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## **7. CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Leader or Follower in the 'World-Class' Movement?*

### INTRODUCTION

A rapidly growing body of scholarly literature has evolved to describe the impressive scale and pace at which the Chinese higher education has developed over recent decades. This is often being analysed as a response to globalization. China's desire to become a globally competitive economy is driving its policies to increase student enrolment, to improve degree standards and teaching quality, and to boost investments in research and development in a range of selected institutions, thus developing a stratified system with World-Class Universities (WCUs) at its top end and aiming to raise its global visibility. These policies are considered to be following successful Western (mostly US) models and good practices, although it is underlined that China would adopt these by 'creative adaptation' and with 'Chinese characteristics.' Yet it is time to view China not just as a follower, but also to look at its (potential) role as a global leader in higher education.

Data for this project were collected by extensive desk research and through a series of international conferences, round tables, and expert interviews. Consequently, a series of some 30 semi-structured multi-stakeholder interviews was undertaken in China and Hong Kong with representatives from Chinese academia (C-ACAD), international academia (I-ACAD), Chinese administrators in universities and government (C-ADMIN), and from international administrators (I-ADMIN) and international business (I-BUS) active in China.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: GLOBALIZATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education institutions are increasingly globally exposed and engaged, but strongly nationally embedded at the same time. Nation-states have played a crucial role since the nineteenth century in the development of the modern university, with training programmes for important state functions. They have always sought to preserve universities to serve national needs in terms of social and economic development. The internationalization of higher education has developed since, following major political and economic developments such as the post-war

reconstruction, decolonization, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and regional integration in Europe, Asia-Pacific and Latin America. From the end of the 20th century onwards, the internationalization of higher education has been increasingly contextualized by globalization, with its key trends of deregulation, liberalization and privatization, towards a globally competitive knowledge economy, enhancing the role of higher education in developing human capital for domestic economic growth and global competition (Van der Wende, 2001, 2010).

Globalization is characterized by the intensification of worldwide social relations (Giddens, 2000), the widening, intensifying, speeding up, and growing impact of world-wide interconnectedness (Held et al., 1999), and cannot be regarded simply as a higher form of internationalization. Internationalization refers in the literal sense to any relationship across borders between nations, or between single institutions situated within them. It assumes that nation-states continue to function as bounded economic, social, and cultural systems. In contrast, globalization puts emphasis on an increasing convergence and interdependence of economies and societies and a de-nationalization and integration of regulatory systems is expected. Whether national systems become more integrated as suggested by globalization, or more interconnected as with internationalization, can be seen as central distinctions between the two concepts.

Internationalization is a process more readily steerable by governments than is globalization, which is creating a dynamic impact and an environment in which it is no longer possible for individual states or institutions to seal themselves off from global effects (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2009). Internationalization of higher education is thus one possible response to globalization and can be defined as: 'Any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education institutions more effective in response to the globalization of societies, cultures, economies, and labor markets' (Van der Wende, 1997).

The relationship between the concepts of internationalization and globalization is thus not linear or cumulative, but of a different order. It could in fact be seen as a dialectical one in the sense that 'Not all universities are (particularly) international, but all universities are subject to the same process of globalization – partly as objects, victims even, of these processes, but partly as subjects, or key agents of globalization' (Scott, 1998, p. 122). This chapter will explore this dialectic with respect to China's role both as an object and a subject of globalization; as a follower and a (potential) global leader in higher education.

Several scholars (Douglass, 2012; Kirby, 2014; Rhoads, Wang, Shi, & Chang, 2014, among others) engaged in this discussion point to the fast expansion of Chinese higher education, while expressing concerns about the conditions and constraints under which this is currently taking place. It is too early to assess China's (potential) global leadership in higher education, given the fact that the criteria for determining global positions are relatively new, with very few Chinese institutions qualifying as WCUs. Moreover, change is slow in higher education. Interviewees from international business argue that it seems to be the slowest sector in China to completely open up to globalization and consequent reforms.

Taking this comprehensive and complex approach seems to be crucial in analyzing China's role in global higher education and is encouraged by China scholars like Shambaugh (2013), who stresses that after three decades during which observers have watched how the world has impacted China, it is now necessary to understand how China is impacting the world in a range of different dimensions; and Wasserstrom (2014), who states that: 'with China and globalization, we should not choose between thinking of the Chinese state as only either being reshaped by international forces or itself reshaping the global structure. We are instead better off drawing from all of these perspectives at once.'

