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Civilisational 'ideas', state power, and globalising 'realities': structuring mechanisms shaping contemporary higher education outcomes in China

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we ask: what does 'the idea' of the Chinese university mean at the current time, especially when the sector has been shaped by endogenous and exogenous globalising dynamics? We explore this question, drawing on cultural political economy as a heuristic to make visible the links between culture, economy and politics. We identify three key dynamics: the constitutive powers of civilisational ideas; the power of the Chinese state; and the ongoing integration of Chinese higher education into knowledge production and its circulation nationally and globally. We show these dynamics have the unintended consequence of accelerating global processes including: (i) outward and inward academic and student mobility; (ii) internal social stratification, education inequalities and injustice; and (iii) the instrumentalism of knowledge production and its circulation that emulates the neoliberal academy in the West. Despite invocations from President Xi to nurture the red gene, higher education in China is deeply entangled in global dynamics as well as a shaper of its trajectories.

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Introduction

We once spotted a drawing published on social media which sought to capture the underlying characteristics of the People's Republic of China in one laconic visualisation: Marxism, Stalinist bureaucracy, contemporary Chinese legalism, Confucianism, Maoism, crony capitalism, and vestiges of Chinese imperialism. The complexity and contradictions inherent within these characteristics resulted in a visualised caricature; a creature symbolising China that is neither fish nor fowl.

It is similarly difficult to pin down the precise features of contemporary Chinese higher education (HE), despite the much-vaunted idea of HE policies and programmes in China as distinguished by 'Chinese characteristics'.[1] Even its elite HE institutions appear to be moving in opposite directions. On the one hand, Tsinghua University triumphantly announces in September 2020 it has become the first Chinese university to achieve world-class status, according to the criteria upheld in China's Double First-Class University Plan (Huang 2020), a key criterion being the institution's standing in international university rankings. On the other hand, Renmin University of China – another elite university in Beijing – announced it was exiting the international rankings entirely, following a visit by President Xi Jinping in April 2022 during which he told Renmin University to ' … adhere to the leadership of the party, inherit the red gene and take root in the land of

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China, and embark on a new path of building a world-class university with Chinese characteristics' (Xinhua News 2022).

Labelling Xi's speech as either empty rhetoric or ideological posturing is too reductive, under-describing what we see as the complex and at times contradictory dynamics at work in shaping in Chinese HE. Chinese universities, we shall argue, are simultaneously world-class and global, *and* political/partisan, civilisational and national; they aspire for world-class status vis-à-vis Western elite universities, and yet are also tasked with being the standard bearer for the idea of a Chinese university.

In this paper we explore this state of affairs. We begin by introducing cultural political economy (Robertson and Dale 2015; 2021) as a broad heuristic to bring into view a more complex ensemble of dynamics shaping Chinese HE outcomes. We then sketch out the key features of China's contemporary HE system, including the strategic deployment of the ideational power of Confucianism by the Chinese state, together with recent policies on expansion, institutional differentiation, and global science. Substantively, we focus on the intended and unintended outcomes of three dynamics which are illustrative rather than exhaustive of what we describe as both endogenous and exogenous processes. The first is an understanding of Confucianism as a civilisational idea mobilised by the party-state for political purposes internally, and as a means to distinguish Chinese society from the West (Robertson, Rosenzvaig, and Maber 2023; Therborn 2010). This has the effect of accelerating access to Western universities lured by the fetishising of world-class university brandings as marks of distinction. Second, the distinct cultural political economy of Chinese socialism, including the *hukou* system, over-determines education opportunities and outcomes. The effect here, despite China's ostensible socialist commitment, is to drive a further wedge between rural and city dwellers, undermining China's socialist ideals by strengthening education-structured forms of stratification. Third, a combination of top-down political power, the prioritisation of HE as an engine for the Chinese economy, its outward spatial extension with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the fatal attraction of the world-class university trope, creates a heady cocktail of economic instrumentalism, overbearing political direction, and (at times) intrusive political control. Despite the political intention of ploughing a separate path to the Western development model, China's efforts to advance the 'idea of a Chinese university' in/advertently feeds both off, and into, the pervasiveness of neoliberal logics which shape many Western universities whose corporatisation has brought about recognisable shifts in the academy on a global scale.

