

Navigating Shifts in Europe-China Higher Education Cooperation: An Institutional Logics Perspective

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Abstract

Understanding the changing dynamics of Europe-China cooperation is essential, particularly against the backdrop of recent geopolitical shifts that have added layers of complexity to this relationship. This shifts underscore the need for a nuanced analysis of the drivers of such international collaboration, which represents a gap in both theoretical and empirical research. Our study explores the complex nature of this cooperation from the perspective of institutional logics, focusing on how societal changes have influenced the interaction of scientific, economic, and political logics underlying the cooperation from 1975 to the present. Through analysing relevant literature and policy documents, our findings uncover how varying logics' compatibilities between and within the two regions have influenced the course of Europe-China higher education collaboration. In doing so, this paper not only addresses a gap in the literature on the intricate factors shaping Europe-China academic relations but also establishes a theoretical foundation for future research on international higher education cooperation in a rapidly evolving global context.

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Introduction

The recent geopolitical changes in the global landscape have brought dramatic changes to the international collaboration in the sector of higher education (Rizvi, 2022), including the higher education cooperation between Europe and China (Braun Štrelcová, 2023; Cai, 2023a). The evolving landscape of Europe-China higher education cooperation, once marked by a period of flourishing collaboration (Cai, 2019), is now navigating through a period dense with challenges and uncertainties (Altbach & de Wit, 2023; Cai, 2023a). This transformation is largely influenced by the fluctuating dynamics of EU-China relations, further compounded by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical tensions arising from China-US rivalry (Zha, 2023) and the Russia-Ukraine war (Cai et al., 2022). Cai (2023a) has comprehensively elucidated the paradoxes, misperceptions, and risks inherent in Europe-China higher education cooperation. Similar observations are also made by Altbach and de Wit (2023). In sum, the significant challenges that pose risks to the current Europe-China higher education collaboration are highlighted as follows.

First, while policymakers and university leaders on both sides are at a crossroads, struggling to develop effective strategies, academics are uncertain about how to proceed with collaborations due to a lack of clear guidelines (Cai, 2023a; Shih et al., 2024). Some EU member states, such as the Netherlands in 2019 (Government of the Netherlands, 2019), Finland in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2021) and Germany in 2024 (DAAD, 2024), have issued recommendations for higher education cooperation with China, but the underlying rationales of these guidelines are somewhat paradoxical. They fluctuate between advocating for continued collaboration with China, recognising the country's significant achievements in science and technology (advocating against decoupling), and cautioning that such cooperation should not compromise academic freedom, intellectual property rights, or raise security concerns (emphasising a de-risking approach). Similarly, Sweden has also launched the 'Approach to matters relating to China' in 2019 (Government Office of Sweden, 2019), where openness, scientific globalism, and academic freedom became increasingly prominent drivers to sustain the cooperation with China (Shih et al., 2024). Although the UK is not in the EU, as an important European actor in cooperation with China, it also tended to turn to a case-by-case approach to manage risks while maintaining the education and research ties with China (Summers, 2023).

Second, misperceptions about cooperation from both sides might also affect the current cooperative practices (Cai, 2023a): Within the EU, there's a belief

that China's authoritarian system significantly intertwines with its higher education institutions' practices in collaborations with Europe. However, according to Cai (2023a)'s observation, the Chinese government, despite engaging in tough dialogues with the EU, expects these political discourses to be loosely linked with the collaborative activities of Chinese universities with their European counterparts. In China, there's an assumption that European higher education institutions, given their long tradition of academic autonomy, remain independent from political discourses related to cooperation with China. Yet, there are signs that the attitudes of European universities towards collaboration with China are increasingly aligning with governmental positions as to avoid reputational risks (Shih et al., 2024).

Third, the paradoxes and misperceptions, mentioned above, lead to another critical challenge: a vicious cycle where misunderstandings exacerbate collaboration difficulties, hindering effective communication and shared goals (Cai, 2023a). This cycle diminishes motivation to bridge cultural divides, threatening the long-term viability of the partnership. If unresolved, reversing the damage and restoring the relationship could become nearly impossible, highlighting the urgent need to address these misinterpretations to safeguard future collaboration.

We argue that these challenges and misunderstandings encountered in Europe-China higher education cooperation stem from an inadequate grasp of the fundamental changes occurring within this sphere, especially when viewed against the backdrop of political and economic discourses. Consequently, our paper delves into the contextual factors influencing the direction of Europe-China higher education collaboration, with the goal of identifying the root causes of these paradoxes and misconceptions.

While our inquiry has received limited research attention, extant literature sheds useful lights on our study, encapsulated within two principal strands: one delineating the historical progression of Europe-China higher education collaboration and another probing into the foundational reasons for international higher education cooperation, encompassing and extending beyond the Europe-China framework. While these strands enrich our comprehension, notable lacunae persist, particularly in decoding the impact of contextual factors on the evolution of Europe-China cooperation dynamics.