This may shed new light on the integration versus interconnection paradigms as discussed above. In any case, the unprecedented degree to which Chinese universities have become globally engaged and their students and faculty have become active and mobile internationally should be taken seriously into account, as well as the influential governmental interventions in the sector, which have already been followed in a range of other countries.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN RESPONSE TO GLOBALIZATION

China has been developing its higher education system over the last few decades at an unprecedented and unmatched scale and pace and its system is now the largest in the world. Building on a long tradition of academic excellence, but they are effectively restarting from a devastated higher education landscape after the nationalization (or Sovietization) of institutions in the 1950s, and their closure or destruction in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution. Since 1978, under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy, the scale of higher education started to develop slowly and gradually and this has accelerated since the 1990s (Shen & Jiang, 2013).

Quantitative expansion in terms of student enrolment rose from 7.2% of young adults aged 18–22 year in 1995 to 26.5% in 2010 and is projected to attain 40% in 2020. In 2014, a 37.5% enrolment was already achieved, signifying 35.6 million full-time students, including 312,700 doctoral students, and 2,824 institutions graduating 6.6 million students (MoE, 2015a). Qualitative growth was stimulated through large-scale national initiatives aimed at creating centres of excellence and WCUs, known as the projects 211 and 985, followed by the 2020 Blueprint (or China's 2010 National Plan for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development) (MoE, 2010) and the recent 'World Class 2.0' scheme (State Council of People's Republic of China, 2015). Investments have grown substantially and China now has the second largest R&D budget in the world (since 2013), supported by the (probably) largest economy in purchasing-power parities (PPP) (Stiglitz, 2015). However, a recent White Paper notes that the average academic impact of Chinese research is not yet matching its growth in output and needs to improve in quality to support China's aim to move towards a more sustainable knowledge-based economy (Nature Publishing Group, 2015).

Like in many other countries, internationalization has been a key part of this national strategy for the development of Chinese higher education, with – also not uncommon – student mobility as its main feature. China is sending more students abroad than any other country. 712,157 in 2013, according to international data, while receiving only some 96,409 international students in the same year (UNESCO, 2015). Data from the Chinese Ministry of Education report more balanced numbers: 459,800 Chinese studying abroad versus 377,054 international students in China in 2014 (IIE, 2015). It aims to bring back Chinese who studied abroad, encourages non-returnees to contribute to R&D in China from abroad, and has engaged in Sino-foreign partnerships so as to facilitate the establishment of foreign branch campuses of (mainly Anglo-Saxon) universities, which is seen as a more affordable alternative to studying abroad. Interviews reveal that Chinese representatives are mostly positive about the universities' current practices for internationalization. But interviewees from international business are concerned about the depth and pace of internationalization and miss a more sophisticated focus on international content. As one interviewee pointed out, 'Globalization is still in its first stage for Chinese universities. The collaboration and joint ventures are the structural issues. On the content issue, there is still a long way to go to be globalized. [...] Currently, it is still in process, the structural issue, which is the easy part.'

Higher education in China is also still first and foremost a national affair. It has a long history of education for government service and also today still has a primarily national purpose: 'Education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation [...] The strategic goals to be attained by 2020 are to modernize education, bring a learning society into shape, and turn China into a country rich in human resources' (MoE, 2010). And like in many nations, this human capital agenda for higher education is increasingly contextualized by globalization as a driving factor providing mainly economic rationales: the aim of developing domestic capacity (talent) for economic growth and competition in the global knowledge economy. China's response to globalization includes an internationalization strategy as a means to enhance this capacity in both quantitative and qualitative terms rather than as a goal in itself.

However, there are significant specific challenges and concerns related to the speedy growth of the Chinese higher education system, including the sometimes paradoxical nature of the country's policies in this sector, especially with regard to internationalization. The historical, geographic, and cultural intricacies of its international engagement, as well as the national regulatory frameworks guiding it, will be key to understand China's global agency and its (potential) role as a global leader in higher education.

#### *Growth and Beyond: New Challenges and Persistent Concerns*

Research and critical debate on the extraordinary growth of the Chinese higher education system involves a broad range of Chinese and international scholars (Altbach, 2009; Rhoads, Wang, Shi, & Chang, 2014; Douglass, 2012; Jiang, 2012,

2015; Kirby, 2014; Postiglione, 2015; Shen & Jiang, 2013; Marginson, 2011; among others). The most commonly raised issue regards the rapid growth in quantity in relation to the necessary raise in quality. The 2020 Blueprint indeed points out that the core mission for the development of China's higher education in the next decade is to improve quality, referring to the teaching, research, and service functions of the universities as well as their infrastructure (MoE, 2010). Clearly the challenge for China is to develop an institutional quality culture, built on systematic evaluation, assessment, and self-improvement, linked to a performance-based human resources management, including opportunities for faculty development and transparent procedures for promotion and tenure. All different stakeholders interviewed agreed that quality improvement in Chinese higher education is very much needed. The fact that many top students still choose to study abroad confirms in their view the lag in the quality and competitiveness of Chinese higher education. It is acknowledged that building WCUs is not sufficient, as also the quality of a broad range of local and vocational institutions needs to be improved. And that new international or local initiatives, such as NYU-Shanghai, Schwarzman College, or ShanghaiTech,<sup>1</sup> cannot be expected to impact the system as a whole. Moreover, governmental efforts should not be focused solely on research, but as much on elevating teaching, beyond its often criticized focus on rote learning for memorization into more innovative methods encouraging interactive learning processes, and the development of critical thinking and creativity.