Conceptual and analytical notes: a tripartite cultural political economy approach

The corpus of academic literature investigating Chinese HE is both substantial and growing. Most researchers undertake empirical research to shed light on a specific non-generalisable aspects of the system. However, diagnosing and understanding Chinese HE as a system necessitates an approach which goes beyond focusing on one phenomenon. Cox (1981) calls the latter a 'problem-solving' approach; by way of contrast, his 'critical theory' approach asks how this world came about, and in whose interests. It is this approach that informs our questions and lines of analysis.

Specifically, we draw on Robertson and Dale's (2015; 2021) cultural political economy of education framework as a heuristic tool to conceptualise the dynamic, complex, and contradictory ecology of Chinese HE as an education ensemble. We are particularly interested in their parsing of the concept of culture to refer to not only discourse mediated norms, but as social ontologies that shape ways of knowing and world-making (Therborn 2010). This enables us to consider China's intellectual heritages, forms of political power, and modes of societal ordering, and how and in what ways these are imbricated with, and the outcome of ongoing dynamics within and beyond China. Our hope is that our analyses and conceptualisations can offer a more complicated, complex, and yet critical, examination of the structuring mechanisms shaping Chinese HE.

Admittedly, there are a plethora of mechanisms and factors which interact to influence and ultimately shape HE outcomes in China. The choice of which mechanisms deserve emphasis and

greater analytical focus is often predicated upon the researchers' ontological perspective. Inspired by Burton Clark's Triangle (Clark 1983), which provides an analytical model for organisational analysis of HE systems, we propose some changes in the Triangle's three vertices namely state authority, market, and academic authority.

We retain state authority, but replace market with globalising realities, and academic authority with civilisational ideas and historical institutions. The retention of state authority as a consequence of the centrality of state power needs no further explanation. The market, however, has become a globalising market; consequently, globalising realities serve as a more pertinent context for the marketisation of HE. Finally, in a non-democratic country, the role of academic authority is often subsumed by state authority. Notwithstanding, for an ancient country like China, the consequences of the legacy of ideational projects and allied historical institutions on the contemporary HE outcomes deserve particular attention. The confluence of these tripartite dynamics (Figure 1), the forces of which interact collectively, have the effect of shaping Chinese HE outcomes both now and in the future.

The contemporary Chinese HE landscape: a thumbnail sketch

The accomplishments of Chinese HE over the past four decades are nothing short of spectacular. The number of students enrolled in 4-year undergraduate or postgraduate degrees has exploded, from less than 1 million in 1978 to nearly 33 million in 2019 (Liu and Zheng 2021). As early as 1995 and 1998, China launched the '211' and subsequently the '985' projects, with the former aiming to develop 100 domestic world-leading universities by the early twenty-first century, with the latter focused on promoting the international development and reputation of a small number of elite flagship universities.[2] The World-Class University and World-Class Discplines Plan (commonly known as Double Firsts) replaced the two projects in 2015. Some 42 universities and 465 disciplines were in turn selected as designated world-class candidates. This policy pivot has catalysed spectacular results for Chinese HE, with China emerging as the world's top annual producer of PhDs. It now boasts 50 universities placed in the Academic Ranking of World Universities top

