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The halted neoliberalising of public schools: policy trajectories of two ‘failed’ privatisation reforms in South Korea and China

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates and compares the policy trajectories of two halted privatisation reforms – autonomous private high schools in South Korea (2002–2019) and converted schools in China (1992–2008). The two reforms, ambitiously announced, were put under scrutiny and ultimately halted, when the public discontent about education inequalities was widely expressed. We particularly focus on the profound entanglement between neoliberal forces and contextual specificities, and their conjoint influences on the two reforms. The non-linear trajectories are explained through their reified embrace of neoliberal discourses and strategies, deep-rooted ideologies, political systems, and legitimisation derived from the shared Confucian ideals of ‘benevolent governance’ and social stability. This paper argues that, in these contexts, the verb form ‘neoliberalising’ better captures the dynamics and openness of privatisation reforms and renders nuanced understandings beyond the currently dominant neoliberal frames of reference.

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Introduction

Neoliberal ideology, which first emerged in the economic arena, has extended free markets and competition mechanisms into the public sectors of society while minimising the role of the government in the last few decades (Harvey 2005). It has profoundly reshaped education, often through outsourcing to the private sector, or exposing the public school system to privatised logics (Bates, Choi, and Kim 2021). However, this is not without controversy, particularly regarding the declining emphasis on social justice and resultant inequalities (e.g. Connell 2013; Klees 2020). This paper explores and compares two ‘failed’¹ privatisation reforms that were legitimised by neoliberal discourses and adopted via neoliberal strategies but eventually halted partly responding to the public discontent about increased inequalities. They are ‘autonomous private high school’² (APHS, *Jaripyeong Saripgo* or *Jayulhyeong Saripgo*) in South Korea from 2002 to 2019,³ and ‘converted school’

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(CS, *zhuanzhi xuexiao*) in China from 1992 to 2008. While more details will be provided later, put simply, APHSs are those transformed from quasi-public to private and CSs refer to schools converted from public to quasi-private mainly in terms of their finance.

This paper sheds particular light on the interaction between neoliberal forces and contextual specificities in South Korea and China, and how they have conjointly (re) shaped the policy trajectories of APHS and CS. To do so, we specifically adopt the notion of ‘neoliberalising’. This terminological choice can be better articulated in contrast to the two more frequently used notions – ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberalisation’. For years, scholars have recognised the perplexing amorphousness of neoliberalism. Castree (2006, 3) argues that there has been an essential and inevitable tension in conceptualising neoliberalism as the desire to abstract ‘commonalities within apparent differences without succumbing to “the fallacies of monolithism”’. Barnett (2005, 9), noting such variant understanding and usage of the concept, even contends that ‘there is no such thing as neoliberalism!’ Springer (2015, 6–7) attributes the ‘identity crisis’ of neoliberalism to viewing it in the sense of a *noun*, and thus advocates the *verb* form of neoliberalism. He firstly distinguishes neoliberalism and neoliberalisation. Both as *noun*, ‘ism’ indicates unrealistic ‘universal, monolithic, and exogenous processes’ and a ‘homogenous and singular outcome’, whereas ‘isation’ attunes to the ‘plurality and hybridisation’ of processes and outcomes. Thus, neoliberal-*isations* should be in the plural, which is favoured by many scholars (e.g. England and Ward 2007; Purcell 2008).

However, Springer further notes that neoliberalisations as a *noun* lead to a delusion that the (probably imperfect) processes will be evolving and eventually completed. Thus, he (2015, 6) suggests the *verb* form of neoliberalism – neoliberalising. This term underlines that the processes are necessarily ‘overdetermined, contingent, polymorphic, open to intervention, reconstituted, continually negotiated, impure, [and] subject to counter-tendencies’. The unfolding, open, and dynamic characteristics of neoliberalising call for close attention to the *conjoint operations* and *effects* of neoliberal practices and other manifestations of power working alongside, resisting, contesting, or existing independent of, neoliberal practices (Larner 2011). This problematises the (re)construction of neoliberalism as an ‘overarching trope’ (Kipnis 2007, 384), or a ‘macro-structure or explanatory background against which other things are understood’ (Collier 2012, 186). Thus, each neoliberalising reform, as examined in this paper, should be specifically considered as ‘a qualitatively distinct phenomena in its own right’ (Castree 2006, 4).

Drawing upon the notion of neoliberalising, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of neoliberalising education reforms in two aspects. Firstly, it focuses on the non-linear policy processes of privatisation wherein lay the negotiations, adjustments and resistance of neoliberal forces. We highlight the dynamics of neoliberal practices in East Asia where these practices have been sophisticatedly adopted as ‘techniques’, rather than a wholesale ideology (Ong 2006). Secondly, this paper connects with conspicuous epitomes, such as ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002), ‘variegated neoliberalisation’ (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010) and, particularly for East Asia, ‘assemblage’ (Ong 2006), which attune to the unevenness and heterogeneity of neoliberal reforms in diverse contexts. Yet, we concur with Zhou et al. (2019, 35) who argue that:

[T]he neoliberalism framework traps analysis of China within a Western frame of reference, hence marginalising the theoretical significance of the socio-political conditions and novel developments found in urban China.

