Trends in Chinese Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract: This chapter summarizes key trends in Chinese higher education of significance for the comparative, international, and development education discourse. These trends often shape how higher education institutions (HEIs) adapt to dynamic local and global forces. Five trending themes are introduced—structural reforms, finance, re-emphasis on continuing education programs, mobility, and quality assurance and assessment. We also introduce the dominant higher educational paradigm (DHEP) and its role in influencing local, national, and global higher education systems. By understanding these trends and influences, we hope to shed some light on possible future directions of higher education in China and the significance, thereof, for comparative education.

Growth in the world’s largest higher education market is often masked by the tremendous parallel growth in China’s economy over the past two decades. National economic prowess has underpinned much of China’s success in all social sectors, including in the development of higher education. This trend is projected to continue well into the future as China’s robust economy is fueling an unprecedented boom in higher education. While its national GDP is on target to become the world’s largest by 2030, China’s higher education enrollments have already surpassed all other countries with current enrollments at 30 million in 2010 compared with about 20 million in the United States and 17 million in India (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; University Grants Commission, 2012).

Table 1. Enrollments and Higher Education Institutional Trends in China, 1949-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Regular HEIs</th>
<th>Enrollments* in Regular HEIs</th>
<th>Non-State/Private HEIs</th>
<th>Enrollments in Non-State/Private HEIs</th>
<th>Ethnic Nationality HEIs</th>
<th>Enrollments in Ethnic Nationality HEIs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>116,500</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>678,946</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>867,234</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>1,165,304</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1,016</td>
<td>1,790,431</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,075</td>
<td>2,155,718</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>11†</td>
<td>21,400†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1,054</td>
<td>3,051,843</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1,041</td>
<td>5,862,139</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>52,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1,792</td>
<td>16,596,377</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>203,545</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>141,385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,358</td>
<td>23,856,345</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>595,048</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>197,882</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures include both undergraduate- and graduate-student enrollments for the corresponding years.
†Figures include only undergraduate enrollments for the corresponding years.
‡Figures are from the year 1991.
Ethnic minority students had roughly the same overall percentage of total enrollments in the past 30 years, comprising 6.64% of total enrollments in 2010, 5.71% in 2000, and 6.9% in 1991 (DP&C, 1991; DD&P, 2001, 2011). The number of ethnic nationality HEIs increased at modest rate over the past 30 years with enrollments following suit. The number of international enrollments also increased by 410% from 2000 to 2010, with 130,637 international students attending Chinese HEIs in 2010, compared to 74,323 in 2005 and 25,636 in 2000 (DD&P, 2001, 2006, 2011).

In this chapter, we discuss five trends that will continue to shape higher education in China well into the future: (1) structural reforms, (2) finance, (3) re-emphasis on continuing education programs, (4) mobility, and (5) quality assurance and assessment. Our visits with senior administrators in major urban centers and in more rural and remote parts of the country view these five trends as foundational to the direction Chinese higher education is heading in the next decade.

In many ways, these five trends mirror what the Ministry of Education (2010) Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development, 2010-2020 (hereafter referred to as the National Plan 2020) gives as a national strategic direction for higher education: quality, developing the talents of China’s young professionals, research capacity, having higher education play a catalytic role to serve society, and solidifying a optimal higher education structure (pp. 18-21). Most senior policy makers and higher education administrators generally refer to this document as a guide for strategic planning purposes.

1. Structural Reform Trends

Several issues become apparent in the National Plan 2020. One issue that strikes us as critically important is the arena of structural reform of higher education. Even though this chapter focuses on higher education, it is important to look at the backward and forward linkages between higher education system and the K-12 system, that in some ways cut across secondary and higher education (e.g., non-regular higher education programs identified by the Ministry of Education as adult education, vocational education, skilled worker schools, and correctional work-study schools). One of the key structural reforms that many scholars and higher education administrators see as a bottle neck in the higher education training system is the gao kao (高考 or “national higher education examination”). There has been a lot of discussion about how to possibly reform this system, how to improve it or adapt it, and how it appears to drive everything below that level. Much of the curriculum up to high school is focused on how to pass the gao kao with high scores in order to improve a student’s chances of gaining admission to one of the key, elite universities such as Peking University or Tsinghua University. A primary question that is often raised regarding the gao kao has to do with its efficacy in assessing talent; is this the best method to do so? On one level, the response is often yes, as observers both in and outside China note that Chinese students from Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taiwan continue to score high on international comparison examinations (Fong & Altbach, 2011; Mervis, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010). They note that the gao kao is a merit-based system. One does not have to be rich to take it. Students who study hard and do well on the exam, you can gain high scores thus realizing their goal to attend the best universities in the country and receive full funding for higher education. Critics of the gao kao, on the other hand, argue with a social justice perspective, and say the gao kao sounds good in theory but in practice,
children that do not live in the urban centers and children that live in the Western Region of China, and minority students, and others are clearly at a disadvantage. These children are not equally represented at the best universities, even though they might be very smart. Some of the best talent in China may be falling through the cracks in the gao kao system. So there is arguably a bottleneck that these critics see in assessing the best talent. Determining how to potentially alter or adapt the current examination system has enormous implications for higher education. These are structural issues that many Chinese leaders want to focus on, which are also being notably addressed in the National Plan 2020.