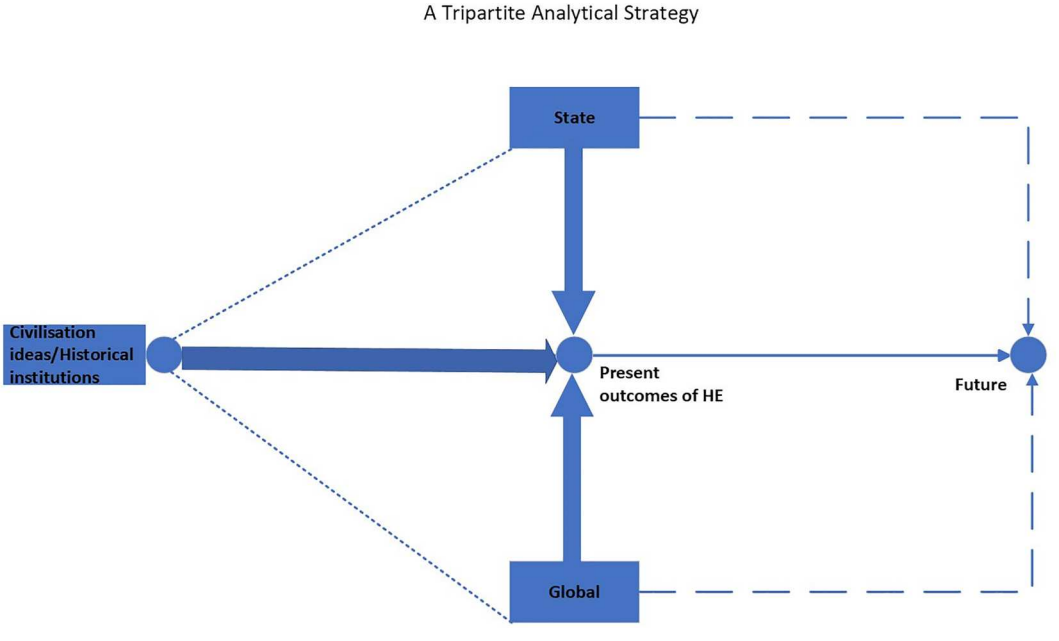


Figure 1. A tripartite analytical strategy.

500 in 2018 (eight universities in the top 100 in this ranking in 2022); a significant increase in overall numbers and a trend which continues to increase. China was the world's second-largest spender on research and development in 2018 when accounting for OECD's purchasing power parity comparison, with $468 billion versus the United States' investment of $582 billion (Normile 2020). China has also overtaken the US to become the world's largest producer of scientific research papers, making up close to one-fifth of total global output (Johnson, Watkinson, and Mabe 2018).

Despite these prominent signs of globalised integration, comparability, and competitiveness, HE in China follows a state-led development model in which the state definitively steers education, instrumentalising HE to achieve its changing socio-political and economic goals. Despite many reforms, the underlying structure remains intact: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) still sits at the pinnacle of all universities' governing structures, and the state exerts control and interferes whenever it deems necessary or expedient (Kirby 2022). Values fundamental to the vitality of universities as academic communities, such as freedom of expression, and open potentially critical debates, have been unable to permeate a system which upholds the prevailing political paradigm as sacrosanct. The genuine capacity for academic critique in China is still far from its early stages, largely because of the existing political, structural, and accepted modes of intellectual discussion. Moreover, in an increasingly complex and challenged geopolitical environment, universities are also becoming more deeply ideological. At the societal level, opportunities to attend elite universities – a barometer for educational equity – have been dwindling for those from less privileged family backgrounds. Moreover, the emergence of a well-educated middle class has failed to usher in a more open and liberal society.

Dynamic 1: legacies of historical institutions and the state's reappropriation of civilisational ideas

Confucianism, as a basket of civilisational values, dates back over 2,500 years and has most recently been undergoing something of a renaissance amongst some HE scholars of China (cf. Marginson and Yang 2022). Its intellectual roots concerning knowledge and the role of intellectuals in society are significantly different from the philosophical tradition that has prevailed in the West. We cannot fully ascertain nor elucidate the modern metamorphosis of Chinese higher learning without gaining a preliminary understanding of the intellectual influence of Confucianism, or more accurately, Neo-Confucianism, founded during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). According to Huang, it is 'unabashedly more autocratic and statist than original Confucianism' (Huang 2023, 34).

As with any philosophy or tradition of thought, different and even contradictory understandings and interpretations of Confucianism abound, historically and within contemporary scholarship. Wary of falling into the silos of either cultural essentialism or cultural relativism, a cultural reading of this notion of a Confucian civilisation explored in this paper merely implies an analytical orientation that treats civilisation as a 'lifeworld' variable in two senses. First, the legacy of its historical institutions continues to exert a widely agreed – even if not deterministic – influence on modern Chinese society; legacies that are selectively and strategically mobilised by different social forces over time. Second, its continued relevance is manifested in its ongoing appropriation in the state's governing of contemporary society. In this section, we briefly talk about *Keju*, the imperial civil service exam, before turning to the state's appropriation. The social prestige enjoyed by the educational elite is intimately linked to the imperial civil service exam which began as early as 650 AD and eventually abolished in 1905. This exam was the means by which capable civil servants were selected based on merit. Confucian classics and teaching formed the exam's core, among other literary, musical, and religious learnings.