In line with their view – while acknowledging the limitation of the sweeping label of ‘the Western’ – this paper aims to move beyond primarily drawing on the neoliberal experiences of Anglo-American societies as frame of reference, or simplistically clustering East Asia with Continental Europe, often as ordoliberal models that highlight the coordination of economic activities within a state framework of rules and regulations (Jessop 2019), in contrast to the Anglophone liberal one. While it is a welcome move to be more precise in articulating what happens in South Korea and China, some critical scholars in their attempt to capture the specificities of privatisation reforms describe the resemblances, variants, or antitheses of neoliberalism and/or Ordoliberalism (e.g. Choi and Cho 2017; Horesh and Lim 2017; Sum 2019). However, we ask whether such descriptors are sufficient to represent East Asian societies’ encounters with neoliberal forces, and our concern can be applied to the exploration of other non-Western experiences. This also echoes the decolonial scholarship that challenges the universality of Western-based theories and calls for constructing non-Western societies as legitimate sites of knowledge production (e.g. Silova, Rappleye, and You 2020; Takayama 2020).

To do so, the policy trajectory approach is employed in this paper to trace ‘policy formulation, struggle and response from within the state itself through to the various recipients of policy’ and associate the policy with its effects (Ball 1993, 16). We examined policies both ‘enacted and espoused’ about APHS and CS. That is, we incorporated ‘the text itself’ (e.g. official documents and circulars, executive plans, and government research reports), ‘the production of the text’, ‘ongoing modifications to the text’, and ‘the processes of implementation into practice’ (Taylor et al. 1997, 24–25). South Korea and China are selected to be compared. On the one hand, the last four decades have witnessed tremendous market-driven socio-economic transformations in both countries. On the other hand, their contextual specificities have been significantly different. While commonly shaped by Confucian ideals, they have historically chosen diverging economic and political approaches to modernisation, for instance, liberal democracy and capitalism vs. authoritarianism and socialism with Chinese characteristics, respectively. This comparison can help us gain understanding of the diversity and complexity of neoliberalising that is not bound by either society’s unique contextualised encounter with neoliberal forces. Seoul and Shanghai are specifically concerned, mainly because Seoul was where most APHSs in South Korea were established, and Shanghai was the ‘role model’ of the CS reform in China.

Through documenting the rise and fall of APHSs and CSs, the paper argues that neoliberalising in education as the ongoing and open process is subject to interruption or even put to an end (at least for the time being), if conflicting with key contextual specificities. In South Korea, the neoliberalising discourse and education equality were constantly negotiated around APHS. This negotiation interplayed with the public perception of, and request for, ‘benevolent governance’ as constructed in the Confucian ideals, and with the political system in which the election can oust the leader of the country and switch the roles of ruling and oppositional parties. The case of CS in China illustrates that while neoliberal strategies were adopted to tackle practical problems, they

were cautiously confined to the socialist framework. More importantly, neoliberal strategies could be flexibly abandoned when they increased political pressure and weakened the state's moral legitimacy underpinned by Confucianism as shared with Koreans. The following sections first contextualise neoliberal reforms in both societies, against which the policies of APHS and CS reforms are then examined; and last, these two cases of halted neoliberalising via privatisation are compared and elaborated.

Contextualising neoliberal reforms in South Korea and China

Understanding the evolving interactions between neoliberal forces and localities is never straightforward. For both South Korea and China, Confucianism has been a profound shaping force and a frame of explanatory reference (Choi and Woo 2018). According to Tu (2000, 199), despite varied styles of governance within East Asia, the public commonly perceive 'government leadership in a market economy is not only necessary but desirable'. As Tong (2011, 146) notes, the Confucian ideal of 'good government' is essentially 'a matter of morality', broadening the 'Mandate of *Tian* (Heaven)' which defines the highest morality of the ruler.⁴ However, this does not indicate that the states in Confucian societies are morally superior than their counterparts, but emphasises that their regime legitimacy significantly draws upon exerting, or making a political gesture of, 'benevolent governance' (*renzheng*). This Confucian ideal requires the state to equally provide all people with prosperous and contented life, in addition to legitimacy from its contemporary demands, i.e. the liberal democratic system in South Korea and economic performance in China (Warren 2019). The public expectation of, and preference for, this kind of moral state is reflected in *Analects* (16/1): 'inequality, not scarcity, persecutes the governor; instability, not poverty, haunts him'. Despite the diverging political paths taken by the two polities, being compassionate to the welfare of all people has been persistently cherished in Korean and Chinese societies. This is particularly prominent regarding the resource allocation in education as it is viewed pure and crucial in both societies (e.g. Kim and Choi 2023).

Meanwhile, divergent neoliberal forces have transformed education in the 'already bumpy surface' of East Asia (Hill, Park, and Saito 2012, 21). In South Korea, government policies and circulars promulgated since the 1980s have frequently referred to 'globalisation', presenting it as a tool to raise their global presence and national competitiveness in the global market (Choi 2021). This is especially the case under the presidency of Kim Youngsam (Gim Youngsam) who set his presidential management agenda as globalisation. In the 1990s, the neoliberal logic was introduced to educational governance, in a subtle but comprehensive way, through the so-called 5.31 reform proposal from the Presidential Committee of Education Reform (1994–1997). The neoliberal ideas and strategies were brought in, packaged in palatable mottos such as excellence, flexibility, and autonomy (Bates, Choi, and Kim 2021). These were compatible with the extremely meritocratic, exam-oriented, and competitive culture. The reform was welcomed also because it was presented as clearance of the legacy from the 30 years of military regime (1961–1990), which were characterised by authority, uniformity, and control (Kim and Reyes 2011). It was the conflation of the key words of neoliberal changes with ones perceived to be representing democracy, such as choice and freedom, that led people to accept neoliberal terms without much resistance (Piller and Cho 2013).