Related to the discussion of the gao kao is the role of private higher education in China. It is not commonly referred to as “private higher education” in China; rather it is called “nongovernmental higher education.” One such example of this new form of private education is the College for Science and Humanities (a private college in Changchun). The current President of the private college had a long history of service in a government HEI but has developed a unique and novel college with a business model that has resulted in accumulating large reserves for further development. Admissions into this private college does not hinge on the traditional gao kao system. Many private HEIs do not view the gao kao in the same way that government and more traditional HEIs do. Students are evaluated in a more holistic manner. Of course students pay fairly substantial amounts of tuition to attend colleges of this type. For those students who did not perform well on the gao kao and therefore were able to gain access to the first-tier elite HEIs, and who also did not want to go to the second-tier public HEIs, private colleges such as CSH are an attractive alternative. Many private higher education administrators and scholars feel that private HEIs like this will continue to grow and fill this void, by offering a valid alternative to the traditional model (Mok, 2000; Sall, 2004). This argument is especially compelling where private HEIs are able to provide skills-based curriculum that lead to competency-based credentials rather than simply degrees to graduates (Kirschner, 2012). The Ministry of Education monitors nongovernment HEIs carefully, but these institutions are not required to adhere to all of the same regulations as those in the public sector. In many ways, private HEIs are able to be innovative with their curriculum. They can add new courses and eliminate those that are no longer relevant. They can be more nimble, respond to the market place at a more rapid pace, and generally are viewed as more closely aligned with the marketplace. This is an interesting trend that will continue to expand nationwide in China. The government is focusing on policies to determine where private HEIs fit into the higher education system as a whole.

Another higher education structural reform issue involves the independence and governance of HEIs. This has a lot to do with the role of the Ministry of Education in the management and oversight of HEIs at all levels. It applies perhaps less so at the elite level (e.g., Project 211 and Project 985 institutions), which now have a fair amount of independence. This is more relevant to HEIs at the third-tier level, which according to the National Plan 2020 is the level most in need of decentralization and autonomy. It would help to facilitate this natural gravitation toward greater autonomy if the Ministry of Education released some of the oversight of HEIs in the form of self-governance at the local level. It falls under this general idea of redefining the relations between the government, Ministry of Education, and these HEIs.
2. Higher Education Finance

A second area of higher education change relates to financing the system. The form most commonly used in China involves multiple channels of higher education financing. For many years there existed only one channel of higher education financing—the government channel. Now there is an emerging and vibrant private sector, though it remains extremely small in comparison to the entire higher education system. Even within the government sector, there is a growing acceptance of multiple methods of financing higher education through a revised taxation system at the city, county, and national levels. Donations and endowments are other forms of financing on the rise. Investments the university can make through scientific innovations and other patent rights are additional potential areas of alternative financing in the future. So this multi-pronged approach of bringing in an income stream so it is not all falling on the Ministry of Education or provincial or city governments is an increasing trend in Chinese higher education.

The government plans to increase the total amount of public funding on education toward the goal of 4% of the total GDP (Jia, 2010; Xiong, 2012). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012a, 2012b, 2012c) indicates China allocated 13% of total government spending toward education in 2010, compared to 9.4% of total government expenditure (3.8% of GDP) in Japan and 15.8% of total government expenditure (5.0% of GDP) in the Republic of Korea. Government funding devoted to tertiary education comprised more than 20% of the total education allotment in China in 2010, compared to approximately 20% in Japan (in 2009) and 19% in the Republic of Korea in 2010 (see UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012a, 2012c; OECD, 2012).

