

CHINA: A FOLLOWER OR LEADER IN GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION?*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on China both as an object and a subject in the globalization of higher education and the sometimes paradoxical nature of the country's policies in this respect. How is the Chinese perspective on globalization shaping its agenda for higher education, the development of world-class universities, and cooperation with Europe and the West? What is China's role in the globalization of higher education, its global agency in higher education, and the impact of its diaspora, soft power, and its new Silk Routes policies? What is its capacity to become a global leader in higher education, i.e. in creating global public goods, such as knowledge and educational opportunity? It seems that China's higher education focus is shifting, widening, and diversifying. It is seeking a leading role along its New Silk Roads, primarily in its neighboring region, but potentially reaching out into Europe. This is in line with its renewed economic policy, aimed at innovating its large-scale manufacturing sector and reducing regional inequalities. A more diversified higher education system should come along to support this. At the same time, China is still an important basis for talent recruitment by the US and Europe. China's higher education sector is thus becoming more complex and will require a next level of strategic management, facilitated by new governance models which allow institutions to seize their opportunities, while guiding the country as a whole towards a *World-Class System*.

Keywords: China, Globalization, Internationalization, Higher Education, Policy, New Silk Route

The impressive scale and pace at which Chinese higher education has developed over the last decades, is often being analyzed as a response to globalization. China's higher education policies are driven by the desire to become a globally competitive economy. Increased student enrolment is paralleled by efforts to improve degree standards and teaching quality, with 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. China is seen 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 look at its (potential) role as a global *leader* in higher education.

This paper will thus focus on China's role *both* as an object and a subject in the globalization process. More in particular the following questions will be discussed: how are China's higher education and R&D policies inspired and fueled by the Chinese perspective on globalization? What is China's capacity to become a global leader in higher education and how does this relate to more general questions regarding China's role in a new global world order and in creating global public goods, such as scientific knowledge and educational opportunity? What is China's global agency in higher education and how could this develop in relation to its soft power and its New Silk Route (One Belt One Route) policy?

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Data were collected through a literature review and official documents, a series of conferences, round tables, and seminars at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, its Center for Government and International Studies, the Kennedy School of Government, and the Graduate School of Education. Initial results were presented and discussed with experts in seminars in Boston and Shanghai, and in London and Sydney via Skype. Consequently, a series of some 30 semi-structured multi-stakeholder interviews was undertaken in China and Hong Kong with representatives from the 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. This part of the study was undertaken in cooperation with the Graduate School of Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and with support from the Harvard Center Shanghai.

A. 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 programs for important legal, educational, medical and military functions (Neave, 2001) and have always sought to preserve their right to have the universities they want, serving first and foremost their needs in political, social and economic development (Foskett & Maringe, 2010). In fact, the modern university is a national institution and only very few universities can claim a centuries-old international tradition, since most were established after 1900 and half after the Second World War (Scott, 1998).

Since the mid-century mark following the war, internationalization of higher education has accelerated, shaped by major political and economic developments such as the post-war reconstruction, decolonization, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and regional integration in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, and in Latin America. From the end of the 20th century onwards, internationalization of higher education has been increasingly contextualized by globalization, with 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 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). Evidently, it requires quite some time, effort, resources, and strategic planning to successfully internationalize nationally-based higher education institutions. In fact, this branch of higher education policy is particularly defined by a nation's historical, geographic, cultural and linguistic characteristics and guided by national regulatory and funding frameworks, which may by time foster or impede the intended achievements (Van der Wende, 2010).