The first body of literature implies that the historical development of Europe-China higher education can be divided into four phases based on four critical junctures. 'Critical junctures' refer to 'events and developments in the distant past, generally concentrated in a relatively short period, that have a crucial impact on outcomes later in time' (Capoccia, 2016, p. 89). Critical conjuncture analysis, stemming from historical institutionalism, is often applied in the analysis of historical development of institutions, such as organisations, formal rules, public policies, etc. (Capoccia, 2016). The history of Europe-China higher education cooperation identifies four pivotal critical junctures (Braun Střelcová, 2022, 2023; van der Wende, 2020; Zheng & Cai, 2018):

1. **1975:** This year marks the beginning of official diplomatic relations between China and the European Economic Community (EEC), the predecessor of the EU (van der Wende, 2020). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, cooperation between European and Chinese universities had begun, but in a fragmented manner, limited to staff and student exchanges based on individual academic networks or bilateral institutional agreements (van der Wende, 2020; Zheng & Cai, 2018). Building on the official diplomatic relations established between the EEC and China in 1975, and the opening-up and reform policy in China in 1978, further agreements on cooperation in science and technology for development were formed between China and the EU during the 1980s and 1990s (van der Wende, 2020).
2. **2003:** A significant enhancement in cooperation occurred with the European Commission's publication of *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations*. This period also celebrated the successful conclusion of the *EU-Higher Education Programme (1997–2001)*, further strengthening ties between the EU and China (Xie, 2020).
3. **2013:** The release of the *Europe-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* at the 16th China-EU Summit marked another positive turning point. This agenda not only promoted increased mobility but also broadened the scope to encompass joint degree provision and research collaborations, supported by mutual interests in reciprocity and internationalisation (Cai, 2019; van der Wende, 2020). Another event marking this year as a critical juncture is China's launch of the One Belt and One Road Initiative in 2013, which signaled a greater focus on enhancing the country's global competitiveness (van der Wende, 2020).
4. **2019:** This year is recognised as a watershed moment, highlighted by the EU's *Europe-China—A Strategic Outlook*. This document recalibrated the dynamics of the partnership, identifying China simultaneously as a collaborator, competitor, and systemic rival (European Commission, 2019).

These four critical junctures mark the nodes of the four stages of China-Europe higher education cooperation. While segmenting the history of Europe-China higher education cooperation into distinct phases may simplify its complex and dynamic nature, this approach enhances analytical clarity. It enables a focused examination of the most radical changes in the cooperation history, which is the central aim of this paper.

These scholarly works suggest a link between contextual changes and shifts in cooperation, offering valuable insights into selecting pertinent periods for analysing both societal and higher education transformations, along with their interconnections. Nonetheless, these investigations have yet to thoroughly explore the influences of contextual factors on Europe-China cooperation and the underlying logics.

The second strand of literature explores rationales in international higher education cooperation beyond the Europe-China context. Contrasting with traditional emphases on academic, economic, social/cultural, and political drivers internationalisation of

higher education confined mainly to higher education policies (Knight, 2004; Zha, 2003), recent studies advocate linking internationalisation with broader societal considerations (Brandenburg et al., 2019a, 2019b; Jones et al., 2021). For instance, Balbachevsky et al. (2022) propose a two-dimensional typology for understanding internationalisation of higher education policies within wider societal contexts, considering the international higher education policies' alignment with national drivers of international political and economic cooperation. de Wit (2024) suggests moving beyond the quest for an ideal definition of internationalisation, focusing instead on clear rationales, outcomes, and future directions.

These studies mark a shift from short-term, neoliberal strategies to those prioritising long-term societal interests and global equality, highlighting the intertwined academic, economic, and political rationales at societal (macro) and organisational (meso) levels. These insights prompt us to examine the academic, economic, and political rationales underpinning Europe-China higher education cooperation. Yet, the literature has not fully analysed how these rationales or logics relate to societal transformation, nor has it provided a nuanced theoretical account of the process.