Previously, educational policy discourses featured catch phrases such as student-centeredness and open schools were employed. Since the 1980s, however, market-oriented education reforms have been aggressively enforced, as expressed in the ideologies of privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation, as well as the autonomy of individuals to make decisions to maximise self-interest (Jo 2005). Market and business terms including consumer needs, autonomy, transparency, plurality, accountability, and competition permeated policy texts afterwards (Lee and Kim 2016). The government policies moved away from serving the needs of the socio-economically marginalised to emphasising the service to *all*, which were translated to adding policies catering to the needs of the gifted. The same discourse now defended the elimination of the equalisation programme for high schools, allowing for the introduction of APHSs. The popular neoliberal educational governing strategies such as standardised tests, merit pay for teachers, and school-based management were also introduced, reflecting the permeation of neoliberal discourses in education (Kim and Reyes 2011; Lee and Kim 2016).

In China, the introduction of neoliberal strategies was largely a pragmatic response to the limits of the planned economy in the early 1980s (Urio 2012). The detachment from neoliberal ideology substantially created a space for the hybridity of various ‘isms’. As Horesh and Lim (2017, 426) argue, developmental and neoliberal characteristics were adapted and combined with China’s own version of state capitalism, that is, controlling key factors of production while ‘leaving room for private capital accumulation’. The role of the state shifted from ‘resource distributor’ to ‘active market agent’ (Wu 2010, 625), interpenetrating with markets through the institution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself (Vickers and Zeng 2017, 203). According to the former Premier Zhao Ziyang (1987–1989), ‘the state would regulate and control the market, while the market controls the economy’ (Vickers and Zeng 2017, 202). While preserving the public ownership as the mainstay, privatisation was taken partially, experimentally and gradually, monitored by the Party-state, in the name of ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics’ (Harvey 2005). The authoritarian political institutions and the extensive mechanisms of social control enabled the CCP to heighten the necessity and universality of its neoliberal policies while downplaying the undesirable consequences (Duckett 2020).

Two reasons specifically stimulated China’s educational privatisation reforms since the mid-1980s – to establish an educational system compatible with the market-oriented economic system and to fill the fiscal gap generated by low educational investments. Educational privatisation took place in two aspects. First, *minban* (literally people-run) schools and various types of public–private hybridised schools, such as CS, proliferated as a result of encouraging all kinds of non-governmental sectors to fund schools and operate them with the user-charging principle, complementary to the public proportion (Hawkins 2006). Second, the languages of New Public Management, albeit highly selective, were justified as an antidote to the perceived inefficient education sector. In particular, reforms that increase school autonomy, accountability, and competition were implemented to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and performativity (You 2021). *Minban Education Promotion Law* was promulgated in 2002 with the purpose of furthering and regulating education marketisation and privatisation.

However, as showed next, the neoliberalising attempts to privatise public schools in both societies seem to have been slowed, rectified, halted, or even reversed in recent decades, partly due to the public discontent about inequalities.

The policy trajectories of APHS and CS

The case of APHS

APHSs first appeared in South Korea in 2002, in response to the public criticism of the uniformity of public schooling created in the late 1960s. In 1968, the Korean government abolished the Middle School Entrance Examination and adopted a student placement lottery system, in order to reduce between-school differences in learning outcomes (Choi and Hwang 2017). The residence area, instead of test scores from the examination, was then to determine the advancement to the junior high school. In addition to the teacher circulation scheme that reallocated public school teachers to new schools every 4 years, this measure aimed to provide equal access to quality education. The initiative was extended to senior high schools in 1974. It turned private high schools quasi-public, erasing many differences between private and public schooling (Kim 2018, 323). This entailed a tight government control over most aspects of the operation and curriculum in private schools. For instance, the policy mandated both public and private schools to follow a common national curriculum.

After the slump and shock from 1997 economic crisis, and with the heightened neoliberal reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the equalisation programme started to be criticised for lack of flexibility, inefficiency, and not being able to address diverse needs of students, including elite students who would save the country from crisis (Choi 2021). In response, the government, led by the then Minister of Education Lee Joo-ho, started the school diversification policy, which featured specialisation and privatisation (Oh 2011, 384). Science, foreign language, or art schools, which were typically small, prestigious and/or academically focused, flourished during the 2000s. APHS as a pilot programme was also launched in 2002 under the conservative government. Their operations were prescribed over time. First in 2005 the Elementary and Secondary Education Act allowed for flexibility in their ‘curriculum, rules, and teachers’ (Choi and Hwang 2017, 4), and in 2009, the freedom became more wide-ranging, from the appointment of principals, setting tuition fees and even academic terms.