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: 122). This article 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 pointing 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 early to assess China's (potential) global leadership in higher education, given the fact that criteria for determining global positions are relatively new, with very few Chinese institutions qualifying as WCUs. And despite all the internationalization

rhetoric, higher education is still mostly a national affair. More than 95% of students enrolled world-wide are domestic, and trends towards decreasing international engagement or re-nationalization could emerge as a result of global conflicts (Surssock, 2015). Moreover, change is slow in higher education. Interviewees from international business argued 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 impacted China, it is now necessary to understand how China is impacting the world in a range of different dimensions. Wasserstrom (2014) 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" (p. 167). He also underlines that it will be important to see the relationship between contemporary China and globalization in a new way. Thus avoiding the "distorting lenses" of the "Friedman Fallacy" emphasizing very recent trends in globalization as mass convergence and unavoidable integration, and the "Kissinger Confusion" emphasizing the ancient history and singularity of China and deeply skeptical about China's potential to integrate into any global order not of its own creation.

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 mobile internationally, i.e. its diaspora, 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. We will therefore look closer at China's global agency in higher education, its role in creating global public goods, the role of higher education in its soft power and in particular to its recently announced "New Silk Route" or "One Belt One Route" policy, which seem to create (re-)new(ed) opportunities for higher education cooperation with Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

B. The Historical, Political, and Cultural Intricacies of China's International Higher Education Engagement

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 in terms of student enrolment. It 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).

Similar to most 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 – a total of 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 suggest 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 as to facilitate the establishment of foreign branch campuses of (mainly Anglo-Saxon) universities, which is seen as a more affordable alternative for study abroad. Interviews reveal that Chinese representatives are mostly positive about 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 and skills.

But like in many other countries, in China higher education is still first and foremost a national affair. It has a long history of education for government service and also today 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" (China's 2010 National Plan for Medium and Long Term Educational Reform and Development, 2010). And as elsewhere, this human capital agenda for higher education is increasingly contextualized by globalization as a driving factor providing mainly economic rationales; i.e. the aim of developing domestic capacity (talent) for economic growth and competition in the global knowledge economy. China's response to globalization thus 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 challenges and concerns related to the speedy growth of the Chinese higher education system and especially with regard to internationalization. The historical, political, 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.

Research and critical debate on the extraordinary growth of the Chinese higher education system involve 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 issues regard the rapid growth in quantity in relation to the necessary raise in quality, the growth of enrollment in the midst of high graduate unemployment rates, growing inequalities, and constraints in academic freedom and institutional autonomy. It can be argued 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).

The 2013 central government issued guidelines to suppress the teaching of "wrong Western values" fueled debate in the West as well as inside Chinese academia regarding the role of academic freedom in Chinese universities. These guidelines aim to suppress class room 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 continued to warn against 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 "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 were echoed in a statement by Peking University's Party Secretary Zhu Shanlu, saying that education should strongly focus on "Marxism and communism beliefs, the study of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and propaganda of the Chinese dream" (people.cn, 3 February, 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 of Western import (Levin, 2015; Yeung, 2015).

These criticisms relate to earlier debates regarding the role of civic and political education in China. Jiang and Xu (2013) point to the paradoxes in this area between political education and moral education, and between developing national citizens and developing world citizens. They reveal that not only there is a large gap between the highly ideological objectives of the compulsory political education theory courses (such as "Basic Principles of Marxism") and their unpopular status among students and consequent poor results. In fact, they say, the sole focus is on political education, at the expense of moral education, and without clear concepts regarding the development of world citizens. The emphasis on world citizenship education is insufficient and there is a narrow-minded preference for nationalism, say also Camicia & Zhu (2011).

Postiglione (2015) underlines this tension between the goals of internationalization 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 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).

After several decades of opening up China's economy to the world started by Deng Xiaoping and sustained by his successors, the current Xi Jinping's government is yet 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 consequent risk for 'dissent' academics of being penalized (Sharma, 2013).

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 growing. 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 disruption of personal VPN connections as solutions for limited Internet access, and the confiscation of Western textbooks at the Chinese border (Bell, 2015). Concerns rise 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 restraint activities that are "not in the national interest or threatening national security". This could have serious effects on collaboration with Chinese universities and cause risks for foreign guest lecturers and international branch campuses operating in China. If they would indeed be considered as foreign NGOs "It would seriously undermine the ability of universities like NYU to operate in China according to principles of academic freedom," stated NYU-Shanghai's vice-chancellor (*University World News*, 2 July, 2015).