The second area of concern is the growth of enrolment in the midst of high graduate unemployment rates (17.6% in 2013). Skills supply and demand are very difficult to match given the strong dynamics of China's labour market in its transition from a developing country to an economic superpower. In interviews, Chinese administrators declare a utilitarian view and are determined that 'the core function of Chinese universities, or even universities in the world, is to serve the need of economic development.' Broader academic debates are more nuanced and argue on the one hand that more general education should be introduced into the curriculum to make students more all-round, adaptable and ready for an innovation-oriented economy (Cao, 2010). On the other hand, it is argued that, especially newly established undergraduate colleges that tend to teach liberal arts, should be transformed into German-style universities of applied science, geared towards the current, largely manufacturing-driven economy (Jiang, 2015). Interviewees point to the problem of convergence and stress that not every university should develop into a large comprehensive institution. Instead, diversity needs to be further encouraged, because currently 'every university wants to become Tsinghua or Beida' (C-ADMIN). "China needs a world-class system, not just a few WCUs at the top and the rest ranging from mediocre to bad." Meanwhile, it is noted that: 'China may produce WCUs in terms of a top 100 ranking, but they are not really WCUs yet in terms of their organizational culture, human and financial resources' (C-ACAD).

The third area of concern regards the growing inequality that has paralleled the expansion of higher education as expressed in shrinking numbers of students from

rural areas and rising tuition fees, especially for disadvantaged students in private institutions. This is combined with greater income disparity, while segregation may further be enhanced by ethnic, diversity and minority issues. Interviews reveal divergent views also on this issue. Chinese administrators highlight the success of the 211 and 985 projects as the only feasible way of developing higher education with limited resources. Chinese academics point out that this approach has increased regional inequalities between coastal areas and inland China, and among different ethnic groups. In their view, there should be a more egalitarian development in higher education: ‘Instead of aggressively creating WCUs at the expense of other HEIs, China should as a socialist country be able to demonstrate a more egalitarian development towards a world-class system.’

The fourth and probably most intensively discussed concern is the weak academic freedom of faculty, their feeble involvement in university governance, the parallel or dual governance structures, and the low degree of institutional autonomy in Chinese universities. Interviews reveal that some policy makers recognize the need for more autonomy in order to reach the next stage in the development of WCUs, while others hold that this would be possible under the current governance rules, referring to the already successful rise of some Chinese WCUs on the ARWU ranking under the current regime. An experiment has been launched in Tsinghua and Peking Universities and Shanghai City to pilot a series of ‘Comprehensive Reform’ practices, which would involve substantial change in areas such as human resources (Liu, 2015). Whether such extended autonomy would actually diminish the considerable impact of the central government in the recruitment and appointment of party secretaries as described by Huang (2015) remains to be seen. These reforms are expected to take at least a number of years before actual implementation (Jiang, 2015) and are already criticized for not taking the diversity of institutional types and missions into account (Hu & Qin, 2015). Chinese interviewees expect that: ‘The new practices of Peking and Tsinghua will impact MoE’s policy making and may become the standard that other universities will be expected to follow’ (C-ADMIN). They also acknowledge the growing bureaucratic pressures resulting from the government’s anti-corruption campaign and an increased awareness of accountability in universities as beneficiaries of public budgets in a low-trust environment. Their responses affirm a lack of knowledge of effective alternative governance models, and the need for Chinese research on international best practices in this area.

Growing bureaucratic pressures have been paralleled by new governmental guidelines to suppress the teaching of ‘wrong Western values’ (see next section for more details). These ideological issues catch much attention in Western debate and media, where the common view is that academic freedom, faculty involvement in governance, and institutional autonomy are essential conditions for academic excellence. It is also argued that Chinese notions of academic freedom should be considered as distinctively different from those in the West (Marginson, 2015; Postiglione, 2015). Interviews reveal that Chinese academics may be rather pragmatic about it and would see bureaucracy, the lack of transparency, academic

fraud, corruption, and seniority weight as bigger problems. Most importantly, it was noted that concerns of academic freedom seem to be relative to disciplines; engineers for instance would not experience this as much as faculty in the humanities. And for obvious reasons: 'the Chinese government wants students to learn to see the world in the Chinese way, therefore history is so important' (C-ACAD). This is not unique in China, as the reading and teaching of history in many countries is biased by national inclinations. It can also be argued more generally that most of these issues are not unique: 'China's expansion and rise in rankings is unmatched anywhere. Its problems in access, equality and governance are shared everywhere' (Kirby, 2014, p. 155). Yet they are clearly more politically sensitive in light of China's exceptional size and rapid economic growth under a basically unreformed communist political system (Perry, 2014, p. 8).