The freedom for these schools was given at a cost: they had to finance themselves, risking potential closure if they cannot recruit a sufficient number of students. Some regulations remained, however, such as the ceiling for tuition fees and reserving a minimum of 20% of their places for underprivileged students (Park 2016). The status of the APHS licences was to be re-examined once every 5 years, and when failing to meet the evaluation criteria, they were to be reverted to traditional schools (Park 2016). In 2010, The Local Education Authority in Seoul changed the policy of equalisation fundamentally with the implementation of a universal high-school choice programme, resulting in 20% of traditional private high schools turning themselves into APHSs (Choi and Hwang 2017). Under this new regulation, students within Seoul could apply for schools irrespective of the type of schools or catchment area. There were 13 APHSs out of 142 private high schools during the first year of this programme, and over 50 APHSs were approved afterwards. The expansion and the fact that it constituted a considerable part of senior high schools instigated disputes.

APHSs, along with specialised schools, were expected to raise the overall educational calibre. These high-status track schools – featured by a differentiated curriculum, school

independence, and student selection – however, left the traditional public schools behind to become a ‘ghetto’ and disproved the claim by the conservatives that the introduction of APHSs would strengthen public schooling and equality (Kim and Reyes 2011; Oh 2011). The majority of these elite schools were attended by students from middle-upper-classes, partly due to their sizeable tuition. The high competition involved in securing a seat in these schools favoured the affluent classes who could purchase the competitive edge through purchasing private tutorials and the very complex admission-related information. The choice, diversity, and autonomy promised by neoliberal strategies such as APHSs were open only to ‘talented’ students (Park 2007).

These changes created tension. Many of the public started to view APHSs as a mechanism which perpetuated inequalities between the socioeconomically privileged and underprivileged (Lee and Kim 2016). This perception predicted that these schools would have a difficult fate afterwards. The general public thought that they had to follow an egalitarian framework represented by the school equalisation policies, and that education as public good must be off the limit of business activities (Kim 2005). To illustrate the public responses, in the two national surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004, about 67% and 66% of the population supported reverting back to the equalisation as the main framework for public schooling provision.

Debates on the cancellation of APHSs started in policy discussion. Defendants of APHSs claimed that the policy promoted competition between schools, thus increasing the overall standard of education, and reviving the collapsing public education. ‘Parents who are more educated with higher income’ and conservative parties which had long been in power advocated this discourse (Park 2010, 594). The mainstream mass media would represent the interest of these ‘powerful’ and discredit the policy serving the underprivileged. For instance, initiatives such as Innovative Schools and the Free Lunch Scheme were criticised as political, ‘communist’ propaganda of the progressive superintendents (Yoo and Kwon 2016).

However, the strong internet infrastructure and social media enabled the less powerful to find a route to express their concerns, build coalition and networks, create counter discourses against the neoliberal changes which minimised social welfare and advocated a small government (Choi and Cho 2017). People created discourses and garnered support for social movements by sharing views and making appealing statements to the public, via social media platforms such as Naver.com, twitter, and MLBPARK (an online sports community). According to Jeon Min-ki who investigated the big data on the discussion around the APHSs, people’s negative sentiments are revealed through collocating words such as ‘resistant’, ‘fake’, and ‘broken’ (CBS Shisa Jockey Producers 2019).

The public sentiment was not something to be disregarded by the politicians in the context—where the public can significantly affect the power structure through the election and where educational issues are highly politicised (Choi 2021). Conventionally, political parties draw on poll results to canvass public opinion on social issues, in preparation for elections. The annual polls conducted by regional educational offices and governmental research institutes such as the Korea Educational Development Institute showed that the opposition rate to APHSs has increased over the years. By 2014, the majority (60.7%) were in favour of the conversion of autonomous private high schools back to general high schools, most of whom (42.4%) noting the exacerbation of educational inequality brought by APHSs (Yi 2014). Similar opinions were expressed via

the Voting Advice Applications, or online election campaign where candidates express their position of issues, and the voters cast an informed vote (Park et al. 2016).

In this context, the candidates for 18th President Election, regardless of their party allegiance, all pledged for welfare-oriented policies (Kim 2013). Part of this policy was free high-school education, which placed APHSs in a precarious position. President Moon Jae-In (2017-present), among the candidates, emphasised the vision to narrow the socioeconomic gap between the privileged and underprivileged (Kim 2018). This partly responded to the criticism that the central government, with the excuse of decentralisation, was disregarding the social responsibility to ensure the welfare and equity of the society (Kim 2018). Moon, as a presidential candidate, resumed the free high-school pledge during his campaign for the 19th President Election. He also announced his plan to abolish the privileged group of schools terminating their licences ('Education authorities cancel licenses' 2019). This turn seems to be partly related to the stance of the Democratic party, which Moon is affiliated.⁵ The Democratic traditionally stressed welfare and social justice, representing the interest of the marginalised (Ahn 2015). The public expressed their support for this counter-neoliberal move by voting for Moon.

With the endorsement from the public of the reverting or slowing down of neoliberal changes, in 2019 the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education revoked licences for eight out of 13 APHSs. They reportedly failed to reach the standard set out previously, such as the mandatory quota for underprivileged students, leaving only 42 APHSs operating countrywide ('Education authorities cancel licenses' 2019). Later the year, the government announced that all APHS, along with specialised schools except for science schools, were to be turned into public schools as of 2025⁶ (Chun, Park, and Jeon 2019).