There is thus a contradiction between China's desire to be a leader in the global economy and its internal policies to restrict academic and Internet 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 confirmed the party's correct policies hitherto, 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; "Herein lies the paradox of China's economic liberalization," notes one observer (Abrami et al, 2014, p. 29).

C. China's Global Agency and Impact

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 on China's modernization (Daly, 2015), yet in a very uneven and still incomplete way (N. Wang, 2015). As a realization of the Chinese dream, which is different from the American dream (Ljunggren, 2015), and from the aim of wanting to be number 1, according to Stiglitz (2015).

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.

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). This 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 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 scope and as a consequence renders its public policy record of more than parochial interest and importance.

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 by 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 math 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 would be interested in moving into 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 the Western higher education, China is currently taking a more proactive role in globalization. Efforts are being undertaken to seek impact at global level, ranging from small programs 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 other initiatives in London, Mumbai, South Africa, Malaysia, and Laos.

However, for 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 call for academics to 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. A first comprehensive international recent report on China's performance in science (Nature Publishing Group, 2015), made similar recommendations on structures for funding, conducting and sharing research and on training and hiring practices in order improve the quality and impact of its scientific output.

D. Global Public Goods and Soft Power

Research-based knowledge and student learning are global public goods, which 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 and Stern 1999, pp. 2-3, cited by Marginson, 2015, p. 41). A major expectation regarding China's contribution to generating global public goods is related to the increasing inequality caused by globalization and its role in re-balancing it (Wang N., 2015; Stiglitz, 2015). It could be argued that the increased inequality in large countries such as China is counter-balanced by the lifting of its position relative to the West. China's contribution to the global science system is also growing quickly and much of future human knowledge can come from China, as it did for much of human history (Marginson, 2015).

Interviewees view Chinese academics as part of the global academic world who are actively contributing to global good by knowledge production and educational opportunities. They also point to recent establishment of UNESCO research centers (at Tsinghua University) as examples demonstrating China's role in creating global public goods. Meanwhile, they point out that the quality and originality of knowledge production is still lagging behind due to the structural and organizational limitations, as discussed above. 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 to 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 and 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, or the English version of CCTV and Tsinghua's growing provision of massive open online courses, or MOOCs 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 neighboring 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, 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 (2013) with reference to Nussbaum (1997). However, in their view this aim is overshadowed by the national focus of the state-imposed political education. Likewise, Western students rated some of Tsinghua's MOOCs, notably the one on "Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought", as Chinese state propaganda. Resistance also evolved in some cases over the education provided by the Confucius Institutes (see next).

E. Confucius Institutes

The Confucius Institute Program is arguably China's most systematically planned soft power policy mechanism. It aims to promote Chinese language and culture internationally and was started in 2004 with the first Institute opening its doors in Seoul, South Korea. In 2015 there were 500 institutes in 134 countries worldwide, many in Europe (169) and the US (109). The aim is to establish 1000 worldwide. CI's operate under *Hanban*; the Office of Chinese Language Council International; a non-profit public educational organization affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education and partner with established colleges or universities abroad. They were initially welcomed with enthusiasm, as an asset in relation to Chinese students enrolments, Chinese studies programs and bringing financial and human resources.

Since 2013, concerns have been rising over CI's hiring policy, non-disclosure of contracts, and the lack of academic freedom in its curriculum, which is seen as infused with propaganda and political influence. After a 2014 incident with the *Hanban* director in a European conference (the Braga incident) and some faculty and student protests, several universities in Canada, the US, and Europe have discontinued their contracts with CI and the American Association of University Professors has argued for the closure of all American Confucius Institutes over issues regarding academic integrity.

