

# DEVELOPING CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION IN TENSIONS

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## Introduction

The challenges faced by Chinese higher education can be understood as consequences of both system and institutional responses to global and domestic pressures (Cai 2004). The two pressures are closely intertwined with each other and often explain the changes of higher education systems around the world (Pinheiro, Wengenge-Ouma et al. 2015). The combined external and internal pressures have also caused conflicting logics underlying the Chinese higher education.

## Challenges in Chinese higher education

Regardless of the reform achievement, a number of problems have arisen mainly as a result of the expansion of higher education (Wang and Liu 2009, Li 2010, Cai, Kivistö et al. 2011).

First, along with the rapid growth of student enrolment and greater scale of higher education, there are a lack of sufficient resources and effective measures to ensure quality (Cai and Yan 2017). On one hand, broader entry into universities has lowered the quality of enrolling students. On the other hand, the rapid increase in student numbers leads to a decrease in qualified teacher resources per student. It also results in very large class sizes, which have limited the capacity to develop sufficient teacher-student interaction. To overcome this challenge, many institutions have recruited new teachers. However, many of these new teachers received their doctorate within the past 10 years, and it is commonly accepted that the quality of doctoral education has been deteriorating in the same period (Shi, Ma et al. 2009).

Second, the education model in Chinese higher education is formulaic and universities lack the capability to cultivate outstanding, innovative talents. Graduates are criticised for lacking innovation, practical abilities and social responsibility. In 2005, when Premier WEN Jiabao visited the father of China's space scientist QIAN Xuesen (who passed away at the age of 98 in 2009), QIAN raised the question, 'why our universities can hardly cultivate first-class talents?'. He told the Premier that none of Chinese universities were running in the right model of cultivating excellent talents and were not innovative enough. He believed that the lack of scientific spirit was where the real problem lay.

Third, there is a lack of diversity amongst Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs). Smaller colleges attempt to follow the structure of comprehensive universities, and vocational schools seek to evolve into research institutions. The homogenisation of HEIs is due to the current practice whereby institutions are measured by a single set of criteria and institutions tend to define themselves by rank (Zha 2009). Such a homogenous structure of higher education does not meet the requirement of economic development or the needs of the labour market.

Fourth, there is a rise of unemployment amongst university graduates. In 2008 about 30% (more than a million) of university graduates were unable to secure employment upon graduation (Zhou and Lin 2009). Although the media reports that the current employment rate has reached 90%, it has been alleged that some HEIs force students to forge employment claims (Wu and Zheng 2008).

Fifth, there are unbalanced distributions of higher education resources between regions and unequal access to higher education between different social groups. Disparity has been a major issue associated with the past 30 years of economic development in China. There are regional disparities, disparities between urban and rural areas, and disparities in household incomes. As regional governments take on important financial responsibility for HEIs under their

jurisdiction, the differing economic state of regions naturally leads to unequal conditions for higher education development between regions.

The rapid economic growth in China has widened the gap between rich and poor in society. Currently, the Gini coefficient—a commonly used measure of inequality of wealth—has reached 0.47, overtaking the recognised warning level of 0.4 (Jia 2010). Despite the progress made in equalising access by urban-rural and strata origins in China, disadvantaged groups retain their unfavourable status in accessing higher education (Yao, Wu et al. 2008).

Last but not the least, the reforms face tensions between Chinese and Western ideologies (Cai 2004, Cai 2012). Chinese higher education reforms reflect an influence by Western reform ideologies. While the Chinese government wishes to obtain economic benefits from the international economy, this does not mean that the government takes a *laissez-faire* attitude towards all associated ideologies. Higher education, considered as an important ideological battlefield, is always in the front line of conflicts between Western ideas and the Party's principles. China's practices of importing foreign models in the development of a modern higher education system have followed a theory of borrowing from the West what was useful without losing the essence of Chinese values. However, as the philosophies and ideas underlying Western higher education systems are often alien to Chinese traditional culture or ideology, the development of Chinese higher education inevitably confront dilemma. Because of the deeper ideological concerns, some old functions of higher education administration have not necessarily been terminated.