The case of CS

The origin of CS was rooted in a series of decentralisation and privatisation reforms since the mid-1980s to 'align China's educational system with the newly emerging marketisation of the economy' and to loosen the fiscal burden of the centre (Hawkins 2006, 28). In the milestone policy document *Decision on the Structural Reform of China's Education System*, the local government was required to bear the majority of expenditures on compulsory education, and state-owned enterprises, social institutions, and citizens were encouraged to run schools within the existing regulatory framework. But substantial involvement of the non-governmental sector only embarked in the early 1990s when the idea of 'socialist market economy' was officially confirmed. In 1993, the central government stated that while public schools ought to be the mainstay, all circles of society should make contributions to educational development. Meanwhile, education was officially defined as 'a social productive force', justifying the introduction of market mechanisms and corporate ideas in education (Fan 2020). From 1992 to 1993, seven *minban* schools were established in Shanghai, mainly by retired principals with funds raised from communities and lands and facilities offered by the government (Fang 2017). The public-private hybridity, emerging from the very beginning of educational privatisation, both characterised and problematised CSs, as illustrated later.

The 1994 taxation reform enabled the central government to withdraw certain tax authority from the local government while leaving the latter to fill the increased gap

of educational subsidies. As Hawkins (2006, 32) notes, ‘now local governments must be even more creative in finding alternative sources for funding schools’. The 1994 policy document *Opinions on Implementing the Programme for Educational Reform and Development in China* creatively proposed that ‘if conditions allow, schools can be operated in the forms of “people-run-and-public-subsidise” (*minban gongzhu*) and “public-run-and-people-subsidise” (*gongban minzhu*)’. The explicit intention was to break down the state monopoly on educational provision, satisfy diverse demands for education, strengthen the vitality of school running and eventually improve educational quality (Wei 2015). With the formal recognition of public–private hybridisation, a small number of public schools took the trial in few main cities like Shanghai and Beijing.

As a pioneer, the Shanghai Municipal Educational Commission (MEC) coined the term CS in its 1996 policy document *Suggestions on Reinforcing the Management of the Experiment with the Conversion of Public Schools at the Level of Primary and Secondary Education in Shanghai*. It was soon accepted by the State Education Committee and borrowed by other provinces. In general, CSs were former public schools receiving funds from both government and non-government sectors and operated in the same way as *minban* schools (Ding 2012). As officially stipulated, only ‘weak’⁷ and newly-established public schools were eligible to convert; the conversion and fees were subject to strict scrutiny by local authorities. Although without clear prohibition, MEC stated that firm control should be exercised regarding the conversion of public schools with high social fame and at the level of compulsory education. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) adopted a more liberal attitude in its 1999 policy document *Decisions on Furthering Educational Reform and Promoting Quality Education in an All-round Way*, which permitted local governments to ‘make bold attempts’ of all forms of school sponsorship and management, as long as in conformity with laws.

Mainly encouraged by this policy, the number of CSs rapidly increased nationwide. Taking Shanghai, for example, 23 public schools converted in 1997, accounting for 20.7% of all *minban* schools, and the percentage rose to 50% in 2001 (Fang 2017). The CS scheme was attractive primarily for two reasons. Firstly, compared to public schools, CSs could enrol students who were not within the catchment area and charge higher tuition fees and extra endorsement fees (*zanzhufei*), as their *minban* counterparts. This satisfied parents who were advantaged in the market economy reforms and willing to purchase preferential educational services for their kids (Painter and Mok 2008). Second, compared to *minban* schools, CSs obtained more support from local educational authorities, such as extra funding for daily operation and facility update, and higher percentage of teachers in payroll, as their public counterparts (Ding 2012). In a nutshell, CSs enjoyed the benefits of both public and private sectors.

This hybridisation was also reflected in school management. The reform intended to enhance efficiency and diversity of educational services by granting more autonomy and introducing the management mechanisms of *minban* schools to CSs. However, *de facto* changes occurred to a limited extent. Except for fees charging and student selection, CSs were run under the direct and tight control of local educational authorities as public schools. For example, in Shanghai, CS principals were appointed by district educational bureaus (DEBs). All received fees were required to be put into bank accounts opened by DEBs and expenditures should be reviewed by DEBs. Curricula and syllabi did not stray

away from public schools. As Ding (2012, 162) pinpoints, while MOE identified CSs as public, MEC seemed ‘confused’ to categorise CS as *minban* for statistics.