This demonstrates that it is indeed complicated to control soft power in contexts where civil society and non-state actors may be critical of the ideology that China is seen to be disseminating through these institutes and over which the Chinese government has little to say. CI's thus do not seem to be very effective in terms of China's global agency in higher education. From our interviews, all stakeholders believe that CI's are part of China's cultural diplomacy. However, some Chinese and international academics pointed out that CI's need better strategies and less governmental interventions otherwise they can have a negative impact on China's soft power. Compared to Confucius Institutes, higher education institutes, research centers and NGOs are better platforms for soft power, in their view. "For the next decade, the Chinese government will need to think about how to do the job more clever" (C-ACAD).

F. The Chinese Diaspora

Is China asserting global agency or "soft power" through its diaspora? What is the role of overseas Chinese in the global context? Do they effectively disseminate Chinese values and interests? Do they contribute to western scientific and capital development, do they contribute to Chinese R&D, or should this all be considered as a contribution to knowledge as a global public good?

China has sent the largest numbers of students abroad and aims to move from brain drain to brain circulation. Thus far, however, brain drain remains a significant problem. The Chinese diaspora has continued to grow in size and strength and there is still a very large net outflow of Chinese students every year. The worldwide Chinese knowledge diaspora is one of global importance and features strongly in the innovation systems of western countries (Welch, 2015). Programs aiming to bring back Chinese who studied abroad, such as the 1000 Talent Program, demonstrated only partial success (Cao, 2008; Welch & Cai, 2011). More recent data suggest that the vast majority (85%) of young Chinese scientists overseas are planning to return to China (Nature Publishing Group, 2015). But despite the rising rate of returnees, there is also evidence that the best and the brightest would still fail to return (Welch & Cai, 2014; Welch, 2015).

Chinese leaders still send their children to US universities, even top Chinese universities still lose students to the US, UK and HK, and are not yet very effective in attracting foreign elites (Kirby, 2014). Interviewees from international academia and business stressed that this trend is now also observed at the level of secondary education, with growing interest for international high schools abroad. A recent report from HSBC (2014) found that 85% of parents (within a sample of their presumably affluent clientele) from mainland China would consider the possibility of sending their children abroad for university study (higher than the average level of 74% among sampled countries), that 42% of parents from mainland China will consider middle school education and 19% will consider primary school abroad. Interviewees from academia complain about the relatively weak quality of Chinese graduate students, as the best would go abroad after undergraduate at Chinese top universities.

In our interviews and meetings with Chinese academic and others, they noted an increased trend for younger high school students to go abroad and showed concern about the interest and ability of students to return to China and to identify with its political culture. New, changing, or dual cultural identities due to the unprecedented number of Chinese spending time abroad, most significantly as students, could affect the country in profound ways over time (Wasserstrom, 2014). In the long-term, these returning nationals could bring about a positive shift in China's academic system. Overseas PhD returnees appointed by Chinese top universities are expected to make these institutions more globally minded and improve their teaching and research practices (Zhang, 2014; Jiang, 2015). However, this will strongly depend on how the returnees will be able to combine their Western and Eastern values in their new identities and how the elites that studied abroad will interact with the elites educated domestically.

Interviewees from all sectors agree that returnees play an important role and make substantial contributions in the Chinese higher education system. Returnees brought back professional training and international collaboration opportunities. But Chinese administrators also point out that some individuals encounter issues in their adjustment to the Chinese academic system because of the previously mentioned “pragmatism” and problems in the structure of the system. Yet they expect that by forming a team and developing agency bottom-up they will bring change to the system. But much effort and especially time will be needed to see an impact. And while Chinese believe that this change will be gradual and slow, on the US side voices already go up to reduce the number of Chinese students as it would just be helping its competitor to grow, as was set out in recent a report on “Balancing China” (Daly, 2015; Walt, 2015).

G. The Shanghai Ranking and the World-Class University Movement

Perhaps the most remarkable, yet mainly unintended, example of China’s global agency and impact on higher education is the Shanghai Ranking and the related World-Class University Movement. China’s decision to develop World Class Universities (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), firstly published in 2003 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and also known as the “Shanghai Ranking”. 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 the perhaps 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 classifying the research performance of universities worldwide. It initiated an open global competition in higher education that had not existed hitherto 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 toward, rather than away from the Western or global model. A total of 44 Chinese universities are 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 international ranking in STEM fields steadily improving (ARWU, 2015).