To address the research gaps identified, we pose the question: How have contextual factors shaped the underlying logics of Europe-China higher education cooperation from 1975 to the present, with particular focus on the shifts in logics at critical junctures? It involves two dimensions: first, the changes in the logics underlying each side's cooperation strategies with the other; and second, the evolution of the compatibility between the logics of both sides. While exploring an extensive historical period, our primary goal is to elucidate how the current landscape of Europe-China higher education cooperation differs from the past and the underlying reasons for these differences. By 'China' we focus on the mainland China, as the cooperation with Europe in the regions of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan can be different. The term 'Europe' can be understood in two ways: geographically, it refers to European countries; at the supranational level, it refers to the European Union (EU) as an entity (Zheng & Cai, 2018), coordinated by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. We would like to highlight two key points. First, in the broader context of Europe, despite Brexit, the UK's academic collaboration with China remains a significant part of Europe-China higher education cooperation (Summers, 2023). Additionally, in the early stages, higher education cooperation between Chinese and European universities (including British universities) was initiated through individual networks or bilateral institutional agreements, with the EU playing a more limited role (van der Wende, 2020). Second, we recognise that the varying national strategies among European countries may not be fully captured in this study.

To approach our research question, we conduct institutional logics analysis by taking two essential steps: first, construct an analytical framework using the institutional logics perspective, and then conduct institutional logics analyse by using secondary literature and policy documents.

Approaches of Institutional Logics Analysis

Institutional logics analysis delineates the methodologies used to scrutinise organisational or institutional systems through the lens of institutional logics (Cai & Mountford, 2022). Addressing the critique that many existing studies based on institutional logics often resort to ad hoc analyses—meaning that these studies may apply institutional logics inconsistently, improvising or adapting the analysis without a systematic, structured approach, Cai and Mountford (2022) have set down essential principles for an optimal approach to institutional logics analysis, forming the foundation of our analytical approach. Nevertheless, it's essential to tailor the principles of conducting institutional logics analysis to accommodate the specific nuances of each research project.

The absence of pre-defined analytical frameworks for analysing how the broad context of Europe-China cooperation influences the logics within Europe-China higher education cooperation compels us to develop our specific institutional logics analysis approach. This approach is designed to tackle two key issues in our research: firstly, identifying the key shifts in institutional logics within the domain of Europe-China higher education cooperation at crucial moments triggered by significant societal changes, and secondly, exploring the dynamics of these logics from both European and Chinese perspectives through a compatibility analysis to uncover the complexities of this cooperative relationship.

Institutional logics perspective as one of the strands of institutional theory was initially posited by Alford and Friedland (1985) and has been further elaborated by Thornton et al. (2012). Institutional logic is characterised as 'a collection of material practices and symbolic constructions' which form the 'organising principle' of an institutional order and are 'accessible to organisations and individuals for elaboration' (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248). Grounded on the analysis of the institutional environment for the Western society, Thornton et al. (2012) identified seven ideal types of institutional logics, namely state logic, profession logic, family logic, market logic, corporation logic, religion logic, and community logic. They highlight that these logics are distinct due to their unique sources of legitimacy, authority, and identity, among other factors. Incorporating macro structure, local culture, and human agency, institutional logics analysis aids in comprehending the content and meaning of a complex institutional environment, enhancing the explanation of how the institutional environment simultaneously facilitates and limits the actions of organisational and individual actors (Cai & Mehari, 2015).

Cai and Mountford (2022) advocate for an optimal approach to institutional logics analysis, emphasising the importance of rigorously identifying field-level logics and ensuring a robust theory-method fit. In this context, we further review these two critical aspects and discuss their application in our study.

To discern field-level logics, it is essential to distinguish them from societal-level logics. Societal-level logics offer a macro perspective, encompassing the broad institutional frameworks that shape individual and organisational behaviour. Conversely, field-level logics, relating to the norms, values, and practices unique to a specific

field or sector, reflect the manner in which broader societal logics are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within a particular context (Thornton et al., 2012). The interplay between these levels is dynamic, with field-level logics being shaped by and also contributing to the evolution of societal-level logics through processes of institutionalisation and agency, respectively.

When identifying the field-level logics in our research, we examine the influence of societal-level logics on the development of field-specific logics that underpin Europe-China higher education cooperation, particularly on the strategy or policy dimension. According to Mountford and Cai (2023), field-level logics exhibit small or large deviations from the ideal-type societal logics: Some are field instantiations of societal logics, some are hybrids, and others seem to represent new field-level logics. As outlined in the introduction, the analysis of pertinent literature on the rationales for international higher education cooperation (beyond just the Europe-China framework) reveals a consensus around academic, economic, political, social/cultural motivations or rationales (e.g., Knight, 2004; Zha, 2003). While these studies do not explicitly label them as institutional logics, their discussions closely align with the concept, especially regarding the legitimisation of cooperation. This aspect is critical, as Thornton et al. (2012) underscore the significance of institutional logics in legitimising practices within a field, considering it as a fundamental feature of institutional logics. Legitimacy, in this context, refers to the perception that an entity, action, or decision is appropriate, acceptable, or justified according to established norms, values, or laws.