The hybridised nature of CSs was fundamentally problematic, resulting in the outbreak of public discontent. As explicated above, CSs could capitalise on favourable policies for both public and *minban* schools, particularly, using richer public resources while enjoying higher autonomy over fee charging. Thus, many prestigious public schools were passionate about conversion. They converted primarily in three ways: (1) dividing junior and senior secondary sections and partly converting the junior part; (2) emerging with existing *minban* schools to form new CSs; and (3) establishing new *minban* schools within original schools to join the CS scheme. Many experienced teachers from prestigious public schools were either voluntarily transferred to CSs for higher incomes or re-positioned by schools to attract more fee-charging students (Wei 2015). As a result, the conversion of prestigious public schools put *minban* schools and other public schools in a disadvantaged position in competition, violating market principles. The expanded inequality of educational resource allocation among schools exacerbated the already concerning ‘parental choice fever’. However, the government scrutiny for approval was lax, mainly due to financial considerations (Ding 2012). For example, in 2001, 76% of CSs were at the level of compulsory education, and many of them were prestigious schools (Fang 2017). The public was keenly sensitive and resentful about the fact that CSs even worsened the pre-existing unequal resource distribution, shifting the role of prestigious schools from serving ‘the talented’ to serving the rich (Vickers and Zeng 2017). Their discontent was expressed through internet like BBSs and mainstream media; many misconduct cases were even reported by parents to the central and local petition agencies.⁸ Open criticism was put forward by scholars, acting as defenders of the public’s interest, and ‘New Left’ officials. All these gave rise to heated public and scholarly debates (Fan 2020).

Intensified discussion and critiques put officials under huge pressure. Before the central government reacted, Yan Junqi, the then vice mayor of Shanghai, stated in 2003 that CSs should be either turned back into public or completely transformed into *minban* (*feigong jimin*) to end the mess and save the public image of MEC (Ding 2012). In 2005, the policy document *The Notice on the Preparation for Cleaning-up and Rectifying the Problems of Converted School Fees* was issued. It announced a comprehensive termination on approving new CSs from 2006 and required local governments to probe, and file reports on, the funding, fee charging, sources of teachers, and approval procedure of CSs before 2006. The 2006 *Compulsory Education Law* stipulated that the nature of public schools shall not be changed for any reason. In 2007, MOE requested the completion of ‘cleaning-up and rectifying’ CSs across the country before the end of 2008. But instead of a fundamental reversal, these moves were more a pause (Painter and Mok 2008), not alone the fact that 32% of CSs in Shanghai took the *minban* route, and most of them were prestigious schools affordable by richer families (Fang 2017).

Understanding halted neoliberalising: comparison and discussion

So far, this paper has investigated the policy trajectories of APHS and CS reforms in South Korea and China. It can be seen from the above that both reforms involved privatisation. In South Korea, a number of quasi-public schools developed stronger

private nature, whereas, in China, the highly public-funded system was partly transformed into a private-public hybrid. APHS and CS commonly enjoyed financial and administrative autonomy over charging higher fees and selecting students in the emerging educational market. Nevertheless, their openness to privatised logics and measures was to varying extents and for different purposes. APHSs obtained great autonomy over curriculum, personnel, academic terms setting, finance, and administration. With the neoliberal reforms presenting those changes featuring autonomy and choice as tools to eradicate the spirit of the government which usurped the power through *coup d'état*, and the equalisation policy being blamed for the economic failure that led to the IMF intervention (Kim and Reyes 2011), APHSs ('autonomous' private high schools) which contributed to diversifying schooling provision was deemed as reflecting democracy, efficiency, and quality of education.

In contrast, except for student enrolment and fee-charging, the private-public hybridised CSs in China were run under the firm control of local educational authorities in most management areas as their public counterparts. The CS scheme was promoted as an ideal for innovatively combining public ownership and regulation, corporate management and private fund while not simply shifting the role of the public body from a provider to a regulator as seen in many public-private partnerships elsewhere or completely falling into capitalist privatisation opposing to socialist ideals to which CCP has claimed to commit. Nevertheless, as part of the fiscal decentralisation in education between the central and local governments, this reform was mainly driven by 'a desire to disengage the state from being the sole provider of educational services' (Hawkins 2006, 30). Put differently, the major driving-force of this privatisation reform was a realistic one – pragmatically releasing the state burden and supplementing the insufficient public educational expenditure (Painter and Mok 2008). There was no intent to change the dominance of public ownership in the first place, manifesting in the fact that educational authorities insisted on categorising CSs as public in policy.

Both reforms were abolished in the end at least temporarily, due to the public discontent about increasing educational inequalities. In South Korea, the drivers were the egalitarianism concerning public schooling, a notable socio-psychological characteristics of Koreans that was established since the Korean War (Song 2006), and the highly participatory and interactive election system (Park et al. 2016). Along with specialised schools (e.g. foreign language and science high schools), APHSs, with their significant numbers, created a stratified educational system (Kim 2005). Only the wealthy were able to pay higher tuition fees for APHSs, which widened the gaps between the privileged and the underprivileged and diminished the equality in education access (Park 2016) and in progressing to higher education (Oh 2011). This was not acceptable to the public. The dissatisfaction was effectively expressed, and a coalition of stakeholders was mobilised via social media (Choi and Cho 2017). Politicians were pressured to respond to the demands during e-campaigns, with the powerful election system which can change the position of the opposition and ruling parties (Park et al. 2016).