The impact of the ARWU ranking, which inspired the creation of several other international ranking enterprises, 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), their unbalancing impact on institutional policies affecting their (teaching) mission and profile, as well as on national policies, (Hazelkorn, 2007, 2011; Van der Wende, 2014). At the same time it is recognized that the related World Class University Movement has contributed 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).

H. China’s New Silk Road: A New Epistemic Road?

A major new vehicle for China’s global influence through both economic and soft power was announced in 2013 with its New Silk Road (NSR) policy. A mega project with a land-based Silk Road and maritime Silk Road creating together a massive loop linking three continents: Asia, Europe, and Africa, reflecting China’s ambitions to reclaim its place as the “Middle Kingdom” and linking it to the world by trade and cultural exchanges. Railroads are a main feature of the land-based Silk Road connecting major manufacturing cities in Western China to Europe via Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, the Balkans, and the Caucasus across the 11,000-kilometer-long Eurasian continent and potentially including 60 countries. The New Silk Road is supposed to create more than a trade infrastructure, reviving the historical and cultural meaning of it. Through this “infrastructure diplomacy”, China also hopes to gain closer cultural and political ties with (especially its neighboring) countries along the Silk Road — resulting in a new model of “mutual respect and mutual trust”, a community with “common interests, fate, and responsibilities”, guided by China’s principles for an “open world economy and open international relations”. Its aim to contribute to global public goods is inextricably linked to the Silk Road in China’s past as a source of goods and information for the rest of the world.

The NSR concept quickly became popular throughout 2014 to become the key instrument of China’s foreign policy, diplomacy and soft power and has also been dubbed as “One Belt and One Road” (OBOR). However, in the rather open formulation of the

policy, details on implementation remain scarce. For instance, will agreements with foreign countries be signed bilaterally with individual countries or at multilateral levels like EU and ASEAN? And which countries will precisely be included? Some may be strategically important for China's foreign relations, but represent territories that are quite challenging to navigate for businesses, researchers or students (Kaczmarek, 2015; Tiezzi, 2014; Rolland, 2015).

What is the NSR's potential for China's global agency and impact in higher education? Welch (2015) suggests that the NSR could be a new epistemic road, pointing to the large Chinese knowledge diaspora in Europe, including thousands of highly qualified Chinese researchers, and its prospects for the European knowledge economy if they could act as bridge builders between the two research communities. Given also that Europe is the second largest receiver of (mainly undergraduate) Chinese students, after the USA (with mainly graduate students) and the many Europe-China collaborations, including joint programs, branch campuses, bi-lateral scholarship programs, China's participation in EU-wide frameworks such as ERASMUS Mundus (as the largest provider of non-EU students), and its access to the European Research Council funding facility.

The broader political economic context for the potential impact of the NSR on the European Higher Education and Research Area (EHEA & ERA) could in principle be positive. The EU is China's largest trading partner. Looking at the EU's aggregate trade with China, China's influence on Europe is underestimated, although the picture at the sub-EU level is very different (Godement, 2014). While concerns about human rights issues in China persist, there is also considerable goodwill on both sides and new EU-China negotiations show promise. Europe seems also more willing than the US to recognize China's role in the creation of new global institutions, as demonstrated by the range of European countries quickly joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), created by China and one of the main investment vehicles for its OBOR.

European higher education has much to offer and much to gain in China. A strong record of open bi- and multilateral cooperation in higher education and research, supported with large-scale programs such as ERASMUS+ for education and Horizon 2020 for research. Mutual cooperation and recognition are important principles, with the successful ECTS scheme now built out to the Academic Credit Transfer Framework for Asia (ACTFA). Higher education in Europe is, like in China, mostly public and more affordable than in the US. The strategic interest of European HEIs for Asia is strong and on the rise, while other areas including North America are losing ground (Sursock, 2015). And probably most importantly, Europe is in need of a substantial amount of foreign talent as it is facing a substantial skills shortage and mismatch in relation to its ambitious knowledge economy growth strategy (Morehouse & Busse, 2014; Van der Wende, 2015).