#### *Paradoxes and Ambiguous Policies*

China's policies for higher education reflect, certainly for outsiders, a number of contradictory elements or paradoxes. Firstly, there is the strong focus by the government on fostering an innovation-based economic growth model, while it is at the same time impeding the required reform in terms of institutional autonomy, academic freedom and modern teaching and learning approaches. This was for instance illustrated in recent publications by the Ministry of Education (2015b) on the role imposed on university campuses in generating government propaganda, i.e. in strengthening the Party's core values and ideology, contrasting the Prime Minister's expectations regarding their role in stimulating innovation and student entrepreneurship (Xinhua News, 2015). In our interviews, all stakeholders agree that the development of an innovation-driven economy and a manufacturing-technology upgrade (as envisaged in the new Industry 4.0 strategy) would require a more and better qualified talent pool than currently produced by the Chinese higher education system. International business representatives highlight the need for extra on-the-job training for Chinese graduates, particularly in soft skills. Also, Chinese interviewees point to the need for students to engage in authentic innovative activities, extracurricular activities for strengthened university-industry collaboration, underpinned by China's concern that it produces fewer innovative and creative thinkers than its global competitors.

International experts argue that the government's utilitarian focus on education for national strength and developing talent for the collective good is at odds with the concept of a more general or liberal education aimed at liberating and educating the individual to be critical thinker and an active citizen, as currently developed at top Chinese universities (Kirby, 2014). Cultural factors such as the tradition of acquiring encyclopaedic knowledge based on Confucian values – rote learning and memorizing existing facts – may actually inhibit critical thinking, creativity, and discovering new solutions (Douglass, 2012). Others state, however, that we should look beyond stereotyping claims that Chinese classrooms and science would generally or naturally

lack critical thought, or creativity, or the standard critique of the examination system in that respect (Marginson, 2015; Postiglione, 2015). Nevertheless, interviewees all agree that there is a need for more elements of a liberal arts and sciences model in the Chinese higher educational system and for creativity and critical thinking. International interviewees emphasize that for creativity and innovation to flourish, fidelity to truth and freedom of inquiry is indispensable, but is currently hindered in China by the fear of doing or saying something wrong or politically incorrect.

A deeper integration of the liberal arts and sciences model into the university would make the Chinese system far more globally influential, but the conundrum is this: the model may be seen as a solution for training the much sought-after 21st century skills, like creativity and critical thinking, thus serving the increasingly economic and utilitarian emphasis imposed on Chinese education; yet its humanistic, moral, and ethical values may be in conflict with China's political and cultural persuasions and cannot be offered in the absence of academic freedom (Kirby & Van der Wende, 2016).

Not only are Western scholars questioning the inconsistencies of the Chinese policies and models for higher education. Jiang and Xu (2014) point to three paradoxes in the area of civic and political education in China. In fact, they say, the sole focus is on political education at the expense of moral education. Moreover, there are no clear concepts regarding the development of world citizens, the emphasis on world citizenship education is insufficient, and there is even a narrow-minded preference for nationalism (see also Camicia & Zhu, 2011).

Postiglione (2015) also refers to the tension between the goals of internationalization, institutional autonomy, and the safeguarding of national educational sovereignty, which creates an unambiguous paradox in China's higher education policy. China's aim to boost its global competitiveness and to develop international talent by means of sending millions of students abroad, stimulating international experience among its faculty, and encouraging Sino-foreign cooperation, is contrasted by persistent concerns about cultural colonialism or Western imperialism, and the infiltration of Western values via textbooks and the internet. This goes in part back to the role of missionary universities from Europe and the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, followed by anti-imperialist movements in the 1920s (Rhoads et al., 2014). But after several decades of opening up started by Deng Xiaoping and sustained by his successors, the current Xi Jinping's government is again very concerned about the national heritage at risk in the face of globalization. This is leading to a renewed wave of tightening ideological control of higher education institutions, increasing pressure on academic freedom, and the consequent risk for 'dissident' academics of being penalized (Sharma, 2013). Most notable was the announcement in 2013 of guidelines suppressing classroom discussion spreading 'Western values,' such as human rights, freedom of the press, rule of law, and civil society, that could undermine party rule. In early 2015, education minister Yuan warned against the ideological risks for education in China's period of opening to the outside world, accusing some countries of



