Transnational Education Marketing (TNE) between the U.K. and China:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Institutional Marketing Communications

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Introduction

Over the next 20 years, the phenomenon of transnational education (TNE) marketing from the U.K. to the vast and complex Chinese market will become an increasingly important mode of economic, educational and cultural exchange between the two countries². As a result, there has been an increasing emphasis on the economic, cultural, regulatory and operational challenges of this relationship (Tang and Nollent, 2007), especially in the context of the global commodification of higher education (Naidoo, 2003).

From a marketing perspective, however, the question of what is being exchanged in these transactions between the U.K. and China is not so easy to answer. Increasingly, it is recognized within the field of higher education that, even in a significantly commodified market (Fairclough, 1993; Whitty and Power, 2000; Johnson, 2001), the ‘product’ cannot be valued simply in terms of a profit-and-loss equation. Rather, a unique relationship must develop between educational institutions for marketing efforts to succeed. Much of this relationship depends not just on how consumer requirements can be identified, anticipated and satisfied (Morgan, 1991) or how certain “transactions are created, stimulated, facilitated and valued” (Kotler, 1997: 4), but, increasingly, about how these

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² For the purposes of this study, we define transnational education (TNE) as the provision of one country's educational offerings in another country through a variety of arrangements which can include one or more of the following: franchising, branch campus, 'fly-in' teaching, twinning and other collaborative programmes.
transactions are positioned or presented through a variety of images, formats, metaphors and symbols. The theoretical premise for this argument is that “marketing is a set of practices and discourses” (Morgan, 1992: 137) which facilitate relations in modern western societies. Marketing, therefore, is not simply about the product or even about how it is promoted, but about how an image of it is discursively constructed in order to elicit the collusion of customers. The linguistic, rhetorical and communicative elements of an organisation’s strategy are thus inseparable from their political and organizational elements (Reed, 1998).

In the area of TNE, especially, it has become evident that the ‘product’ being exchanged between nation-states is not simply the degree or diploma (Johnson, 2001). It is also the culture, the social role, the people and the institutional interests (overt or covert) of the institution which shapes how it is perceived by its ‘customers’. In this sense, TNE can be interpreted as the promotion of a set of discourses which collude to construct an image for customers. This discourse has political underpinnings because it ascribes certain identities and social roles to participants in the exchange process in order to fulfill marketing objectives. We believe the example of Sino-British educational marketing provides a unique opportunity for important discoveries to be made about the nature of the ‘product’ which is being marketed and the politics of promotion which underpins it.

The question of how U.K. universities should position the ‘product’ of higher education is vitally important to address now rather than in several years’ time for two primary reasons. Firstly, the United States (the key competitor to the U.K. in higher education) is poised to pose a much greater competitive threat almost as soon as the new President of the United States takes office next year. Although the U.K. has benefited in recent years from the fallout from 9/11 in terms of TNE – mainly due to the much greater visa problems faced by Chinese students wanting to enter the U.S. -- this ‘advantage’ is likely to recede greatly from next year onwards. Already, there are reports in American newsmagazines that direct flights between key cities in the U.S. and China will increase dramatically, further facilitating the attractiveness of the U.S. as an educational destination for Chinese students. Secondly, the Chinese government is rapidly building up her own capacity and infrastructure for English-language teaching. The pace of this reform is so rapid that it is likely that many Chinese students will choose to obtain their degrees at home over the next few years rather than incur the cost of traveling to the U.K. This scenario should be planned for, and actively dealt with, by U.K. education marketers.
now.

One of the key ways for universities to manage this discursive reality is through promotional materials targeted at students and people who influence their decision to enroll at a particular institution. The design, content, style and positioning of these promotional materials form a highly significant basis upon which universities reinforce and strengthen images which they want to communicate to target markets. These materials, used heavily in marketing communications by universities, consist of student prospectuses, videos, posters, press advertising, websites and search engine listings. Although promotional materials have been studied (e.g. Askehave, 2007), there has not been a substantive study of these materials in TNE marketing, especially in the U.K.-China context.

As an illustrative case, we examine the promotional materials used in the TNE marketing of the University of Nottingham (UoN) and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC). According to the university’s website, the UNNC is the very first Sino-foreign university in China. UoN is also the only British university with campuses overseas (in Malaysia and China). This pioneer position and clear internationalization focus make the UoN and UNNC an exemplary case for research into the politics of TNE.

