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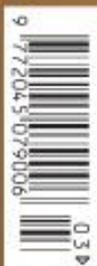
What do Chinese think of UK independent schools

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华闻周二出版

文化自信 源于优质阅读

What do Chinese think of UK independent schools

中国人眼中的英国私校

记者 林卉卉 资料图片

今年1月，卫红完成了她在伦敦商学院斯隆学者课程 (Sloan Fellowship in Strategy and Leadership) 的论文，题目是《英国顶尖私立名校的中国战略》。过去一年，她走访了十五所英国私立学校，访谈了其中绝大多数学校的校长，包括男校温彻斯特公学 (Winchester College)、拉德利学院 (Radley College)，女校切尔滕纳姆女子学院 (Cheltenham Lady's College)、威科姆阿贝学校 (Wycombe Abbey) 及混校马尔伯勒学院 (Marlborough College)、奥多中学 (Oundle School) 和坎福德学校 (Canford School) 等顶级私校。

卫红研究英国私校不仅仅因为兴趣，也有现实的原因，她是一名10岁男孩的母亲。在中国时，她和身边无数受过高等教育、有海外视野的朋友同事都在焦虑一个问题：孩子的教育问题。这些家长把目光不约而同地



惠灵顿公学 (Wellington College) 是传统的马球名校，每年都会举办自己的杯赛哥本哈根杯 (Coperham Cup)

别被成绩排行榜给“骗”了

borne) 等一众政府要员夫人的母校。“这是

What do Chinese think of UK independent schools

Reporter: *Huihui Lin* Pictures of schools from public resources

Vera Wei has just about finished the management report for her Sloan Fellowship in Strategy and Leadership at London Business School. The topic is the China Strategy of Leading UK Independent Schools. During the past year she interviewed headmasters and headmistresses from the 15 top UK schools, including Winchester College, Radley College for Boys', Cheltenham Lady's College and Wycombe Abbey for Girls' and Marlborough College, Oundle School and Canford School for Co-ed.

She researched UK public schools out of intellectual curiosity and for personal reasons. As the mother of a then nine-year old boy, Vera, like most of her well educated colleagues and friends in China, had been agonizing for her child's educational experience for years. Parents often debate about sending their children to study abroad, however, "it is not a question of if, but when, where and how." Many desire a British all round education for its tradition and prestige, yet accessing good quality information is almost a mission impossible. Vera had thought that once she arrived in London accessing information would not be a problem. She was proved wrong.

Last April, Kailan Lucas spoke at an event in Hangzhou, China, which was named "Perspectives on the education of blue blood elite families," aka, how the upper class,

ultra-smart families choose to educate their children. Hundreds of families couldn't wait to hear how Kailan sent her boy to Eton, the appetite for insights into UK educational opportunities is immense.

Leagues tables could cheat

Vera started looking at school exam league tables. Consulting her British colleagues, she was shocked to find most top performers were unheard of by her local colleagues although some had researched at length school options for their own children. And their highly recommended schools had much lower ranking or were nowhere to find on league tables. Vera watched incredulously while one deeply spoken British banking veteran told her how excited they were to receive an offer from Marlborough. Later on she found out that Marlborough College is the alma mater of Duchess of Cambridge and other influential members in current British society. "This is a typical 'when you know more' scenario", Vera reflected, "Brits value the word of mouth."

Kailan couldn't agree more. "The tradition, the destination of its students and the value added in between, for example, the network, are way more important than the rank itself." Her son Charlie received offers from Eton and Westminster School last July and chose Eton, the 'cradles for elites' where 20 prime ministers graduated." "After visits Charlie felt that Westminster simply could not offer as much in sports and music, which he loves dearly".

Vera believes that education should help children find their interests and passion for life. For that purpose, children benefit from being exposed to multi-faceted activities. Top boarding schools meet these needs. "Most schools have state of art facilities for sports, music, art, design & technology, you name it. Some schools even offer riding lessons or boast of a golf course on campus." Classes are smaller, students do not exceed 15 in total, and in some less popular subjects you might find there are only 2 or 3 students in one class. After the interview with Winchester College, Vera thought to herself: This would be my dream school, if I were a boy.

As a sports enthusiast herself, what Vera loves most about British boarding schools is that children have the time and space for sports. Rain or shine, 2 hours are spent on games each day. Children could enjoy running or even fooling around in the mud to their hearts' content and then simply change into uniforms and immerse themselves in academics. The beauty is that the children are taught and coached by teachers who are passionate about teaching, sports, life and culture. Children don't have to look far for role models.

Nonetheless newspaper league tables of UK school exam results are where Chinese parents start with and most probably end. As in China, exams and grades are everything. But here for top British independent schools the purpose is broader: to prepare the young people into the world who believe in their ability to shape their own destinies and bring the best out of other people. Mrs. Emma McKendrick from Downe House School was crystal clear on this, "We send a certain number of students to Oxbridge. I would certainly be happy if we have 2 or 3 more. Does it make a big difference? No. We want to prepare them for the life beyond. If we fail that mission, even if they attend Oxbridge, they might not be successful in their lives. Sometimes Oxbridge could even become a burden."

Chinese top schools are highly selective and they end up in having very strong academic intake year on year. Unsurprisingly the students graduate with top scores years later. While non-selective schools like Stowe, the alma mater of Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Group, strive to improve their pupils' prospects by teaching them well, thus giving better "value-added". Since children do develop at different paces, this approach certainly makes more sense than simply league tables.

