

## On the playing fields of Shanghai

*Some of England's best-known private schools are rushing to set up satellites abroad. But the market may be reaching saturation point*



Cricket, boarding-house names reminiscent of Harry Potter's Hogwarts and ancient and peculiar customs are among the hallmarks of Britain's leading private schools. Now they can be found in Singapore and Kazakhstan. As the domestic market softens, some of the most famous names in British education are building far-flung outposts.

Harrow led the way in 1998 by setting up a school in Bangkok, where its straw boaters greatly amused the locals. It now has schools in Beijing and Hong Kong too. Sherborne, a private school in Dorset, has opened a branch in Qatar. From next year Wellington, a boarding school in Berkshire, will compete for Shanghai's pupils with Dulwich, a south London day school, which already has a franchise there.

At home, private schools are criticised for perpetuating privilege. Overseas, that may be precisely the appeal. ISC, a research company, estimates that some 6,300 "English-style" schools were operating overseas by 2012, up from 2,600 a decade earlier (that category includes many commercial and stand-alone outfits, some of which have been around for decades). The market grows by 6% a year.

Overseas expansion creates an extra revenue stream for private schools—handy at a time of domestic austerity and falling admissions. Schools also tout their foreign branches to British parents, who increasingly want their offspring to learn about fast-growing bits of the world and, particularly, to pick up some Chinese (though in practice some offshoots of British private schools in China are so rigidly Anglophone that pupils are told off for speaking the language).

The first international schools were set up in the 19th century in countries like Japan, Turkey and Switzerland, for the families of diplomats and business travellers. British private schools were set up in India with a rather different purpose: to educate the local elite to be British gentlemen. The new rash of British schools abroad combines something of both objectives. They are designed to appeal to a mixture of globetrotting parents and ambitious locals with an eye to a university education in Europe or America for their children. Pupils tend to sit the international GCSE, which some consider tougher than the standard British test, and often the International Baccalaureate.

## Tiger trouble

The schools also offer a respite from traditional Asian rote learning and promote a more questioning outlook. Still, local aspirations die hard. One teacher in Hong Kong says it can be tough to persuade pupils to go home at night: some even try to sleep under their desks. In schools with a mixture of locals and foreigners, the Chinese pupils tend to dominate orchestras and maths competitions.

So far demand has been so strong that the main strategic question for private schools is how quickly to expand. Dulwich is the nippiest, with schools in China, Korea and one opening in 2014 in Singapore. It also runs sponsored A-level programmes for Chinese students in Zhuhai in Guangdong province and at the elite Suzhou High School in Jiangsu province.

The latter arrangement solves an irksome problem for educational expeditionaries. In theory, Chinese pupils are supposed to be schooled in the domestic system. Yet the rich and ingenious have found ways around this. Some parents seek passports from countries such as a few Balkan states and Cyprus, which offer them to big investors, so that their children can attend foreign-sponsored schools.

The new schools sometimes look spookily like the ancient English ones to which they are linked. And they strive for a close fit with the native institution. They hold speech days and house competitions, sing Latin songs and occasionally exchange teachers. But in many cases this masks an arm's-length business relationship. "Legally it's a franchise partnership and what we are selling is the name," explains Christopher Parsons of Dulwich College.

Most of the new breed of schools are run by local management companies. Some are even considering franchising entire regions to education providers, including American chains. At that point the link to the playing fields of England becomes rather tenuous. But Simon Lucas of EC Harris, a consultancy, advocates even looser ties. "A lot of schools are jostling for position in the upper quartile," he says. Creating partnerships with ambitious local schools, rather than franchises, would allow English-style schools to appeal to parents who cannot afford high fees for the best-known names.

Trade-offs with the host culture can be tricky. Dulwich, despite a strong Christian tradition, accepts that it cannot teach religion in its Chinese schools. But the King's School in Canterbury recently pulled out of a partnership there, concluding that the constraint was inappropriate given its association with the cathedral, the historic seat of the Church of England. It is trying instead to form a partnership with a chain of Indian schools. Bureaucratic hassles have generally made India less attractive than other Asian countries.

Other traps abound. Dulwich ran a boarding school in Phuket, but had to withdraw from the deal in 2005 after a local Thai investor sought more control. Mr Lucas warns that too many schools are lax about ensuring their contractual arrangements will remain secure if political moods or power hierarchies change. He thinks the most promising new markets are in South America, notably Chile and Mexico. As the market for secondary education becomes crowded, some chains like Knightsbridge Schools International are specialising in primary schools instead. It is heading for destinations like Turkey and Montenegro. Haileybury school has set up in Almaty, in Kazakhstan.

The Dubai-based GEMS school chain, meanwhile, has cheekily reversed the trend. The outfit, run by Sunny Varkey, an Indian entrepreneur, is busy setting up new schools in Switzerland and Uganda. It is also opening a clutch of private schools in England, at cheaper prices than the established competition.

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