Method

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we propose to analyse a dataset of marketing and PR materials (e.g. websites, press releases in Chinese and English) currently used and put out by the University of Nottingham (UoN) and the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC).

Given the specific research focus on the strategic use of language by British universities to market themselves and construct legitimacy for overseas campuses, a discourse analysis approach appears to be the most appropriate methodology. More specifically, critical discourse analysis (CDA) explicitly focuses on the dynamics of power, knowledge and ideology that surround discursive processes (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 20).

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3 see http://www.nottingham.edu.cn/content.php?d=251
5 Legitimacy, or even the desirability, of such a model is far from reaching a consensus. For example, see Fazackerley, A. (ed) British Universities in China: the Reality Beyond the Rhetoric. An Agora discussion. December 2007. Agora: the Forum for Culture and Education.
It thus provides an appropriate methodological framework for a rigorous enquiry into marketing communications, discourse(s) and ideology, all key elements of this research project. The goal is to analyse the “dialogical struggle (or struggles) as reflected in the privileging of a particular discourse and the marginalization of others” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 25). CDA is useful for studies seeking to analyse how political strategies are shaped by and help shape contexts. The methodology chosen also addresses the challenges attached to the analysis of complex, potentially polemical and contested discourse which, we argue, might be the case here. CDA focuses on the connection between meaning and power, and uncovers taken-for-granted stories and recognises the ideological nature of discourses, even the most ‘naturalised’ and invisible.

Although Fairclough (1993) has studied the way universities are marketed in England, we find Wodak’s discourse-historical approach to CDA highly appropriate for the purposes of our research because of her specific focus on identity-related issues (see among others de Cillia et al., 1999; Wodak et al., 1999; Mitten, 1992). Examples of this approach are found in the study of the organisation of the European Union (see Iedema and Wodak, 1999; Straehle et al., 1999), or the discursive construction of national identities (see de Cillia et al., 1999; Wodak et al., 1999). Our research project will inevitably address the way (national, corporate, institutional) identities are constructed and how a particular reality (the desirability of a Sino-British education for example) is created and presented through discourse, e.g. are we addressing the issue of British value-laden education in Chinese territory; a Chinese-dominant education with a British ‘flavour’; or a genuine hybrid offspring of both cultures/educational traditions?

**Contributions and outputs**

In a nutshell, our research questions addresses: (1) the way UoN and UNNC market themselves to various audiences (in China and the UK) through its ‘product’ positioning and corporate marketing communications; (2) how the university negotiates important identity issues (see paragraph above), reflects upon its corporate identity as an ‘multinational’ university and (3) how a university has been able to legitimize its physical presence overseas (e.g in a context of a lingering suspicion of imperialism and neo-colonialism) to provide a working, successful model. The contributions of our research are threefold: methodological, theoretical and practical. Methodologically, we are applying CDA to new datasets in a novel context. Whilst CDA has been fruitfully
applied to media analysis, issues of gender and inequality, and even to the way universities communicate and market themselves, it has not been applied so far to TNE marketing communications in English and, especially, in Mandarin Chinese. Theoretically, our inquiry aims to yield new insights into institutional marketing communications, product positioning and corporate branding in a culturally complex setting. In practical terms, we believe this research will contribute to policy debates within TNE policy. TNE is a topical subject which not only engages British universities at the highest levels of management, but also the policy-makers who must determine the overarching strategy concerning Britain’s education system and its brand in the next few years, in the face of Britain’s reliance on a continuing influx of Chinese students who are being courted by other nations such as the U.S., Canada, France and Singapore.

This initial research project should provide a solid foundation for larger-scale projects, including studies of other examples of TNE marketing and the collection of new datasets. The latter may include ethnographic studies of students in classroom and other settings to observe their interactions with lecturers and facilitators, thus bringing to life the oft-quoted cliché in marketing theory that marketing is about facilitating practices and relationships. We expect the findings of this study to interest readers of reputable journals not only in the field of higher education marketing but in cognate areas such as those in *Discourse and Society* and the *Journal of International Marketing* (JIM). Furthermore, this study should also prove useful to practitioners, marketing professionals and higher education consultants who are likely to be involved in formulating short- to medium-term strategies for targeting, segmenting and penetrating heterogeneous Chinese markets over the next decade.
References