The institutional logics perspective helps to further clarify these rationales underlying higher education cooperation between Europe and China by providing with enhanced theoretical explanations that focus on the aspect of legitimacy. Specifically, the three field-level logics, scientific, economic, and political as instantiations of societal level logics of profession, market and state, serve as fundamental pillars in legitimising international cooperation within higher education (Balbachevsky et al., 2022; Cai & Zheng, 2022; de Wit, 2024; Knight, 2004; Marginson, 2016; Robertson & Wu, 2023):

1. **Scientific logic of international higher education cooperation:** This logic emphasises the pursuit of knowledge growth and the capacity for scientific development as the basis for legitimising international higher education cooperation. It values the advancement of academic inquiry and the contribution to the global body of knowledge, underscoring the intrinsic academic and research-oriented objectives of such partnerships.
2. **Economic logic of international higher education cooperation:** This logic frames legitimacy in terms of economic benefits. It encompasses leveraging cooperative efforts for financial gains, enhancing institutional reputations, and expanding market presence. In this way, it aligns higher education collaborations with broader economic objectives and market-driven outcomes.
3. **Political logic of international higher education cooperation:** When cooperation is guided by political logic, its legitimacy is derived from adherence to 'political

correctness' and compliance with state regulations. This logic highlights the importance of aligning cooperation initiatives with governmental policies, diplomatic relations, and national strategic interests, ensuring that cooperative practices are in sync with political expectations and regulatory frameworks.

These multifaceted institutional logics not only coexist but also interact within international higher education cooperation, such as in the Europe-China context, adding layers of complexity to the institutional framework within which these collaborations operate.

A good theory-method fit involves using approaches that appropriately combine inductive and deductive reasoning to effectively build and test theories at various levels of analysis (Cai & Mountford, 2022). Our investigation, based on analysing relevant literature and policy documents, employs a dual methodological approach to institutional logics analysis, using both the deductive and inductive approaches to address the two specific goals of our research.

First, we examine the impact of significant global shifts on the evolution of institutional logics within the framework of Europe-China higher education cooperation. This is achieved through a thematic analysis of documentary data, guided by deductive reasoning, where the three identified logics serve as a lens to assess the emergence or decline of specific logics in response to societal changes in both the EU and China.

Second, we assess the compatibility of the logics that underpin cooperation from both European and Chinese perspectives. Institutional logics theory suggests that mismatches between the driving logics of actors within the same field can complicate and challenge collaborative endeavours (Greenwood et al., 2011). Our study seeks to determine the degree to which differing logics from Europe and China contribute to either tensions or synergies, drawing on an analysis of the institutional logics that underlie their cooperation strategies. This second phase of analysis primarily employs inductive reasoning, building on the foundational insights gained from the initial document analysis.

Using the institutional logic analysis as the research approach, this study answers the research question based on documentary data that cover the academic literature, policy documents, reports related to the EU-China higher education from 1975 to 2024. The documentary data incorporated into our analysis were collected and analysed through the following procedures. Initially, based on the review of literature that comprehensively reviews the development of EU-China higher education cooperation (e.g., Cai & Zheng, 2022; van der Wende, 2020), we identified the key historical events and relevant policy documents in Europe-China higher education cooperation (See the list in the supplementary material). Then, we conducted a thorough search and compilation of relevant documentary data, encompassing policy documents, academic literature, news and reports related to the identified events and policies, utilising appropriate keywords for the search process. Given the long-time span of the study (from 1975 to 2024), we recognise that it may not be possible to cover all relevant documentary data, which could limit our analysis.

Results of Literature and Document Analysis

Before examining the intricacies of our analysis, we first offer a synopsis of our findings in Table 1. Horizontally, the table facilitates a chronological overview about the evolution of the institutional logics that underpin international higher education cooperation between Europe and China. As we have indicated in the Introduction, the existing body of literature commonly segments the historical progression into four distinct phases. Based on the major characteristics of four phases, we label them as ‘Growth Phase’ (1975–2002), ‘Golden Phase’ (2003–2012), ‘Expanded Golden Phase’ (2013–2018), and ‘Paradox Phase’ (2019 to present). We identify specific institutional logics that underlie each phase of EU-China higher education cooperation, treating the institutional logics associated with each phase as ideal types. An ‘ideal type’ a concept developed by Max Weber, is an analytical construct that intentionally exaggerates certain aspects of reality to create a distinct and pronounced model. This model encapsulates the most significant characteristics of a social phenomenon and is commonly used for comparative analysis (Swedberg, 2018). Employing this approach allows us to better comprehend the primary drivers of EU-China cooperation and the critical dynamics in its evolution. Specifically, in each of the four phases, unique institutional logics emerge as predominant forces shaping the direction of EU-China cooperation. However, it is important to note that while these institutional logics are highlighted in specific phases, all three may coexist across all phases, albeit influencing the cooperation