feeding their own propaganda into China's education system: 'In recent years, some countries have viewed China's rise as a challenge to their institutional patterns and political values, so they have intensified infiltrating and dividing China with more covert means.' Consequently, textbooks should show the mainstream ideology of China, while those disseminating the 'wrong Western values' should be prevented from entering its universities and colleges. A range of textbooks guided by Marxism should be built so as to support mainstream ideology, the minister added (Xinhua, 30 January 2015). These views were based on the Central Committee and State Council's 'Opinions concerning Further Strengthening and Improving Propaganda and Ideology Work in Higher Education Under New Circumstances' (published 19 January 2015) and echoed in a statement by Peking University's Party Secretary Zhu Shanlu, saying that education should strongly focus on 'Marxism and communist beliefs, the study of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and propaganda of the Chinese dream' (Zhu, 2015). The notion that Western ideas are potentially subversive has been greeted with widespread disbelief, especially by Chinese academics, noting that Marx was not an Eastern person and that Marxism, socialism, and communism are Western imports (Levin, 2015; Yeung, 2015). Another paradox indeed.

While opportunities to freely learn Western values during study abroad continue to grow, restrictions on the import of what is seen as subversive ideas seem to be sustained or (re-)enhanced. Western scholars in China report on academic 'no go zones' in fields such as international relations, China's foreign policy and human rights (Shambaugh, 2013). Reports also address issues in political sciences, regarding the disruption of personal VPN connections as solutions for limited internet access, and the confiscation of Western textbooks at the Chinese border (Bell, 2015). Concerns have been raised that foreign scholars are blacklisted if their findings or even the focus of their research is seen as a threat to the party state. Moreover, a draft law regulating foreign NGOs has been presented, which would restrain activities 'not in the national interest or threatening national security.' This could have serious effects on collaboration with Chinese institutions and cause risks for foreign guest lecturers and international branch campuses operating in China. If they would indeed be considered to be foreign NGOs, 'It would seriously undermine the ability of universities like NYU to operate in China according to principles of academic freedom,' as commented by NYU-Shanghai's vice-chancellor (Sharma, 2015).

There is a contradiction between China's desire to be a leader in the global economy and to restrict academic freedom at the same time. Admittedly: 'To Westerners, it seems very incongruous to be, on the one hand, so committed to fostering more competition and market-driven flexibility in the economy and, on the other hand, to be seeking more control in the political sphere, the media, and the internet. To maintain economic growth, China is straining to promote innovation, but by enforcing a political chill on Chinese campuses [President] Xi risks suppressing precisely the disruptive thinking that the country needs for the future' (Osnos, 2015). It could actually be the stagnating confidence in the rapid economic growth, which

have until now confirmed the correctness of the party's policies, that explains the recent restrictions on the discussion of sensitive topics at universities. It may be a sign of concern about possible public unrest and continued party domination. Greater ideological allowance is clearly a broader issue, as 'Herein lies the paradox of China's economic liberalization' (Abrami et al., 2014).

#### CHINA'S EMERGING GLOBAL ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

China clearly is one of the winners of globalization. But as much as it may be seen as a new leader, or even a threat, it may consider itself still as a developing, poor or even backward country with a keen interest to learn from the West, i.e. as a follower. It would consider its rise first of all as a project of China's modernization (Daly, 2015), yet in a very uneven and still incomplete way (Wang, 2015). And secondly, as a realization of the Chinese dream, which is different from the American dream in that it is not a dream about individual freedom (Ljunggren, 2015), and different from wanting to be 'number one,' according to Stiglitz (2015a).

There is no single Chinese perception of globalization. Shambaugh (2013) analyzes the variation in China's global identities and the gradual shift from denying China as a world power, insisting on its identity as a developing socialist country, to acknowledging it as a regional power, and actually as an emerging world power. Discussions then focus on what kind of major power and what kind of global role and responsibility it should develop. J. Wang (2015) critically notes in this respect that China should reconsider its perception of dichotomizing the world into the 'developing' versus the 'developed,' or into the West versus the non-west. Instead, it should serve as a bridge between the two.

Our interviews reveal that perceptions also differ within the higher education sector and that the idea of China as a global leader in higher education is rather novel. Yet all interviewees agree that China cannot just copy other higher education systems, because 'China is so different, its culture is unique.' While also stating that: 'China doesn't want to lead, it's not part of Chinese philosophy, but if you do well, people will follow' (C-ADMIN). The view that, as China solves its own problems, it could possibly offer lessons to other countries, is shared by most Chinese administrators, but less so by interviewees from other stakeholder groups.

