, few parents want to be seen as doing this. Yet for young people, to express aspirations and ambitions on their own behalf is considered much less problematic.

Globalization, it may be added, further caused parents exposed to advertisements and information from other countries to question their own beliefs about good parenting. This included the idea that "I might be wrong about what is best for them, so I should try to open multiple doors to empower them to choose who they want to become." The CEO and CFO of MentorDanmark had both lived in the USA and did not hide the joys from their successes. At the same time, they were not afraid to share their failures, and felt no need either to bluff about their achievements or to deny that they were small fish in front of the giant Chinese tutoring companies.

Public and private spaces for education: The lines between schools, communities, and families

Historically, in both cultures tutoring long existed in informal modes accessed through social and cultural capital before the emergence of institutional forms. As tutoring companies emerged, more families with little social or cultural capital but with sufficient economic capital could gain access to tutoring. However, the institutional forms differed in Denmark and China. In Denmark, the major forms of private tutoring, even when provided by companies, remained in the family spaces supplemented in some cases by community spaces such as public libraries. This pattern might be explained not only by the tradition of family tutors but more importantly by the clear division of educational spaces and related roles by actors in the spaces of schools, communities, and families.

In Denmark, unless it is close to the examination season parents mainly arrange to tutor on weekdays, leaving weekends and holidays for leisure and social activities in the community space. "For

MentorDanmark, holidays and weekends are the low season, and Monday to Thursday is most popular,” said Kany. “Parents feel that the kids need a break, and the local communities have many activities for children in the summer period.” By contrast, in China, the best periods for tutoring companies are weekends and holidays, especially the summer and winter vacations. This timing on the demand side reflects the high parental expectations for academic achievements. Another important factor lies on the supply side. Denmark has kept its strong tradition of providing after-school activities outside the school space, enabling students to join local clubs and teams with members of the community. In China, by contrast, such a tradition has changed with urbanization until recent efforts to reactivate extended education and build lifelong education systems. Working parents, especially those in urban areas, have had to plan children’s after-school time on their own due to the limited supply in the public sector, thus finding tutoring companies an efficient and convenient solution. The 2021 policy to provide nationwide after-school programs and ban (academic) tutoring on weekends and holidays is a fierce attempt to keep tutoring to only a few hours on weekdays (China, 2021). A key policy goal is to release time for social activities and other forms of learning, for example, in arts and physical education.

Returning to the space for tutoring, shadow education was largely considered part of the learning that should take place in family spaces with parental involvement after school hours and outside other community activities. Another contributing factor was the diversified school curriculum, since control of schooling in Denmark is more decentralized than in China. As indicated by Kany’s contribution to this special issue of the journal, MentorDanmark’s attempt to provide class tutoring failed mainly because students attending different schools had different curricula, so the company could not provide a standardized curriculum for full classes of tutees.

By contrast, in China the school curriculum is standardized. Tutoring companies can even use tracking to group students according to their academic achievements, which would not be acceptable in Denmark, providing standardized group tutoring while catering to the differentiation between tracks. The evolution of shadow education in China has been the history also of blurring boundaries between the school, family, and shadow education (Zhang & Bray, 2021).

Returning to Denmark, in that culture family space was still well guarded by the parents, and schooling showed little backwash of tutoring. However, as tutoring companies send tutors to more families and in the process externalize parental roles to tutors, boundaries will blur there too. Further, as tutoring companies succeed in sending tutors to provide tutoring in schools, even that boundary will blur.

Moreover, in both cultures school teachers contributed to the institutionalization of tutoring, but in different ways. In China, initial tutoring institutions largely depended on teachers providing tutoring as a way to earn extra income beyond school hours (Zhang & Bray, 2021). At the same time, some teachers left the schools for the tutoring sector. Some did so out of frustration with

the constraints in public schooling, but of course the higher incomes permitted by tutoring were also attractive. Many teacher-tutors viewed tutoring as an extension of public schooling to the private space. Some schools collaborated with tutoring institutions to secure performance.

In Denmark, by contrast, teachers and their union fought for their rights in the public space, which unexpectedly left a gap in schooling. As explained by Kany in his article, MentorDanmark moved into this space and grew by supplementing and complementing what was omitted in schooling. Danish teachers draw clear boundaries about their responsibilities within and beyond official school hours. They view the after-school hours as their personal time and avoid involvement or interference with other educators (such as leisure-time specialists), community members (e.g., running clubs), and parents. Few Danish teachers provided tutoring; and among the few who did, the involvement was limited to a small part of their lives.