Table 1. Summary of the Research Findings.

| | Growth Phase (1975–2002) | Golden Phase (2003–2012) | Expanded Golden Phase (2013–2018) | Paradox Phase (2019-present) |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| Institutional logics driving Europe’s higher education cooperation with China | Initially driven by political logic and soon dominated by scientific logic | Dominant scientific logic coupled with a rapidly growing economic logic. | Dominated by combination of economic logic and scientific logic | Dramatic increase of political logic and a trend of declining economic logic and scientific logic |
| Institutional logics driving China’s higher education cooperation with Europe | Initially driven by political logic and soon dominated by scientific logic | Dominated by scientific logic coupled with a slowly growing economic logic | Dominated by combination of scientific logic and economic logic | A growing political logic and willingness of maintaining its balance with market and scientific logic |
| Cross-region Compatibility | Very high | High | Very high | Low |

to varying extents. Vertically, we juxtapose and assess the compatibility of the institutional logics from both Europe and China during these phases.

In the detailed analysis that follows, we will further expound on how specific contextual factors have instigated shifts in institutional logics from one phase to the next. Moreover, we will scrutinise the degree of compatibility of institutional logics between and within the regions throughout these temporal segments.

Institutional Logics Analysis of the Growth Phase (1975 to 2002)

The establishment of official tie between the EU and China in 1975 marked a pivotal shift in international relations, encompassing the domain of higher education cooperation between China and Europe. This policy, aimed at modernising China's economy, elevating living standards, and ending the nation's international isolation, marked the beginning of a new chapter in Europe-China educational collaboration.

China's opening up was driven by a strategic intent to attract foreign investment, technology, and expertise, thereby fuelling economic growth and development. Moreover, the engagement with Western countries, such as European countries, was strategically designed to counterbalance the Soviet Union's influence during the Cold War, signifying a major realignment in global geopolitics (Wu & Wang, 2011). Although driven by political and economic motivations, the Chinese government recognised higher education cooperation as a crucial element in achieving its reform objectives. This recognition was demonstrated through the signing of agreements with several European nations, including Germany, the UK, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium, aimed at bolstering mutual cultural exchanges and student mobility (Chen, 2004). This period saw a significant emphasis on the development of scientific logic in higher education. The establishment of the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) and the introduction of the Chinese Government Scholarship for international students in the 1990s further facilitated this exchange, with Europe emerging as a primary destination for outward student mobility (Zheng et al., 2018).

China's Opening-up Policy also opens doors for foreign institutions to collaborate with Chinese counterparts. The late 1970s saw Western European countries align their interests towards cooperation with China, largely influenced by the political climate of the time. This period was characterised by a shift in global geopolitics, marked by the cooling of the bipolar détente and economic challenges within the developed world. Concurrently, the Sino-Soviet conflict unfolded alongside the inception of China's reform programme (Albers, 2014). Given their influence in shaping and disseminating the prevailing belief systems as expected by their governments (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011), European universities were prompted to foster cooperation for promoting mutual understandings, alongside supporting China's economic and technological reforms (Andreosso-O'Callaghan, 1999). Once collaborative engagements with China began, European universities and their academic staff experienced a shift towards prioritising knowledge enhancement and the development of scientific capabilities (Pinna, 2009). This transition, initially motivated by the political logic and a

nascent economic rationale, gradually shifted to the science logic that mirrored the objectives set out in the EU's international science and technology policies regarding the cooperation with China in the 1990s, such as *Agreement on Science and Technology Cooperation between the EU and China* released in 1998, *EU-China Higher Education Cooperation Programme* in 1997.

The compatibility between the institutional logics that propel Europe's cooperation with China and vice versa is evident, stemming from a shared adherence to similar logics—scientific logics. Within each side, the predominance of scientific logics simplifies the collaborative process for the involved parties. It is important to note that the interpretation of scientific logics in both China and Europe bears a striking resemblance, underpinned by a globally accepted understanding of the nature of science (Merton & Storer, 1973). This commonality facilitates a smoother collaborative endeavour, as the fundamental principles guiding scientific inquiry and advancement are mutually recognised and valued.

Institutional Logics Analysis of the Golden Phase (2003 to 2012)

The Golden Phase is marked by both China and the EU launching strategies to enhance their cooperation, showcasing a mutual dedication to fostering a reciprocal and mutually advantageous partnership. The strategies of both sides highlight the complementary interests and motivations between China and the EU, aiming for enhanced trade and technological cooperation.