In China, CSs intensified the tension between educational privatisation and socialist ideals, although the Chinese state attempted to avoid that. The increasing economic disparities among individuals, justified by the motto 'letting some people become rich first', enabled a group of parents to purchase for preferential educational services. In consequence, rich families could afford CSs supported by private and public funds and

better teachers receiving the government payroll. That is, public resources were misused for the privileged. Critiques on the ambiguous public–private boundary of CSs and inequalities were provoked since the first day of its launch and accelerated throughout the reform (Ding 2012). The state rectified privatising activities when they seemed likely to aggravate socio-political instability. Despite various privatisation reforms in recent decades, *minban* education has experienced even more restriction than ever, oriented by Hu Jintao's (2002–2012) 'putting people first', and most recently exacerbated by Xi Jinping's (2013-) 'common prosperity', sensing the danger of the ever-increasing uneven development and distribution that have caused to the CCP leadership.

The two reforms of privatising public schools in South Korea and China led to inequalities, or the erosion of publicness, as many other countries have similarly experienced. Nonetheless, negative consequences were addressed by the Korean and Chinese states in the characteristic ways framed by their idiosyncrasies of political culture. As mentioned earlier, Koreans and Chinese are still deeply saturated with Confucian ideals of 'benevolent governance' shaping the public perception of the state's role in neoliberal reforms. This alive tradition has entangled with modern political ideologies and institutions in both societies, leading to policy reactions to the negative consequences of APHSs and CSs.

In South Korea, Kim (2018) illustrates the tensions between the direct commitment to liberal democracy and the implicit Confucian moral discourse, which constrains political leaders and constructs the Korean civil society confronting the state for the interest of common people. The neoliberal ideas packaged in words, such as choice, autonomy, efficiency, and effectiveness, were used in election campaigns and welcomed by the public, as they were linked to purging the education system of the oppressive military legacy, liberal democratic ideals, and high quality of education. But when the APHS policy worked in the way merely privileging certain group of people, public support was shifted to the party that would take a moral (rather than just political) leader role and be more oriented to group primacy (Choi and Woo 2018). The 'citizens' movement' (*simin undong*), characterising post-democratic Korean society, has also reinforced the benevolent governing ideal that the state should look out for people's livelihood. Motivated by citizens' everyday interests and facilitated by social media, common people have been empowered to raise voter awareness, voice out their demands and press political parties and electoral candidates. Thus, the candidates were forced to become more responsive to the common good and win the trust of the people on their political efficacy to achieve social harmony (Kim 2011). While not being confrontational, these subaltern citizens successfully expressed their resistance to the policy they disagreed with, causing the policy course to change (see Choi 2017 detailing their repertoires of resistance acts). Nowadays, such citizen movement is accelerated by the tendency that, after decades of strong economic growth, younger voters are now moving towards more value-driven politics (Warren 2019).

For the Chinese state, the rebalancing strategies were undertaken mainly to build and retain support for CCP rule (Duckett 2020) while marching towards the goal of restoring China as a world power (Urio 2012). In addition to the popular view that the CCP regime has heavily relied on economic performance to maintain its legitimacy, light should be thrown on moral performance rooted in the Confucian ideal of 'benevolent governance' and its embodiment in the socialist

ideal of ‘common well-being’. Although not genuinely elected by people, Chinese officials have portrayed themselves as the highly responsible parent for all people, as the people expect them to be (Tong 2011). The prolonged image of ‘parental officials’ (*fumu guan*) has been rhetorically integrated with the socialist ‘serving-the-people’ promise. CCP has constructed its political supremacy and regime legitimacy by convincing people that it is the only force capable of guaranteeing a ‘moral bond between the state and society’, leading them out of difficulties (Tong 2011, 141). Facilitated by an authoritarian system, the Party-state is willing and able to abruptly shift the policy substantially if it is thought to exhaust public expectations and threaten legitimacy and stability despite ideological conflict and policy inconsistency (Zhou, Lin, and Zhang 2019). Although many of the rebalancing policies have in effect further re-segregated provision (Duckett 2020), in propagandas, they have demonstrated CCP’s gesture of assuring the collective welfare of the people in order to reduce dissatisfaction with the downsides of privatisation and further reinforce its rule.

Due to the similar stress on the state’s firm role in market regulation, Hall and Soskice (2001) cluster Continental Europe and East Asia as ‘coordinated market economies’ in contrast to Anglophone ‘liberal market economies’. Some scholars specifically utilise ‘ordoliberalism’, the concept mainly drawing on the Continental European experiences, to illustrate Chinese economy and governance (e.g. Lagerkvist 2015; Sum 2019). However, for the ordoliberal, the role of a strong state is to establish properly functioning free markets by drawing on ‘a legal and ethico-political framework’ (Jessop 2019, 2). In other words, state intervention aims to sustain an ordered, stable, and healthily competing market economy. This is embedded in a deep belief of humanist values based on the liberal, equal, and individualist understanding of self, for which economic freedom is key to political freedom (Kipnis 2007). In contrast, as we can see from this paper, free markets and neoliberalising can be halted in South Korea and China for the reasons distinct from those stimulating state intervention in ordoliberal models. In South Korea, this was the case when a party valuing social justice was in power. In China, this was central to resuming moral legitimacy for its rule and socio-political stability since the CCP propagates itself as the responsible parent.