## **Global and local pressures for Chinese higher education**

Global pressures for Chinese higher education include the omnipresence of globalisation and particularly its effects on emerging knowledge-based economy, competition for global talent, and introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) in education, etc. (Pinheiro, Wengenge-Ouma et al. 2015). Because globalization manifests itself primarily at the local level (Coleman and Sajed, 2013), the domestic pressures are to some extent derived from the global pressures but mostly rooted in China's local political, economic and cultural contexts.

In the past decades, there are three major domestic pressures for Chinese higher education. Firstly, demand for a higher quality of education has been increasing, in part, because of improved economic conditions in the country. While more students are able to take higher education entrance examination, and have a better chance to pass the exam, the competition for

entering “good” universities has become fiercer. Amongst more than 2000 HEIs, only about some 100 universities (often “Project 211” and “Project 985” universities) are considered as being of high quality or prestige. Now the two projects are replaced by the “Double World Class” project (Yan Forthcoming), but those HEIs enjoying special financial support from the State under the new scheme are more or less the same of those of Project 211 and Project 985 institutions.

Second, the increasing demands for higher education and industry collaboration require universities to increase their quality (human capital function), and to link higher education more strongly to economic development, particularly in collaboration with industry (Cai and Liu 2015).

Third, rising urbanisation and its associated social disparity problems have aggravated the equity in higher education in two ways. On the one hand, partially due to differences in economic development, HEIs are not evenly distributed among municipal cities and provinces. On the other hand, students from poorer families and regions have unequal access to good-quality secondary education, thus leading to different chances of gaining access to the most prestigious HEIs and careers (Feng 2011, Ma 2011).

## **System responses to both global/external and domestic pressures**

To respond to these global and domestic pressures, the government has launched a series of policies. The correspondence between policy instruments and the pressures they address can be described in following table 1:

**Table 1** Summary of pressures and responses in Chinese higher education

<b>Demands/pressures for higher education</b>	<b>Governmental reforms as responses to the demands</b>
<p>Students demands for quantity:</p> <p>There is an increasing demand for higher education. Many students pursue higher education abroad</p>	<p>Introduction of private higher education</p> <p>Expansion of higher education enrolment</p> <p>University merger</p>
<p>Students demands for quality:</p> <p>Students compete for good universities (high quality of education) but the available places are limited.</p>	<p>Quality assurance</p> <p>Internationalisation</p>
<p>Society's demands for further investment in higher education:</p> <p>Governmental financial constrains</p>	<p>Tuition fee policy</p> <p>University-run enterprises</p> <p>Privatisation of higher education</p>
<p>Labour market demands for high-quality human resources and innovative talents:</p> <p>High-quality and innovation talents are in short supply.</p>	<p>Building first class universities</p> <p>Expansion of post graduate education</p> <p>Internationalisation</p>
<p>Labour market demands for different types of human resources:</p> <p>The phenomenon of academic drift</p>	<p>Differentiation between academic education (mainly MOE's responsibility) and professional/vocational education (local responsibility)</p>
<p>Economic development needs close cooperation between university and industry (due to emerging knowledge-based economy):</p> <p>University and industry lack trust and motivation for cooperation.</p>	<p>University-run enterprises</p> <p>University Science and Technology park</p> <p>"Project 2011"</p>
<p>Society's demands for equity in access to higher education:</p> <p>Inequity in access to higher education between people whose household registration in different regions</p> <p>Inequity to access to higher education between social groups</p> <p>Imbalance in affordability between poor and rich families</p>	<p>Student loans</p> <p>Green gate (first enrol student and then seek economic solutions)</p> <p>Special admission policies</p>

Source: Cai and Yan (2015)

## **Pressures and responses at the institutional level**

The recent national policies on higher education have mainly resulted in the following four pressures for Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs). First, along with the devolution of administration power to the local government and growing institutional autonomy, HEIs are required to be more accountable to the stakeholders' needs. Second, the stakeholders of HEIs have become diversified. When China was in a centrally planned system, the sole stakeholder of HEIs was the state. However, nowadays the stakeholders have been extended to local governmental agencies as not only regional level administration authorities but as partners for regional development, enterprises who employ university graduates and utilise the knowledge and technology produced by universities, students as fee-paying consumers, and private owners/investors of HEIs (particularly private ones). Third, the system of higher education has shifted from the one with vertical differentiation to horizontal differentiation. For two decades, the Chinese HEIs have been divided into four vertical layers from the top research universities to those higher vocational colleges at the bottom. However, the recent reform launched in 2014 is going to transfer 600 regional universities to a parallel track providing applied technological and vocational education instead of academic education. Finally, HEIs are placed in a fierce competition mainly for funding resources, either public or private. In order to succeed in the competition, HEIs must closely collaborate with local industry, better serve labour market needs and explicitly address stakeholders' concerns.