In 2003, the issuance of *China's EU Policy Paper* signified China's intention to engage with the EU across a broad spectrum of areas, including politics, economy, education, technology, culture, and the environment. The Policy Paper, along with subsequent declarations from the Chinese government, conveyed China's need for international collaboration, particularly in economic, scientific, and technological fields, promising a commitment to a peaceful rise (Berkofsky, 2006). Indeed, the Policy Paper underscores China's aim for a robust economic partnership with the EU, aspiring for China to become EU's top trading and investment partner, and stresses the significance of enhancing scientific cooperation through key forums and committees (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2003). Also, following its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in December 2001, China's motives for engaging with Europe have been partially driven by its desire to further integrate into the global economy and comply with multilateral trade regulations. However, China has not committed to cross-border supply in terms of market access or national treatment, allowing it the flexibility to shape its market based on its own standards, free from the constraints of the *General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)*. This flexibility has somewhat diluted the economic logic underpinning business collaborations, extending its effects into the sphere of higher education.

Similarly, in 2003, the publication of *A Maturing Partnership – Shared Interests and Challenges in EU–China Relations* by the European Commission marked the onset of the Second Phase, signifying the EU's enhanced coordinating role in Europe's engagement with China. This document highlights the principal motives for EU-China collaboration,

including the promotion of global governance, facilitating China's transition towards an open society, encouraging China's economic integration both domestically and on the global stage, and elevating the EU's visibility within China. Despite these broad objectives, the subsequent years witnessed a pragmatic approach dominated by economic interests, leading to a 'honeymoon' period in EU-China relations from 2003 to 2005 (Michalski & Pan, 2017). Without being specific to cooperation with China, since the launch of the Lisbon Declaration in 2000, the EU has aimed to enhance its global competitiveness and become the world's most competitive knowledge economy, reflecting a strong economic logic underlying its international strategy (van der Wende, 2020). Nevertheless, despite that economic incentives play a significant role in the EU's higher education cooperation with China, the primary collaboration activities have centred on enhancing bi-directional student mobility, joint educational programmes, and collaborative research (Cai, 2013). This underscores the prevailing influence of scientific logic in shaping the EU's engagement with China during that period.

While both scientific and economic logics play crucial roles in the collaboration between Europe and China, their emphasis varies across the two regions. In Europe, economic logic is more salient, while in China, the focus is more on scientific logic. Cai's (2013) research highlights a considerable level of compatibility between these divergent logics within the framework of higher education internationalisation. Cai (2013) noted that Europe's relative superiority in scientific development has encouraged China to assimilate advanced knowledge and high-quality education from Europe. Conversely, European higher education institutions have been motivated by the opportunity to enhance their revenue and reputation, capitalising on the recruitment of Chinese students and expanding their presence in China. Despite differing motivations, the complementary nature of these aims has significantly propelled academic mobility, research collaborations, and educational exchanges between the two regions. This suggests that within both Europe and China, the scientific and economic logics are compatible, as they both recognise that academic collaboration yields intellectual as well as economic benefits.

Institutional Logics Analysis of the Expanded Golden Phase (2013 to 2018)

In 2012, the *EU-China High Level People to People Dialogue (HPPD)* was released as a third pillar alongside the *EU-China High-level Economic and Trade Dialogue* and the *High-level Strategic Dialogue*, through a joint initiative by the European Commission and the Chinese government. This development was followed by the issue of the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* in 2013. Although, some European scholars argued that the 'honeymoon' of EU-China cooperation ended after the golden period from 2003 to 2005 (Berkofsky, 2006), the cooperation in the higher education domain since 2013 have demonstrated unprecedented flourishing (Zheng & Cai, 2018), signifying the Expanded Golden Phase in EU-China higher education collaboration. During the phase, another development in EU-China higher education cooperation was the promotion of the EU-China innovation cooperation involving interactions between industry and universities (Cai, 2023b).

In 2014, the Chinese government released its second EU policy paper—*Policy paper on EU: Deepen China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-win Cooperation*. In this document, ‘China and the EU’ were defined as ‘the world’s most representative emerging economy and group of developed countries respectively’ ‘with no fundamental conflict of interests’ (State Council of China, 2014). This policy underscored China’s commitment to a decade-long engagement with the EU, primarily driven by economic objectives. During this time, Chinese universities were actively involved in implementing two significant national initiatives. The first is the *China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, issued by the State Council of China in 2010. It provides ‘more support shall be given to exchanges of students and teachers, mutual recognition of academic credits, and mutual or joint conferment of academic degrees between Chinese and foreign colleges’, reflecting a strengthened emphasis on scientific logic. The second initiative, the *Study in China* plan launched by the Chinese Ministry of Education in September 2010, aimed to boost the international student body in China, with a target of hosting 500,000 international students, including 150,000 degree students, by 2020, showcasing a blend of scientific and economic motivations. Fuelled by these combined logics, Chinese universities experienced a surge in meso-level and micro-level partnerships with European counterparts during this period (Zheng & Cai, 2018). This collaboration resulted in the creation of 28 Europe-China joint institutions and 171 joint academic programmes within China by 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, 2019).