Closely related to the multiple financing streams is the increasing cost of tuition. The private sector tuition costs are often significantly higher than those in the public sector, which is consistent with tuition comparisons across the globe (Bollag, 2007; Levy, 2010). Even the public sector now requires students to pay tuition, where this was traditionally never the case. Students at even the top universities in the country are required to pay tuition fees, which have been increasing over the past decade, and are foreseen to continue along this trend. As a response to these increases a variety of student subsidies and alternative means to support students is another important trend. The various personal costs that are incurred in preparing for one’s college education have resulted in issues related to socio-economic class. A shadow educational system exists in the form of the buxiban (补习班) or “cram schools which are expensive and outside the reach of many parents. Yet there is a high correlation between those students who attend these preparatory schools and admission to the best universities. Higher education finance in China is an evolving process and a fruitful area for further research.

3. Continuing Education Re-emphasis

Continuing education, lifelong learning, extension programs at the tertiary level were never a big part of the education sector, except perhaps during the Cultural Revolution, when this was a much emphasized form of training. Full- and short-term training programs that occurred during the post-1976 modernization movements included a local striving to be competitive abroad. This continuing education emphasis seemed to decrease in the higher education literature and policy discussions in the past 15 years. But it seems to be re-emerging as an important discussion point in many circles. There is a need to produce well-trained workers in all areas of the economy. With recent findings of the lack of skilled and well-trained workers, there is a perceived need to
offer higher education to adults throughout the country. There is also a huge need to provide quality skills to young people who are unable to enter the formal higher education system. The goal the government would like to reach is about 50% of the workforce at any one time would be in some sort of continuing education program.

The overall low-quality of the workforce sparked the need to further develop the continuing education subsector of higher education. In relation to the dominant educational paradigm (DEP) the focus of which is on human resource development continuing education fits in very well with striving as it does to build capacity within post-secondary schooling. There is an apparent difference in the overall paradigmatic perception between continuing education or professional development programs in China and the United States and other countries. In the United States, the bulk of continuing education programs focus on personal interests, talent acquisition, life skills, and personal growth. Religious-sponsored HEIs in the United States offer inspirational classes, seminars, and workshops for personal spiritual development, self-reliance, and entertainment. Continuing education programs and events in the US are often attended by adults and seniors, who, when they advance in years can learn new skills to keep themselves active, such as developing or learning a hobby (Gracy & Croft, 2007; Mirabella, 2007; Moore & Tonniges, 2004). In this respect, the US is similar to Japan. In China the emphasis of continuing education course and degree offerings are clearly on occupation-related skills development. The Chinese continuing education trend is to help build the overall, continued, sustainable economic growth of China. The focus is toward developing a workforce with sufficient skills to remain competitive in the local- and global-economic environments.

Project Yi in Hong Kong has helped provide a bridge between secondary education and higher education, especially for those students who did not perform as well as many of their counterparts on the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (Wong & Yeung, 2004). Advances in medicine and technology occur at such rapid rates that continuing education and professional development programs are often better suited to offer relevant curricula than traditional degree programs at most Chinese HEIs. In fact, the only probable way many HEIs in China and other countries can keep pace with these rapid changes is through robust continuing education programs closely aligned with industries and technological and medical advances (Herschock, Mason, & Hawkins, 2007). China’s unusually large migrant worker population is another group of over a 100 million people often in need of retraining, retooling, and other types of continuing education (Jacob, 2006; Lu, 2009). Grounded on millennia of Confucius ideology, many people in China and much of East and Southeast Asia make lifelong learning a way of life—a formidable rationale and foundation in support of most higher education continuing education offerings.

4. Mobility

There is a continual trend to increase the internationalization of higher education throughout much of China. There is an increase in the number of international partnerships, such as establishing memorandums of understanding (MOUs), international exchange programs with faculty and students, and sending more Chinese students and faculty abroad. There is also a push to attract more non-Chinese students and faculty members to attend and teach at Chinese HEIs. Many HEIs are beginning to establish degree programs in English so they can accommodate this internationalization process to a greater ability in the future. This is a reciprocal trend, where the push and pull factors for internationalization is in full force. HEIs from all over the world are
reaching out to Chinese HEIs like never before in hopes of establishing these types of partnerships. Likewise, Chinese HEIs are reaching out to comparable and aspirational international HEIs. The more prestigious or elite HEIs in China are becoming more selective in their partnership identification and selection process.

There is a continued push for greater openness and mobility exchanges, and looking at the relationships between internationalization and modernization. From the Chinese perspective, these outreach efforts are mostly designed to help the nation continue to thrive and grow and develop economically and remain competitive at the global level. This fits within our notion of the DEP.