Chinese HEIs are susceptible to both the global/local pressures and an environment resulted by policy instruments. For a university with high level of institutional autonomy, it tends to make its independent strategies to respond to the different needs, though the demands from the state, often eventually represented as financial incentives, are one of most important considerations. Although the Chinese 1998 Higher Education Law stipulates quite high level of autonomy for HEIs in formulating their own institutional strategies and plans, in practice, their autonomy is "regulated autonomy" (Yang, Vidovich et al. 2007), meaning that they have limited scope to decide their goals and educational programmes but can to a large extent determine the means by which their goals and programmes will be pursued. In such context, Chinese HEIs mainly address the demands from the government, who has translated both global and local pressures for higher education into higher education reform policies. This may result in two kinds of consequences. On the one hand, HEIs lack initiatives to plan for long-term institutional development. On the other hand, how HEIs are able to

successfully respond to external pressures is largely dependent on how wisely the governmental policy is designed. In practice, HEIs always try to maximize their benefits from existing policy instruments.

## **Tensions in underlying logics**

While universities typically endeavor to follow policy guidelines, the reforms planned by the government often result in conflicting logics in the field of higher education, and which may confuse HEIs and complicate their actions. Some contradictory logics underlying the 1990s higher education reforms have been identified by (Cai 2004). Although more than 10 years have passed, most of tensions still exist today, such as: a) between socialist ideology and Western values; b) between the traditional higher education steering model and the active participation of society (stakeholders); c) between inadequate conditions at the level of HEIs and resource stringencies in the public purse; d) between short-term market demands and long-term national development priorities or public interests; and e) between weak legal consciousness and requirements for a regulated market system.

In addition, some new tensions have emerged as a result of reforms in the past decade. The most profound ones pertain to higher education as an ivory tower and the pursuit of scientific (global) excellence against the logic of higher education for market needs, e.g. knowledge production for business use and education for skills enhancement. Such tension has led to challenges in two concurrent reforms in Chinese higher education, namely calls for universities to become more engaged in knowledge and technology transfers to society (particularly to industry), and the transformation of some regional HEIs towards more applied and professional oriented institutions. The historically long time separation between academia and industry has, to a large extent, resulted in the lack of trust and motivation (both sides) for developing effective and reciprocal cooperative relations (Kroll and Liefner 2008, Wang 2011). In 2014, the Ministry of Education launched a new reform aimed at transforming hundreds of regional HEIs to universities of applied sciences. This policy efforts is hampered by the trend of “academic drift” (Berdahl 1985), since all Chinese HEIs strive to adopt the structures and norms of more prestigious universities (Hölttä and Cai 2012), in addition to the problem of the Confucian tradition which values human knowledge rather than vocational skills (Xiong 2011).

## Conclusions

The Chinese HEIs do not directly respond to the external pressures, but rather addressing a regulative and operational environment set by the government. While most HEIs narrow their strategic focus on pursuing and maximise their benefits from existing policies, the challenge in their operational basis is how to reconcile these conflicting logics.

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While most national systems of higher education are confronting seemingly convergent global pressures, specific national or local issues still mark the distinct features of each system. Hence, higher education, in places, has been enmeshed in the tensions between national issues and global pressures. In China, both the global influences and internal issues have become the major driving forces for current higher education reforms. This paper explores the specific tensions between global pressures and national issues with respect to Chinese higher education in which political, economic and traditional dimensions are focused.

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universities with society for promoting regional innovation systems differs from Western practices from the perspective of the Triple Helix. It focuses on China's leading metropolis, Shanghai, and takes as a case study the Tongji Creative Cluster which, unlike most other clusters in China, is based on knowledge-intensive services rather than high-tech manufacturing. We find that although it is commonly assumed that the statist Triple Helix model characterises the development of the innovation system in China, the practices of the Tongji Creative Cluster take a different approach, combining both bottom-up initiatives in the initial stage and top-down coordination in later developments. We argue that this model is more useful for China's regional innovation systems as it can overcome many challenges in the statist model.

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