The launch of the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* in 2013 heralded the Golden Expansion Phase, highlighting a pledge to ‘develop a strategic partnership for the benefit of both sides’ and ‘exploit existing synergies to enhance cooperation for win-win results’ (European Commission, 2013, p. 2), indicative of a pronounced economic logic. This economic rationale seamlessly integrates with an increasingly reinforced scientific logic. For instance, the EU’s launch of the *Erasmus Plus Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE)* projects has seen a significant involvement of Chinese partners, many of which aim to cultivate university-enterprise connections (European Commission, 2021). Additionally, to foster premier, grassroots collaboration in pioneering research, the EU introduced various co-funding mechanisms with China to bolster collaborative research efforts, exemplified by the agreement between the European Research Council (ERC) and the Chinese National Science Foundation (NSFC) (European Commission, 2015). During this period, one significant change on the EU’s side, which cannot be neglected, was the implement of Brexit since January 31st, 2020. Although later, the UK’s policy towards China became more conservative with more emphasis on the security, in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit, the UK still considered China as an economic opportunity, manifesting a strong economic logic (Summers, 2021).

During this period, the guiding principles for cooperation between the two sides were almost identical, combining both scientific and economic logics. This high compatibility explains why higher education collaboration between the two parties has

achieved the most notable successes in the history of EU-China higher education relations (Zheng & Cai, 2018).

Institutional Logics Analysis of the Paradox Phase (2019 to Present)

As highlighted at the beginning of the paper, since 2019 various pivotal events have markedly influenced EU-China relations, including higher education. These events involve the EU's changing view of China, transitioning from a strategic partner to a competitor and systemic rival (European Commission, 2019), alongside the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Collectively, these developments have steered the cooperation into an era marked by significant challenges and paradoxes.

In navigating the changing geopolitical landscape of academic collaboration, the EU has adopted a more defined strategy compared to China. There's a broad consensus within the EU and its member states on the importance of maintaining partnerships with China, yet with a degree of caution. The EU is eager to strengthen its cooperation with China, recognising the country's significant strides in science and technology. For instance, in the lead-up to her visit to China in April 2023, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the complex nature of EU-China relations in a speech on 30 March 2023, stating, 'Our relations with China are not black or white – and our response cannot be either. This is why we need to focus on de-risking – not decoupling'. Simultaneously, the EU has introduced stricter safeguards to ensure that collaborations with China preserve academic freedom, protect intellectual property rights, and maintain the security of European institutions. Through this approach, the EU aims to cultivate a productive academic partnership with China that is also mindful of its own protective measures (Cai, 2023a).

While the EU continues to cooperate with China in higher education, there has been a shift from primarily focusing on the economic benefits to a greater emphasis on acknowledging systemic differences and adhering to 'political correctness'. This reflects a nuanced approach where the scientific logic and economic logic are increasingly intertwined with the political logic. For example, the EU has prioritised the protection of academic autonomy and data security in research collaborations, evidenced by the European Commission's issue of a toolkit in 2022 aimed at mitigating foreign interference in research and innovation (European Commission, 2022b). This increasing emphasis on political considerations may weaken the influence of scientific and economic logics. Reflecting the EU's broader strategic approach, for instance, collaborations with China under Horizon Europe are now encouraged to concentrate on specific fields like food, agriculture, biotechnology, and areas critical to addressing climate change and biodiversity (European Commission, 2022a).

On the other side, China's cooperation with the EU at the current phase were also increasingly driven by political logic, which can be noticed in the continuous promotion of the *Belt and Road Initiatives* and the proposal of *New Development Paradigm*

since 2020. In the 20th Congress Report, the Chinese government envisioned a new economic development paradigm for Chinese society, which is known as 'Dual Circulation'. It emphasises domestic development as the primary driving force for China's economic growth, while maintaining China's commitment to further opening-up and internationalisation to support the domestic development (Berkofsky, 2006). Influenced by this paradigm and the political logic behind, the role of 'serving the nation' in internationalisation strategy is highlighted.

It is important to recognise that in higher education cooperation, China has strategically employed different approaches in its engagements with the US and the EU, motivated by the need to manoeuvre through intricate geopolitical landscapes (Cai, 2023a). In its dealings with the US, China demonstrates a willingness to address tensions across various sectors. However, when it comes to the EU, China endeavours to segregate political disputes from collaborative academic ventures, striving to insulate higher education cooperation from broader political confrontations. A similar stance is observed in the economic arena, where China is keen on sustaining robust economic relations with the EU. Given the evolving synergies between international academic and industrial cooperation previously established, China seeks to balance the emerging political dynamics with the ongoing scientific and economic collaboration. However, achieving such equilibrium is challenging, necessitating innovative models of cooperation (Cai, 2023b).