China's capacity to become a leader in global higher education, its global agency and impact, relates to broader questions regarding China's role in the new global world order, such as its contribution to creating global public goods and its soft power. Agency meanwhile can be understood as the ability of an actor (agent) to generate social transformation, which assumes a certain degree of control over the social relations, of resources, knowledge of schemas, and the ability to apply them to new contexts (Sewell, 1992).

Perry (2014) states that the fact that many of the problems with which China is currently grappling are global in compass, and, as a consequence, renders its public

policy record of more than parochial interest and importance. This certainly accounts for its higher education policy, as will be illustrated below.

Interviews confirmed that this line of thought is rather new, as it has been more conventional to consider China as a follower. Interviewees suggest that the attractiveness of Chinese higher education is perhaps mostly inspired by the impressive development of the Chinese economy, rather than for a globally shared set of values, and that global leadership in education could perhaps be affirmed for Chinese secondary education rather than for higher education. China's achievements on PISA, with Shanghai as the number one in STEM, are exemplary. It is leading the tables here, and indeed becoming an example, receiving growing numbers of requests to host groups of mathematics teachers from the US and UK, sent to learn from the best practices of their Chinese counterparts. In turn, Chinese secondary education leaders are invited to the West to explain their teacher training and hiring programs. Daly (2015) confirms that there is scope for mutual learning at this level in particular, since China wants to move away from the dominance of test-driven education, while the US is interested in moving into a more test- and homework-driven education because of sharply dropping PISA scores. Globalization could thus work as a two-way street of mutual learning.

While it seems to be premature to consider China a global leader in higher education, most interviewees do acknowledge that, unlike the past 30 years since the Reform and Opening Policy, when China mostly learned from Western higher education, China is currently taking a more proactive role in globalization. Efforts are being undertaken to seek impact at the global level, ranging from small programmes with a global outlook, like the Schwarzman College in Tsinghua University and Yan Jing Xue Tang in Peking University, to global outreach, such as Tsinghua's Global Innovation Exchange campus with the University of Washington in Seattle; Xiamen University's new campus in Indonesia; and new business schools in London, Mumbai, and South Africa. However, for a more substantial global impact in terms of positioning itself higher in the rank of WCUs, many interviewees commented on the paradoxical issue of pragmatism, which may both accelerate and hinder the Chinese higher education system, and its global agency. On the one hand, it has facilitated swift development by introducing the best practices in global higher education; on the other hand, it may hinder academics from achieving excellence: 'Chinese universities and faculty are not into pursuing academic excellence, as they are too much focused on financial reward and reputation' (I-BUS). 'To grow from good to great in research, systemic change is required to support a truly excellent research culture. This would especially involve faculty evaluation, reward and funding structures' (C-ADMIN). Indeed most interviewees expressed a strong view that academics should shift from extrinsic motivation (indicators, funding, publications) to intrinsic motivation (intellectual curiosity) in order to achieve research excellence. Interviewees also agreed that university administration should shift to a model with more autonomy, in particular in human resources management. Less governmental

intervention, a more ‘market-driven’ system with healthy competition, and a more rationalized system for performance evaluation is needed, in their view. The first comprehensive international recent report on China’s performance in science (Nature Publishing Group, 2015) made similar recommendations for funding, conducting and sharing research, and on training and hiring practices, in order improve the quality and impact of its scientific output.

Interviewees view Chinese academics as part of the global academic world who actively contribute to global public goods by knowledge production and educational opportunities. They also point to the recent establishment of UNESCO research centres (at Tsinghua University) as examples demonstrating China’s role in creating these global public goods. ‘Global public goods’ can be understood as goods that have a significant element of non-rivalry and/or non-excludability, are made broadly available across populations on a global scale, and affect more than one group of countries (Kaul, Grunberg, & Stern 1999, pp. 2–3, cited by Marginson, 2015, p. 41). Meanwhile, they point out that the quality and originality of knowledge production is still lagging behind due to structural and organizational limitations. It is widely known that the required free flow of knowledge is hindered by China’s policy on internet sovereignty, constraining its contribution to, participation in, and benefit from knowledge and learning as global public good. In our interviews, Chinese academics are far more concerned than administrators on this point; while the former have to use digital work-arounds to get to Google Scholar, the latter may deny any limitations on internet access, besides sites that would spread ‘radical information’ (C-ADMIN).