Nevertheless, neoliberal forces have changed the school systems in both cultures. In China, pressures of performativity and managerialism in schooling increased incentives for tutoring and PPPs (Zhang & Bray, 2017). Tutoring was viewed as a vehicle not only for families to survive or win in competitions, but also for schools and teachers to score their performance indicators. Until the 2018 national regulation of tutoring (Zhang, 2019), PPPs between tutoring institutions and schools/local governments had increased with a focus on academic achievements. In Denmark by contrast, public schools and teachers strongly resisted PPPs that tried to bring in private actors to provide quick solutions in the name of efficiency.

Again with contrasts, in China, PPPs in shadow education mainly took place at the institutional or district levels. Municipal governments were cautious about the danger of reliance on the market and legitimizing tutoring when the state should be responsible to maintain the public nature of education. After 2018 when the state tried to regulate tutoring and then in 2021 fought for the public good against the wild intrusion of venture capital, PPPs with tutoring institutions dropped sharply or were disguised in other forms. In Denmark, teachers were strong in protecting their professional identities as independent educators. Tutoring was viewed mostly as something irrelevant to teachers and schools, largely as part of parenting in the family space. However, municipalities that had failed in attempts to support homework cafés as public help to students with learning difficulties (due partly to poor organization, partly to parental fear of stigmatizing their children) did consider using the services of MentorDanmark. Their perspective was that private services can be used for the public good if closely managed and carefully steered.

The social construction of the concept of private and public has also shaped government responses to the institutionalization of tutoring. In China's official discourse, state provision was public while market practice was private, and thus the concept of people-run (*minban*) education was created to secure the collective nature of private education, that is education run by the people for the people. Private (people-run) schools are under unified regulation and governance

as public schools in most dimensions so that they could be steered for the public good. However, unlike people-run schools under close monitoring of the state as part of the mainstream system, shadow education was outside the mainstream and left to market forces until the national initiative to regulate the sector in 2018. State interventions were thus considered necessary to balance and steer such practice for the public good, including through the closure of illegal centers.

The 2021 regulation was an example of the state's attempt to set a moral boundary to the wild expansion of big tutoring companies and capital flowing into the shadow education system (China, 2021). Unlike in Denmark, social norms and the trust in (and support to) the public play a key role in keeping the moral boundaries of the tutoring market. In China, the industry fed on and exacerbated family anxieties and feelings of insecurity, trapping more and more families in the theatre effect where they felt that they had no choice but to purchase tutoring in order not to be left behind in the competition. Thus, while the state in Denmark does not feel a strong need to regulate the market yet, the Chinese government decided to increase state intervention to prevent venture and other forms of capital from eroding the public nature of education and to release students from the heavy study loads imposed by the expanding market.

Denmark also has a tradition of private schooling with collective nature, exemplified by the "free schools" run by social groups with special needs that public schooling could not meet. Public education was built on the concept of community rather than the state, and both private and public schools were run by the community to serve the community. The state does not govern private schools as tightly as public schools. Just as the public trusts the state, policymakers seem also to show strong trust in people running private education. In an interview with a policymaker, I could feel his confidence. He believed that the tutoring companies could contribute to the public good if steered properly: "We have a long tradition in steering the private sector, ... like the free schools and publishers." Therefore, unlike Chinese policymakers who were usually unwilling to disclose partnerships with tutoring companies, Danish policymakers were transparent with their plans and felt that they could make good use of tutoring to serve the community.

Related to the above analysis is how the "public guilt" is shaping the tutoring practices not to erode or backwash public schooling. Providers of private tutoring tend to refrain from criticizing public schools and teachers. Kany takes care to express admiration of teachers' work and understanding of their predicaments. He always positioned MentorDanmark as a supplement and support to public schools, rather than a competitor. Describing the services that his company provided for schools during the COVID-19 crisis, he said: "We helped several municipalities with extra tutoring for the children most in need." In this framework, therefore, PPPs with schools were to help schools in equity objectives and particularly to support the most disadvantaged children.