The paradox phase is distinguished by pronounced institutional complexity, with both sides engaging in a dynamic interplay of political, scientific, and economic logics. This complexity introduces significant challenges for both cross-regional and internal compatibility. Regarding cross-regional compatibility, despite the rapid evolution of political logics on both sides—where the legitimacy of higher education cooperation is increasingly linked to 'political correctness'—the interpretation of this term varies substantially between China and Europe.

In China, 'political correctness' tends to resonate with the central government's directives and ideological positions, underscoring national objectives, social harmony, and stability. This perspective may influence academic collaborations to favour subjects and research domains that are in line with the national development strategy, such as the *Belt and Road Initiative* or technological advancements in key industries.

Conversely, in Europe, 'political correctness' within the academic sphere is more likely to emphasise the protection of academic freedom, the promotion of diversity and inclusion, and the commitment to democratic principles. This difference can pose challenges in joint endeavours, where European side might focus on research that encourages open discourse and critical examination, areas that may be regarded as delicate or discouraged within the Chinese academic landscape.

In the context of internal compatibility, both sides face challenges in aligning the three core logics—political, economic, and scientific—that underpin international higher education cooperation, with each entity adopting its own approach to navigate these complexities. The emergence of differing political logics on both sides often

disrupts the previously balanced interaction among these foundational logics, leading to conflicts or tensions. Such disharmony affects the effectiveness and efficiency of international higher education collaborations.

Conclusion

This study elucidates how the interplay of scientific, economic, and political logics shapes Europe-China higher education cooperation. It particularly highlights that recent geopolitical changes have fundamentally influenced the logics driving international higher education cooperation on both sides. In contrast to the growth phase (1975–2001), the golden phase (2002–2012) and the expanded golden phase (2013–2018), where the institutional logics driving each side's cooperation were compatible, the paradoxical phase (2019–present) exhibits a lower degree of compatibility between the logics driving the cooperation on both sides. On the EU side, there is a dramatic increase in political logic and a trend of declining economic and scientific logics, while in China, there's an increasing prominence of political logic, accompanied by an intention to maintain equilibrium with market and scientific logic.

Our findings help explain the paradoxes and misperceptions inherent in Europe-China higher education collaboration as outlined at the beginning of the paper. Although we focus on policy analysis, our findings may imply that at the heart of these issues are the divergent logics held by stakeholders in both regions, including policymakers, administrators, and academics. These differences manifest not only in cross-regional interactions but also internally within each region, leading to tensions and misunderstandings. The challenge for practitioners arises from navigating multiple, often conflicting, logics, rather than a singular dominant perspective. Additionally, the logics with identical labels on both sides can carry different meanings and implications. For instance, the political logics driving current Europe-China higher education cooperation are interpreted differently, shaped by distinct political landscapes in Europe and China.

Regarding scholarly contributions, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the relation between institutional logics and international higher education cooperation between Europe and China. By analysing the intricate dynamics among scientific, economic, and political logics, this study enhances the understanding of how these logics underpin, legitimise, and challenge the cooperation between the Europe and China. This analysis extends the existing literature by providing a dynamic view of how logics evolve in response to broader geopolitical and societal changes, contributing to the theoretical development of institutional logics within the context of international higher education. Thus, it addresses the gap highlighted by Cai and Leask (2024) concerning the lack of research linking international higher education cooperation with broader international relations at the societal level, especially from a theoretical perspective.

Moreover, our study advances research exploring the rationales for the internationalisation of higher education (e.g., Knight, 2004; Zha, 2003). Academic, social/cultural, economic, and political rationales constitute a useful tool for explaining the

drivers of internationalisation in higher education. While the rationale approach is simple and easily understood, it lacks theoretical underpinnings, leading to two interrelated challenges. First, rationales might be interpreted differently, especially when viewed from various theoretical perspectives. Second, this limitation restricts its potential to become a more robust analytical framework. Our study builds on the rationale approach and further develops the theoretical foundations of these rationales through the lens of the institutional logics.

Nevertheless, we recognise that our study represents an initial, albeit pioneering, exploration into the dynamics of higher education cooperation between Europe and China, with a primary focus on document analysis. To deepen our understanding of the underlying logics and their impact on practices, it is anticipated that comprehensive investigations at both organisational and individual levels, drawing on first-hand data, will be conducted in future research. Even in policy research, there is potential for future enhancements. For example, due to space constraints, our analysis is limited to only the most critical events or policies. Additionally, while we refer to the EU or Europe as a whole, it's important to acknowledge that cooperation often occurs on a bilateral basis.


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Supplemental Material

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