Soft power is the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money (hard power) (Nye, 2004). In other words, to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion, or payment. This is often discussed in relation to China’s emerging role as a world power (Shambaugh, 2013). Examples of its soft power could be seen in its enormous diaspora, the Confucius Institutes, the English-language version of CCTV, and its recently launched New Silk Road, or One Belt and One Road policy, which includes opportunities for higher education cooperation and expansion into its neighbouring region, and towards Europe. However, it is also noted that China’s soft power is held back as it should be generated by civil society and not by government. This poses a problem as such non-state actors over which the Chinese government has limited control may be critical of its ideology (Nye, 2015). Most interviewees agree that higher education could be an avenue for soft power because of its non-state status, provided that government intervention is limited. They also recognize that China is expected to accept responsibility for global stability by developing its youth into open-minded citizens of the world through world citizenship education. This is for instance proposed by Jiang and Xu (2014 with reference to Nusbaum, 1997). However, in their view this aim is overshadowed by the nationalist focus of state-imposed political education.

Perhaps the most remarkable, yet mainly unintended, example of China’s global agency and impact in higher education is shaped by the Shanghai Ranking and the

concept of a world-class university. China's decision to develop WCUs by project 985 (in 1998), and its related search for the characteristics of such institutions, resulted in the first and so far most influential ranking of universities worldwide: the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), the 'Shanghai Ranking,' first published in 2003 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. The ranking initially served to analyze the characteristics of WCUs to inform national policies to build such institutions to support China's growth towards an innovation-oriented country, but had no direct global or external intention. However, it quickly became perhaps the most globally impactful higher education project undertaken by China.

After more than a decade, it can be concluded that its impact has been pervasive as well as transformative, becoming perhaps the most objective standard for classify the research performance of universities worldwide. It initiated an open global competition in higher education that had not previously existed by defining the global order and shaping the global model of the WCU. Ironically, or again paradoxically perhaps, this model (re-)confirms the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon comprehensive research university as the global model, also serving as a model for Chinese WCUs, rather than suggesting a model with Chinese characteristics to the rest of the world. As the ranking itself makes clear, China's universities appear to be racing towards, rather than away from the Western or global model. 44 Chinese universities figure in the top 500 and although they are still distant from the very top, they are all on the rise, with five in the top 200 and Tsinghua and Peking University coming close to the top 100, with their positions in STEM fields already being in it (ARWU, 2015).

The impact of the Shanghai Ranking, which inspired the creation of several others, and the ensuing world-class university movement, has been critically followed, analyzed, and discussed by higher education scholars worldwide. Studies point to the inevitability of further competition and its transformative effects on the global higher education landscape (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007, 2009); the coercive effects of research-dominated ranking criteria on system diversity and the consequent need for multidimensional approaches (Van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2009; Van der Wende, 2011; Van Vught, Westerheijden & Ziegele, 2012); and their unbalancing impact on institutional policies affecting their (teaching) mission and profile, as well as on national policies, (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2011). At the same time, it is recognized that the related world-class university movement has contributed a lot to stimulating the pathways to growth in developing countries (Salmi, 2009; Altbach & Salmi, 2011), and to system-wide reform, development of excellence, and large extra investments in higher education and research in a wide range of countries (Cheng, Wang, & Liu, 2014). All interviewees seem to be aware of the significance of the global ranking, and several Chinese administrators proudly point to the fact that the world-class initiatives of the Chinese government are followed by some 30 countries.

Chinese academics state that for the next level of development of WCUs, there is a need for more autonomy. Some administrators suggest that the Chinese government needs to be open to experiment with 'Comprehensive Reform' plans,

while others argue that further success can be achieved under the current governance regulations. From our analysis, it suggests that growth in STEM fields is much more likely to succeed under the current governance system than that in the social sciences and humanities, which would compromise the growth of Chinese WCU's as truly comprehensive universities, as well as their potential for progress in interdisciplinary fields.

#### CHINA'S ROLE IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION: A FOLLOWER AND EMERGING LEADER

In this chapter, we have tried to examine China's role and position as both a follower and a (potential) global leader in higher education. We conclude that it is appropriate to view China's higher education development from both perspectives, as suggested by Scott's thesis that universities can be both object and subject (or key agents) of globalization, and agreeing with Shambaugh (2013) and Wasserstrom (2014) to draw from the perspectives of China as being reshaped by international forces, and itself reshaping the global structure at the same time.

It seems that China's higher education focus is shifting, or rather perhaps widening and diversifying. Since China's opening-up in the 1980s, it has been strongly oriented to the West, the US and Europe, as a follower and a learner in higher education. With regained self-confidence and geopolitical ambition, it is now engaging in a new role as a higher education leader and an example to primarily developing countries and countries in its neighbouring region.

This diversification seems to coincide with China's renewed economic policy, which aims to balance a high-end R&D intensive knowledge sector with innovation of its large-scale manufacturing sector, as well the huge regional inequalities. A more diversified higher education system should support this. For the former, its WCUs will continue to engage with their top-tier counterparts in the West. For the latter, German type *Fachhochschulen* may be a model for its universities of applied science in the second-tier.