Those daring Chinese parents

During her interviews, many schools showed their concerns that few Chinese parents visited schools before they despatched their children. There are over 2600 private schools in the UK which range from world class to under-performing. And Chinese parents seemed to be placing their children through trial and error.

One bubbly Chinese girl showed Vera around when she visited Tudor Hall School, a small girls' school in Oxfordshire. "It was mere luck that I landed here. I had no idea what the school was like before I came. It was like that I had won the big lottery!" But then she said that many of her friends were not as lucky. Some attended the same school in Cambridge, where their English actually deteriorate as they are surrounded by Chinese students so Mandarin becomes the "official" language. And they don't learn as much. So why would the parents pick a school like that? Probably parents buy into agents' sales pitches, assured that the location surrounding Cambridge or Oxford suggested top quality, or sometimes parents were mesmerized when some school was related with royal members. "Then why wouldn't your friends tell their parents as such and get transferred to good schools?" Vera pursued. The girl nailed it then and there. "Well, they have never attended a good school here so they could never tell the difference. Besides, some even think that their school must be very good as so many Chinese parents paid dearly to send their children there." Yes, yes, again, the unknown unknowns. And even if they do complain, their parents might not doubt the school itself, but the inferior quality of British schools in general. There is no specific guideline as to how many overseas students an independent school could have yet most schools stick with the magic number of 15%, to ensure the good quintessentially British school experience.

Why would the top UK boarding schools want to recruit Chinese students? For money? Chinese do have the ancient tradition of "sparing no effort to get the best education possible for thy children". But for top UK schools it is beyond money. Two headmasters actually emphasized that their schools do not need Chinese students to fill their beds. For some schools, being an international school has been part of their heritage. For others, their results have been drawing overseas parents like magnet. For the top schools Vera interviewed, the key drivers for globalisation are diversity and reality. Overseas students bring multiple perspectives and Chinese students typically show strong work ethic which inspires other students. And schools believe that they need to acknowledge the world is changing and prepare students for the challenge amid the globalisation.

British Independent Schools are becoming more international and diversified indeed. Kailan admitted that she had been worried that Charlie's English might not be as good as other British pupils because he spent four years learning in a primary school in Beijing. Then it might be the global exposure that had made him more desirable a candidate to

Eton.

Independent schools, not noble schools

Chinese families do have a stereotype when the best known of British public schools are mentioned. Eton and Harrow seem to be the only two household names although few have an idea that those are all boys' and full boarding schools. The 3 piece tail suit and stiff collars have a very strong signalling effect. Though the old system in Eton under which boys could be registered at birth was abolished some years ago the tradition was still murmured among social circles in China with awe. That is probably where Chinese families get the idea that American schools are for elites while British schools are reserved for aristocrats.

While Chinese parents are attracted by British schools, British schools have also been eyeing up the ever growing Chinese market. Wellington College Shanghai opened in a prime location in Shanghai in August 2014. Before this, Harrow School has opened in Beijing and Hong Kong. The tuition for these Chinese campuses amounts to around 25000 pounds per year. Considering that those are day schools in China, the fee is quite stiff. There are other adaptations. Harrow even becomes a co-ed school in China. Awed by the impressive buildings and facilities, Chinese media addresses those schools as noble schools. Parents might think that their children will enjoy a noble life besides a noble education.

Yet according to Yanglu Zhang, a graduate of LSE, life in a "noble school" is nothing related with

privileges, "We sleep on hard single beds, eat simple food and live by strict rules. It is anything but a cosy life..." According to dictionary, noble as an adjective means either "belonging by rank, title, or birth to the aristocracy" or "having or showing fine personal qualities or high moral principles".

Kailan believes in the second meaning. "Indulgence is the worst enemy towards independence. When a boy first attends Eton, the parents are not allowed to visit during the first three weeks. The boys are kept very busy and they fall asleep immediately after they hit the beds. They simply do not have the time or energy to miss home or acquire bad habits."

Vera does not think that Chinese education system is a failure. Quite on the contrary, she believes that Chinese education is one of the best in the world, if not the best, for imparting knowledge. She herself had been a top student all the way. "I have been where I am because of my education in China." But then she does see that the education has gone over the board where schools prepare students for exams only. "Children have been used to memorising whatever they are taught and getting good grades for exams without having one chance to find their own interests in life. Every year so many Chinese students graduate from top universities without a direction. Then they go on to pursue graduate degrees. Then they graduate with even shinier degrees but they still have no idea what they want to do for life and career. Parents rush about trying to find jobs for their children while the children themselves could not have cared less. After 20 years of cramming for exams would you expect otherwise?" So since when have Chinese children lost the ability

to think independently? Vera thought hard and found that it all started from secondary schools. So when she started her Sloan journey, Vera brought her boy along. The boy enjoyed the State primary school from Day 1 although he barely spoke English. Then his teacher kept urging Vera to let her boy continue schooling in UK as she assured Vera, "...You will see miracles". He started at a top prep school last October as a full boarder and enjoyed his school life immensely. Vera is still dazed by her boy's transformational experience. As for which senior school next, Vera was certain that she will accompany him in some visits and let the boy make the decision. "After all, it is his life."