But there are also significant obstacles, most notably in the area of the EU's mostly absent foreign policy, consequent weak coordination capacity over its member countries' diverging foreign policy interests and fragmented immigration policies. This is increasingly problematic considering the tensions in Europe's border regions, notably in the Middle-East and North Africa, and eastwards regarding Russia's disputed territories. The precise itinerary of the Silk Road will therefore be an issue of geopolitical meaning, guided by Europe's concerns about refugee flows, domestic security and threats of terrorism, need for energy supplies, and issues of international legal order and human rights.

The number of NSR maps findable with Google images is growing by the day and shows intriguing differences depending on the producer's position and interests. The Chinese strategy is deliberately open (or ambiguous) and semi-official Chinese versions of the NSR map published by Xinhua and CCTV differ on an important dimension: whether or not the road will stop in Moscow.

Higher education cooperation is already on the OBOR or NSR agenda and vice versa. President Xi announced cultural exchange and cooperation in training and education to be important elements of OBOR. In terms of soft power and to address the regions yawning skills gap, which invariably stands in the way of its economic ambitions (Sebastian & Choudaha, 2015). It encourages the broad participation of higher education institutions and leading Chinese universities are setting up Belt and Road Institutes, think tanks, and conferences to explore new alliances inspired by the NSR. Examples are the One Belt One Road Economic Research Institute at Renmin University, the Silk Road Institute at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, the China Academy of One Belt One Road Strategy at the Beijing International Studies University, the Road Research Center at Beijing Jiao tong University, and the Maritime Silk Institute at Huaqiao University, and the University Alliance of the New Silk Road at Xi'an Jiao Tong University, which recently invited 60 universities from 22 potential OBOR countries to explore opportunities for cooperation (Sharma, 2015). NSR was also the theme of the 2015 Euro-Asia Economic Forum, with a range of sessions on (higher) education cooperation.

From the Chinese perspective, the focus seems to be primarily on China's neighboring and mostly developing countries. Higher education would have a crucial role to play in assuring that Chinese professionals, engaged in OBOR projects in these countries, have sufficient knowledge of the developing world. It is felt that since China has been so much focused on the US and Europe that Chinese people, especially younger generations, have more knowledge about the developed world. "Therefore the

government should encourage Chinese students to more closely study the histories, cultures, economies and religions of the developing countries along the NSR” (Zhao, 2015).

A statement on the OBOR released by the Chinese Higher Education Association in August 2015 eagerly adopts the view that the implementation of OBOR needs the involvement of higher education institutions, as well as a new vision for internationalization (Qu, 2015). Training in infrastructure, finance and management, engineering, political sciences should ensure that Chinese graduates will become familiar with local political, economic and geographic situations in the OBOR countries. The common mindset and focus in China on English-speaking developed countries should shift to a more diversified internationalization process, including curricula that address the role of international trade in developing countries and related issues of inequality, cultural differences, and sustainability.

OBOR is also seen as an opportunity to re-balance China’s unfavorable deficit in students going abroad versus incoming international students. It is realized that students from developing countries are less interested in [Chinese] language learning than those from developed countries and more in degree courses in applied fields such as engineering and medicine. The sector anticipates a thriving market of educational service, based on China’s strength in high-end manufacturing and connected higher professional education, both by attracting students to mainland China as well as by building programs in OBOR countries, which usually have no problem of aging population, thus a still abundant labor force yet a low level of higher education infrastructure.

Most interviewees agree that the OBOR policy present a huge potential for facilitating economic trade and promoting mutual communication with great opportunities for higher education as well. It will further Chinese higher education’s impact on these countries, they believe, for instance by establishing branch campus, exchange programs, and offering scholarships for students from these countries. They also agree that it presents challenges for the Chinese higher education system to produce talents who can understand the context and the situation of the OBOR countries.