We also have no intention to say that Korean and Chinese states are more people-oriented than other countries allowing for neoliberalising, nor that Confucianism is superior in ensuring more equal societies. The political promise, cultural expectation, and/or survival consideration synthetically render heavy legitimacy and/or practical pressure on their leadership. In South Korea, neoliberal discourses and strategies have been deployed or abandoned for the focal policy to appeal to the potential voters in elections or to push through the national competitiveness goals set by the elected leader (Suh and Kwon 2014). In China, they have been flexibly acted on as the favourable and unfavourable factors to the fundamental goal of ‘socialist world power’ in pace with the ever-changing socio-political situations (Urio 2012). Thus, although some Western countries have similarly encountered negative consequences of neoliberal initiatives, it may be easier and more likely for South Korea and China to exercise firm state intervention and flexibly reorient the reform away from the market, even only temporarily, as shown in the examined cases.

Conclusion

This paper has explored and compared the policy trajectories of two abolished privatisation reforms—though temporary—as the manifestations of interrupted neoliberalising in South Korea and China. These two cases may not fully represent the comprehensive pictures of educational privatisation in both contexts over time and not be generalisable to other policies. Nonetheless, they have elaborated the dynamics of the neoliberalising processes in the societies where (neo-)liberal spirits and ideologies do not originally emerge. Both states privatised public schools in diverse approaches to address their goals—as illustrated above, allowing for self-financing to obtain votes in South Korea against the tension between discourses of education equality and catering for mid- and upper-class needs, and in China, blurring public and private boundaries to solve the shortage of fiscal resources, rather than subscribing to any ‘isms’. When the strategies no longer served their interests or resulted in new problems, they were able to turn back on their previous policies, although this might be just for the time being and subject to further changes.

Moreover, the initiation, detour, interruption, and even (temporary) rejection of privatisation strategies may not necessarily be the result of pure neoliberal or anti-neoliberal considerations. With keeping the noun forms, previous attempts to avoid the ‘violence’ of over-abstraction disconnecting neoliberalism from contexts while having set the right direction has had only limited explanatory power for these two cases. Rather than exaggerating neoliberalism as a universal construct, neoliberalising as dynamic, diverse, and open-to-counter-tendencies processes brings neoliberalism back down to size. In this paper, the open nature of this concept creates the space for a closer examination of *de facto* entanglements between neoliberal forces and contextual specificities, which vividly captures the trajectory of a neoliberalising reform from its beginning to cessation. More importantly, this paper has extended previous work to understand Asian-specific neoliberal practices (e.g. Harvey 2005; Ong 2006) by identifying and elaborating the key specificities including shared Confucian preferences of ‘benevolent governance’ and social stability and respective ideological and political features, which helped with preventing the practices from turning into a totalising frame of neoliberal thinking.

Echoing Zhou et al. (2019, 40) again, this is not a complete rejection to ‘the application of neoliberal vocabulary and methodology’ to explain non-Western societies. Rather, we aim to challenge the privilege of neoliberal frames merely based on some Western experiences as ‘massive narrative in theoretical articulations and representations’ across contexts (Zhou et al. 2019), by attending to the nuances and specificities of two education privatisation reforms in two East Asian societies. They should be taken as illustrative examples for broader investigation and comparison beyond the geographic scope of this paper. For that, drawing on our findings in South Korea and China, we call for more caution about falling into the assumed neoliberal holism and reification as Kipnis (2007) criticises and simultaneous efforts on understanding what actually and sophisticatedly happens in non-Western societies. Certainly, inspired by decolonial theories and spirit, more work is further expected to be done to seriously embrace the non-Western experiences of education neoliberalising as part of the original and profound references of theorisation and articulation. This, as we believe, not only renders

sophisticated understandings of non-Western education and social transformations alone but also enriches the innovative and comprehensive elaboration of neoliberal influences on education in general.

Notes

1. Considering discursive and iterative nature of policy, this evaluation is based on the policy status at the point of the investigation.
2. In South Korea, ‘private’ schools have received subsidy from the government except for those established by international entities. But APHSs did not gain such fund, in exchange for autonomy in highly regulated areas such as finance and curriculum.
3. The decision to abolish APHSs was made in this year.
4. While translating *Tian* into ‘Heaven’ and later *renzheng* into ‘benevolent governance’ is rather simplified, a sophisticated philosophical articulation of these two concepts is beyond the scope of this paper and has been well done by scholars like Hall and Ames (1987).
5. The current president Yoon Suk Yeol, who is affiliated with the conservative party, reappointed Lee Ju-ho as the Minister of Education. Lee cancelled the APHS abolishment policy in June 2023, but some teacher associations and educational governors are demanding the revocation of Lee’s decision (Kim 2023). The currently operating APHSs will remain open at least till 2023, when the delayed licence review will be conducted. Meanwhile, some APHSs are converting themselves to other types of schools (e.g., alternative education institutes) to avoid uncertainties.
6. Evaluation of previous government interventions on private education in Korea shows that the rich could redistribute their wealth to alternative private after-school tutoring programs to keep their edge, and educational inequality would still remain (e.g. Choi 2021).
7. There was no official explanation about ‘weak schools’. Nevertheless, according to Ding (2012, 148), weak schools were those poorly managed and performed, with unsatisfactory teachers and low social reputation.
8. Although there is no specific study regarding the public discontent about CSs, almost all the papers published at the time, including those cited in this section, described this phenomenon to legitimate the necessity of policy change.

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