How much will these internationalization efforts potentially change the Chinese higher education system is yet to be determined. As faculty from abroad are invited to China to teach and Chinese faculty go abroad as visiting scholars there is some question about the viability of such an exchange. Of course one of the primary goals of this internationalization outreach effort is to bring in many of the top and innovative ideas and personnel from across the globe. When faculty members return and come back to China from Australia, Denmark, Finland, Japan, and the United States, they often bring back with them ideas that they could use to their advantage. This internationalization trend offers Chinese higher education administrators the ability to reflect on their current system and choose to fine tune or revise it based on optimal or innovative approaches learned abroad. But too much of an international influence can also have a negative long-lasting influence on China’s higher education system. An overemphasis on internationalization may alter in a negative way the many good things about the Chinese higher education that should be retained.

How much internationalization is enough before the Chinese reach a point of no return? How much mobility conformation can occur before the Chinese begin to lose what is Chinese about their higher education system and their own national identity? There are at least two views on this dilemma in China today—one that would like to push for more openness, mobility, exchange, and internationalization of the higher education system. The other camp cautions that too much internationalization threatens China’s unique national characteristics. Too much internationalization can cause China to lose its Chinese way of higher education. This view suggests that China needs to retain and strengthen its own distinctiveness and not just borrow policies, ideas, and approaches from overseas.

China will also continue to play an increasingly important role for many in Asia and especially in East Asia and the greater Pacific Rim as a destination country to receive higher education training, exchange experiences for students and faculty, and partnerships between institutions. No longer are prospective students looking only to the Western countries, like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and those in Europe as the most optimal places to earn a higher education degree. China is offering many scholarships to students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As China’s economy continues to grow and flex its international prowess on the global scene, these internationalization mobility trends will continue as well. Neighboring countries like Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, may view China as the top higher education destination as economic markets and relationships further develop and shift.

5. Quality Assurance and Accreditation

The National Plan 2020 emphasizes the huge demand for higher education and the capacity to meet this demand is growing but it remains short of the growing demand. The private sector is
helping to fill this void. The question remains, especially about the new private sector and even the more traditional HEIs, as to the quality of the system. How good are the faculty members, curriculum, and the students who enter the system?

Areas such as the so-called science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields are especially of interest to China’s quality assessment specialists. It is in these areas that China’s educational officials would especially like to be competitive with the rest of the world.

Governance is another important quality issue for Chinese higher education administrators. The process of accreditation is becoming increasingly important. What is the accreditation process? What are the measures used to assess faculty competence? In some ways there is a mechanical response to this QA goal. In order to get promoted from an assistant professor to an associate professor with tenure, you need to have a minimum mechanical equation of say 10 or 12 peer refereed journal articles published in SSCI or SCI journals, depending on the academic field. Many Chinese higher education administrators are surprised when they learn that this type of mechanical review process does not necessarily exist in the United States and other countries. In many top international universities, the tenure review process is different and may only require two or three influential and high quality publications that move the field forward in some way. Publication requirements differ substantially by academic fields as well. In history, for example, journal articles are helpful but a quality book published by a major university press (e.g., California, Harvard, Princeton, or Stanford) is perhaps the single most important indicator toward earning tenure in many international HEIs. But in the field of education, publication in top peer-reviewed journals outweighs other forms of publication. So while the tenure and promotion system of the top HEIs in other countries appear somewhat complex, it brings into question the more mechanical approach often found in Chinese HEIs. This trend of insisting on measuring faculty performance using a metrics-only model, is perhaps one of the most questionable aspects of the current status of quality assurance in Chinese higher education. A careful review and reform of the tenure and promotion system in China remains a need in most higher education settings.

The quality assurance issue of how much should be performed by the MOE as compared with external, nongovernmental agencies remains an important debate topic. The US regional model that has six regional accrediting agencies organizations and other nongovernmental associations (e.g., ABET) that accredit HEIs, schools, and programs is of some interest in China. Because of the highly centralized higher education system that remains largely in government control, it would be difficult for China to adopt the exact US model of higher education accreditation yet remains of interest among some policy makers.

Internal quality assurance is another important topic. What do universities do themselves to ensure that their programs are of high quality? The establishment of academic senates, senate committees, five-year reviews of departments, and five-year reviews of research centers are some of the features of this form of review. This continual review process bodes for a standard of internal quality. In China, this internal review process is not as well established, but is becoming an area of potential future direction. In the past, when a center was established in a Chinese HEI, so long as there was funding available, it would continue to operate. The idea of internal versus external quality assurance remains an important discussion point and area for current and future reform in Chinese higher education.
We define the dominant higher educational paradigm (DHEP) as a predominantly Western structure of educational relationships that often inculcates a neoliberal higher education curriculum embedded in competition and linked to market-based skills development. The DHEP is not limited to higher education, or even the education sector as a whole, and often permeates into every major sector of society. Government agencies and organizations, private sector businesses, local communities, and citizens at all levels interact in many ways with the many facets of higher education systems throughout the earth. Individualism, entrepreneurship, and self-direction values are mainstays in several diverse sociopolitical regions within the DHEP. Quality assurance and global industry standards help to strengthen and perpetuate the DHEP and increasingly position global standards of excellence at the forefront of national policies, priorities, and standards.