An OBOR scholarship program would be in the making by the MoE, to be announced in the fall. However, according to informal information from a C-ACAD representative, the goal of these scholarships will be solely focused on helping high-level and mid-level decision makers in the OBOR countries to understand more about Chinese politics, Chinese systems, and Chinese opportunities.

But as always, views differ and policy aims and instruments can be incongruent. Some see OBOR as a means to boost the strongest Chinese universities higher up in various global rankings, others as the opening of a higher education market, or a new avenue for soft power. Europe may see it as a chance to fill its skills shortages, while China may be primarily interested in the young labor force in developing countries nearby. And all of this may work out and be true at the same time, as aims may not be convergent but complementary. European integration has also been a project with many different dimensions and – especially at present – conflicting aims and interpretations, creating a broad range of buy-in options for many stakeholders in the higher education sector. Other comparisons could be made with major historical infrastructural and geopolitical developments that affected higher education and especially its internationalization. At the same time, there are important structural differences; in the 21st century, knowledge doesn’t travel by train, but freely flows over the Internet.

I. China’s Role in Global Higher Education: a Follower and Emerging Leader

In this article, we have tried to examine China’s role and position as both a follower and a (potential) global leader in higher education, aiming to grasp the Chinese perspective on globalization, its global agency, impact, soft power and ambitions to generate global public goods in the higher education context. 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 and Wasserstrom 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 1980, it has been strongly oriented on the West, the USA 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 countries along its New Silk Road - primarily the developing countries in its neighboring 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 efforts to bring innovation to its large-scale manufacturing sector, while also attempting to deal with huge regional inequalities in economic activity. A more diversified higher education system should come along to 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. These will in turn be an example for

developing countries in its region and along the NSR, as to build a well-educated and young labor force in these countries. This new OBOR with regional focus should also help to create a higher education market for Chinese institutions, to rebalance its deficit in international student mobility, and be a push for the reform of Chinese curricula to ensure a better understanding of regional development related issues.

China is promoting mutual respect, trust, learning, and open international relations with its OBOR policy with an important soft power component. Whether and how this will affect China's global agency in higher education is as yet difficult to predict and seems to be primarily focused on its neighboring region. Lessons should be learned from the mixed achievements of the Confucius Institutes in various parts of the world. Especially on how to deal with foreign universities as non-state actors and part of civic society. 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 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 global top 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 arise and Marginson (2015) for instance argues that the outcome of the encounter between Sinic 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 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 school 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 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).

Institutional change is necessary for a Western style economic liberalization and global (re)integration. Or will China develop an alternative model for higher education, like it did for economic development? In that case, as noted by interviewees, a truly Chinese model should demonstrate a more egalitarian development towards a diversified world-class system; "a diverse and genuinely strong system without too much inequality between the top and the second and third tier institutions" (C-ACAD). However "China as a socialist country is aggressively creating WCUs at the expense of other HEIs" (C-ACAD). With the proposal of the "World-Class 2.0" initiative that highlights the establishment of world-class universities and world-class disciplines, Chinese MOE attempts to introduce competition to the current system, in particular to provide opportunities for the non-"211"/"985" universities, and to incorporate performance-based assessment among HEIs (*University World News*, 16 October, 2015). However, as our interviewees have suggested, setting the improvement of Chinese universities' ranking as one of the main goals can in itself endanger the nurturing of a diversified system when clear methods to avoid isomorphism are not in place. Meanwhile, emphasizing only the improvement of top disciplines in the ranking by intensified competition might jeopardize the development of a diverse system of disciplines when interdisciplinary research and cooperation remains as the trend and when some traditional disciplines that require more nurturing have difficulties to sustain themselves against rigid ranking indexes, in particular liberal art disciplines. In this case, the effect on establishing a diversified world-class system by the new World-Class 2.0 initiative is yet too early to tell.