China's regained self-confidence in education is so far mostly justified by its exemplary achievements in secondary education, in particular in STEM fields. But it seems premature to consider China already a global leader in higher education, as its leadership is only just emerging, still partial, and mostly regionally oriented. As confirmed by interviewees, there are still major challenges regarding a still weak internal culture of excellence in research, in the reform of teaching methods and curricula, and in retaining or attracting top global talents. At the same time, China's global agency in higher education by means of the Shanghai Ranking and the consequent World Class University Movement cannot be denied. However, this is foremost boosting global competition, to which China and its universities are subject themselves, rather than imposing a Chinese model on the rest of the world.

It was expected that China would embrace the Emerging Global Model (EGM) of the research university, with its universities being subject to the same forces of

change as factories, banks, and other state-owned enterprises, i.e. dealing with a new set of primarily Western values emphasizing economic efficiency, privatization, individual autonomy, and globalization (Mohrman, 2008). But doubts have arisen, and Marginson (2015), for instance, argues that the outcome of the encounter between the Chinese tradition, and Western science and modernization, can neither be an imported Westernized education, nor a reworking of the old tradition. According to him, it could be a hybrid, something new, a 'Post-Confucian Model.' A hybrid with in-built tensions as it seems, reading a recent statement by PKU Party Secretary Zhu Shanlu, who said that world-class universities are not reflected just in first-class teaching and research, but are even more so reflected in a first-class culture, school traditions, and inner spirit. He quoted Xi Jinping, who emphasized; 'To make world-class universities in China, they must have Chinese characteristics [...] The world cannot have a second Harvard, Oxford, Stanford, MIT, or Cambridge, but it can have the first of the famous Chinese schools, like PKU, Tsinghua, Zhe Da (Zhejiang University), Fudan, and Nan Da (Nanjing University).' (people.cn, 3 February, 2015).

Whether such WCUs with Chinese characteristics could become global leaders is an open question. Western experts argue that they will not be leaders without greater liberalization, less hierarchy and more academic freedom (Douglass, 2012), if they are to exist in a politically illiberal system at all (Kirby, 2014), since the technical and economic virtues of modernization cannot be singled out from the political and social institutions that generate such innovation (Daly, 2015). Although Marginson (2015), argues that: 'While higher education fosters personal agency and a critical approach to knowledge, this does not mean that it is necessarily located in a Western liberal political agenda, nor that global imitation and policy borrowing in one arena is necessarily joined to others' (p. 12). Will China develop an alternative model for higher education, as it did for economic development? In that case, as noted by interviewees (C-ACAD), a truly Chinese model should demonstrate a more egalitarian development towards a diversified world-class system, rather than aggressively creating WCUs at the expense of other HEIs. We admit that contextual factors and conditions are essential to understand the route to growth and global leadership, and that they are not necessarily the same in all regions and at all times. Mutual learning should be envisaged based on the assertion that problems in access, equality and governance of higher education are shared everywhere. Yet there are serious conceptual challenges to be overcome. With 'Chinese characteristics' raises many questions on its official descriptions with respect to ideology (socialism led by the CCP), politics (obeying the decisions of the central government) and the 'Dream of China,' and how it will be implemented in combination with a 'global vision and commitment to solving local problems.' Or should we use it for the unique dual governance structure within Chinese universities, much blamed for the resulting lack of autonomy and innovation, as cynically observed by one Chinese academic.

While seeking a leading role in its neighbouring region, China will still remain at the same time an important basis (or target) for talent recruitment by the US

and Europe (Van der Wende, 2015). The balance between the US and Europe may change, with the New Silk Road enticing a larger involvement of Europe in China's large-scale Eurasian infrastructure, investment, and trade ambitions.

This implies that China's higher education sector is becoming more complex and will thus require a next level of strategic management that goes beyond the university as an instrument of governmental policy. WCUs global playing field, with a wide and complex array of challenges and opportunities, exceeds the scope of top-down and bureaucratic-style management by central governments. China's new governance models will need to allow these institutions to seize their opportunities, while guiding the country as a whole towards a World-Class *System*, i.e. a diversified system of higher education institutions catering for a range of different demands, each with a strong mission and quality profile, and ample possibilities for students to transfer within the system at large.

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> These new initiatives are all characterized by small-scale, research university type academic excellence and may constitute private initiatives such as the branch campus of New York University in cooperation with East China Normal University in Shanghai and the new residential Schwarzmann college at Tsinghua University, or public initiatives such as ShanghaiTech University which was jointly established by the Shanghai Municipal Government and Chinese Academy of Sciences.

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