Chinese higher education has gone through several stages of development in its contemporary history (Hayhoe, 1989, 1996). Since the 1920s, particularly after 1949, one of the key characteristics of the dominant educational paradigm (DEP) and the DHEP is that there is a struggle between worldviews regarding the purpose of education—these views could range from those similar to Paulo Freire (1971) and Ivan Illich’s (1971) notions of “deschooling society” to the current obsession with mass higher education.

China’s educational history can not be summarized well in the limited space here but it is helpful to recognize that this history is long and varied. Notions of what has come to be called nonformal education existed in China during the “traditional period” in the form of the shuyuan (書院), a kind of private higher education institution that inspired many including China’s preeminent leader Mao Zedong. Experiments later in Yan’an and the early People’s Republic period with worker-peasant schools and other adult educational programs were also closely aligned with the thinking of those early non-formal educators (Hawkins, 1974). Thus China has a history of higher education far predating the arrival of Western forms and there are those today that argue it is these early Chinese characteristics that should be reconsidered when assessing higher education reform efforts.

When writers complain about the rigidity of the current system, and all the pressures caused by this system including the overemphasis on the gao kao, some historians would argue that China once had a system that was much more humane. China does have competing paradigms to draw upon.

After 1976, it is fairly clear that China’s higher education system reflects the current DEP which is a fairly structured, three-tiered system. It is heavily based on exams and metrics that can be used to measure quality. It has a primary focus on human resource development and capacity building. It is based largely upon a human resource development model emphasizing national growth and economic development (Becker, 1957, 1964, 1971).

Despite the national adoption of the DEP at all levels, including at the higher education level, there are some in China who are questioning if this is the best path forward for the country. But most recognize that the Western higher education model is so powerful and so dominant that it rolls right over whatever anyone else tries to put in its way. Whether it is the Indian model of village schools and alike or the madrasahs in Indonesia and other Islamic nations, the DEP will continue to exert its intractable influence in shaping global higher education. Perhaps the Middle East has held out longer than other regions, but Philip G. Altbach and Jamil Salmi (2011) and others argue that it is only a matter of time before even the most resistant regions conform.
DEP or Western model has such a dominant influence on the current and projected future of global higher education, that higher education national systems that fail to conform will do so at their own peril.

While Chinese higher education will continue to borrow from the West, it is not likely that the 5,000 year culture and history of learning will just vanish. It is more likely that a hybrid higher educational paradigm will evolve and take shape in China, with several historical and cultural nuggets surfacing as unique in the China context. With China’s growing influence on the global higher education scene, these unique Chinese aspects will most likely have a reciprocal and important influence on other higher education systems throughout the world.

Conclusion

Already boasting of the world’s largest higher education system, China is at the cusp of a promising new era in higher education growth and world prominence. While the DHEP remains a major driver for higher education standards of excellence worldwide, including throughout most of China, the government remains committed to helping its higher education system develop in unique ways. This insistence upon including elements of the global DHEP is reticent throughout the continued government financial support as evidenced by Projects 211 and 985. The establishment of Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Institute for Higher Education and Center for World-Class Universities are two proactive strategic initiatives toward ensuring China will have voice on the global stage in determining higher education prominence through rankings and reputations (Portnoi, Rust, & Bagley, 2010).

In this chapter we highlighted five trends that are shaping much of the higher education landscape in China today. Undoubtedly other trends will emerge as the higher education needs continue to evolve. The DHEP will continue to play an important role, but China’s higher education influence—including the elements that are truly unique to the Chinese context—will also continue to grow on the world stage.

Inequalities that once permeated education at all levels—such as gender and ethnic minority higher education access opportunities—have improved dramatically in China in recent decades. Still, there are significant areas for improvement (Hawkins, Jacob, & Li, 2008). There remain areas for higher education improvement, especially in helping to continue to preserve the indigenous languages, cultures, and traditions of many of the rich ethnic minority groups in China (Jacob, Cheng, & Porter, forthcoming) and in relation to curbing the growing higher education gap between higher education opportunities for those who reside in the coastal Eastern Region of the country compared to the more Central and Western Regions.

References