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. We also acknowledge the extraordinary challenge the Chinese higher education system is facing: the largest and fastest expanding system has to cater for an even faster changing economy

and labour market. Still, we hold that mutual learning should be envisaged based on the assertion that problems in access, equality and governance of higher education are shared everywhere. However, there are serious conceptual challenges to be overcome. "With Chinese characteristics" raises many questions on how 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" will be implemented in combination with a "global vision and commitment to solving local problems". Or should we hold it for the unique dual governance structure within Chinese universities – much blamed for the resulting lack of autonomy and innovation - as cynically observed by a Chinese academic. Also discussions about a possible post-Confucian model (as suggested by Marginson), and other renewed (or neo-) Confucian interpretations seem to lead to a considerable amount of (a perhaps Confucian) confusion among educators.

Whether the 21st century can be the Chinese century in higher education is a question that wouldn't have been asked even a decade ago and it is a comparative question: who leads whom and for how long will the US still be leading? (Kirby, 2014). Chinese interviewees are divided; some see the glass as half full based on the great success of Chinese secondary education and their confidence (or hope) in the new generation(s) of highly educated Chinese returnees who will propel the necessary change. Others rather see it as half empty pointing to the increasing appetite for overseas education, which is now growing at secondary and even elementary levels and fear of a decreasing attractiveness of China for international students and returnees caused by stronger constraints on autonomy and growing bureaucratic pressures. Yet most interviewees agree that although it would be possible for China to become a leader among developing countries, but it is still a long way for Chinese universities to become WCUs. Although a young optimist noted: "It will be a long shot, but the century is still young!"

While seeking a leading role in its neighboring region, China still will remain at the same time an important basis (or target) for talent recruitment by the US and Europe. The balance between 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. The junction of these various agendas and roles is not uncommon to developed nations, which usually have a combination of higher education partnerships (including aid, trade and cooperation-type) and roles at the same time. It confirms China's emerging status as a developed country and indicates that it is becoming more (re)integrated into the global higher education landscape indeed. Chinese universities could thrive in cooperation and in competition with WCUs worldwide.

This implies that China's higher education sector is becoming more complex and will thus require a next level of strategic management. A wider array of partnerships, markets, roles and options necessitates enhanced strategic steering capacities based on a clear vision and mission, furthered and sustained by strong academic leadership. This goes beyond the university as an instrument of governmental policy. Even though in China, as elsewhere, higher education is still first and foremost a national affair, universities need a sufficient level of autonomy in order to be able to serve the country's economy and its society. More in particular, a WCU's 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. Emerging debates on university governance stress a state-market dichotomy that is long overdue and demonstrate the need to explore more refined models balancing autonomy and accountability, shared governance. This should be supported by the next level of higher education research in China, with more advanced questions on what defines world-class universities in public systems.

Chinese academics tend to agree that for the next level of development of WCUs, there is a need for more autonomy, while administrators and government officials are more divided; some referring that the Chinese government would be open to experiment with "Comprehensive Reform" plans, others arguing that further success could well be achieved under the current governance regulations. From our analysis, it occurs that the 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 new governance models will need to allow 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 with each a strong mission and quality profile and ample possibilities for students to transfer within the system at large. Inspiration for this can be sought in international dialogue and based on mutual learning. But instead of the big brand name private institutions in the USA that China tends to be so strongly focused on, it should be looking at public higher education systems with strong traditions of "social contract" (e.g. the Land Grant and Californian model in the USA). And at systems that have (recently) undergone system-level changes towards deregulation and more institutional autonomy, while ensuring accountability for public funding and service (e.g. France), at strong federal models (Germany, Switzerland), and the high performing but more egalitarian public systems in northern Europe. An alternative model for the WCU that fits well into this more public context is that of the "Flagship University", which combines a strong public mission with a global outlook (Douglass, 2015). China would benefit from opportunities to explore such a wider variation of models and approaches and could at the same time develop a convincing Chinese version of it.

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