PPPs have been a driver and salient feature in the development of China's shadow education system and will continue to shape the institutionalization of tutoring. The shapes and nature of

such partnerships evolve as tutoring institutions grow and change, including in reaction to government regulations, but the phenomenon is here to stay. Similar patterns are emerging in Denmark and will evolve as tutoring institutions evolve in the next stages of institutionalization.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Changes in shadow education brought by COVID-19 also fitted the above analysis. Tutoring companies in the two countries made similar attempts to respond to the crisis, but ended in opposite directions. In China, the outbreak required the closure of face-to-face (offline) tutoring companies but gave a great boost to online companies. Thus, 2020 brought a wild expansion of online tutoring, which accelerated the digitalization and massification of shadow education and marked the latest stage of its institutionalization (Zhang & Bray, 2021). PPPs between tutoring companies and public institutions expanded, providing support to learning in response to disrupted schooling. Online tutoring largely absorbed the parental anxieties fueled by school disruptions and their need for help during lockdown. Busy working parents had a particular need for such services when demanded full-time parenting all day and every day. In addition, anxieties were raised by tutoring advertisements emphasizing the necessity of tutoring and exaggerating its effectiveness for examination results and improved academic achievement.

In Denmark, by contrast, rather than being anxious about their children's academic grades and competitive abilities, parents seemed more concerned with the physical and mental well-being of their children. During lockdown, face-to-face tutoring was discouraged as in China (where it was actually prohibited), and MentorDanmark provided online tutoring as an alternative. However, most families reverted to the face-to-face mode as soon as they could. Further, new customers were unwilling to embark on online tutoring. The overall proportion of MentorDanmark online activity did expand from 2%–3% before the pandemic to 11%–12% in mid-2021, but these figures showed that nearly 90% of families still preferred face-to-face.

Thus, while in China the largest tutoring companies were busy expanding their market to lower-tier cities through online tutoring (Zhang & Bray, 2021), MentorDanmark decided to serve social groups most needing help, and developed adventure programs beyond just private tutoring. The company created programs in reading and mathematics for special-needs students, and an experiential learning project in partnership with a zoo was initiated based on an integrated curriculum with the vision of education for sustainable development. These new programs opened possibilities for attracting new customers. In the process, MentorDanmark also developed professionally in curriculum design and pedagogical innovations. PPPs between the company and municipalities were also facilitated by the pandemic. MentorDanmark helped several municipalities with extra tutoring for

children who needed the most help during the COVID-19 crisis. These PPPs opened doors for more collaborations in the future.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, my personal journey of comparison of Chinese and Nordic societies commenced during 2 years of postgraduate training in Norway. I found in that country a culture that was indeed dramatically different from the one in which I had myself been nurtured. This set the stage for much comparative study of education systems with a particular focus on shadow education that has occupied the last decade.

The renewal of my Nordic interest came in 2019 through collaboration with Aarhus University. By this time, following further research training in Hong Kong SAR and professional work in the Chinese mainland, Japan, and other Asian jurisdictions, my lenses for viewing patterns had been polished and my methodological tools had been sharpened. The collaboration with Christensen and others during a pair of visits to Denmark was both illuminating and enjoyable. It was followed by welcoming to China the CEO and CFO of MentorDanmark, and securing further juxtaposition during meetings between them and counterpart managers of tutoring companies in Shanghai and Beijing. Since those visits I have followed developments closely in the two countries, seeing how they have evolved in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and other forces.

Although basically addressing the same phenomenon of supplementary tutoring for students in regular schools, this paper has shown marked contrasts in the nature of that tutoring. Even the vocabularies differ, for in Denmark the tutoring is commonly called homework support while in China it is called out-of-school training. The language shows that in Denmark tutoring is conceived as something to help with schoolwork while in China tutoring it is more serious training. In Denmark, the keywords for advertisements are well-being, motivation, confidence, and interest, but in China, they have been academic achievement, examination, competition, and peer pressure.

Yet in both countries the shadow education sector is in flux, adapting to new circumstances and serving changing clientele. The young Danish generations, international and liberal, might think that they are free from the influence of the “ancient” norms of *Janteloven*, just as many Chinese youths may deny that Confucius has anything to do with their academic aspirations. Certainly, the observations made here are time-bound, and as the societies change so will the market offerings in the shadow sector. Thus, changes in cultures bring changes in shadow education; but equally changes in shadow education bring changes in cultures.

Overall, the paper has shown that much insight can be gained from comparison even of markedly different types of society. I shall myself remain keen to follow the changes not only in Denmark and

China but also in other parts of the world, and I invite readers to join in such collaboration not only with me but also with other colleagues in our CIRIST at ECNU.

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Notes

1. As explained in the Editorials for each special issue, “shadow education” is a common metaphor in academic circles to describe private supplementary tutoring in various shapes and volumes.
2. The ‘twins’ analyzed by Bray and Koo (2004), namely Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR, provide a striking example.
3. Introduction of standardized assessment for college admission was partly a response to poor showings in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

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