However, a streamlined version of Neo-Confucianism that was 'textually tight, deeply conservative, expositional homogeneous, and narrative unambiguous' was adopted and adapted to the *Keju* curriculum, which became the primary method of recruitment for official posts during the Song Dynasty (Huang 2023, 34). As a consequence of this state-sanctioned version of Confucianism,

which implied that exam takers' interpretation of Confucian classics had to be in line with the state's expectations, intellectual dynamism began to become increasingly constrained.

Perhaps more pertinent for our discussion, this examination system left China with a scholarly tradition that associated higher learning with service to the state (Vickers and Xiaodong 2017, 254). One consequence is that intellectuals in China have been ' … inclined to see their professional interests as rather closely linked with state needs' (Hayhoe 2015, 136). The New Culture Movement (NCM) of 1915–1921 in Republican China emerged as an antithetical reaction to centuries of state pre-eminence in academia, condemning traditional culture and the Confucian intelligentsia as a source of social backwardness and cultural lethargy. The NCM called for their replacement by 'modern' values epitomised by science and democracy (Jenco 2017, 12), personified as Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy.

Despite this initial yet short-lived burst of energy against the prevailing Confucian paradigm, intellectual freedom has always had a minor role in HE in both ancient and communist China (Li 2016, 23). In the West, the trajectory of education vis-à-vis the state was different. The concomitant decline of religious society and the rise of individualism within the economic sphere and in society gave rise to the emergence of 'vocational professionalism' and 'intellectual identity' in the West (Grieder 1983; cited in Ko 2001). Consequently, intellectuals saw themselves as an elite class subservient to neither the church nor the state (Ko 2001, 538). What is more, academic freedom ' … remained tied to epistemological traditions of rationalism in the European context' (Li 2016, 26).

In contrast, no educational institution in imperial China – be it imperial colleges which were well integrated within the bureaucracy, or grassroots academies which were vulnerable to co-optation or closure – gained ' … the autonomy and academic freedom that made the European university a third force between state and church' (Hayhoe 2015, 108). Rather, higher learning institutions in China persistently formed an inseparable part of the state bureaucracy and assumed a more functional role in society; of cultivating and selecting trained, approved, and vetted talent for the ruling bureaucracy. Consequently, ancient China's intellectuals were propagators of ethics and morals, the ultimate goals of which were to facilitate the emperors in becoming 'philosopher kings', on which the hope of creating a harmonious society was predicated.

Within the context of modern China, the CCP's attitude towards Confucianism offers nothing short of a rollercoaster ride. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Confucianism was held to be superstitious, backward, and counter-revolutionary; its philosophy of social harmony underpinned by hierarchy was deemed contrary to the Party's revolutionary ideals of social progress based on class struggle. Consequently, the CCP regarded Confucianism as a vestige of feudalism that impeded social progress and ran counter to their ideologically-focused political reforms. Confucianism became the object of vehement criticism, whilst the Confucian heritage was decried as the enemy of the people, becoming a prominent target of destruction by the Red Guards.

Nonetheless, what goes around comes around. Once reviled by the CCP, Confucianism has been making a comeback, this time ironically championed by none other than the CCP. Phenomenal economic success in post-1978 China manoeuvred Maoist egalitarianism into an abrupt and unambiguous end, giving rise to a materialist society underpinned by consumerism and conspicuous spending. Moral breakdowns compounded by rampant corruption tend to make people nostalgic for idealised traditions. In this case the ancient sagely wisdom of transcendental philosophies like Confucianism have been mobilised to fill the ensuring moral vacuum and counteract rampant social ills as moral decay and social apathy. This bottom-up re-popularisation of Confucianism is most obviously manifested in grassroots movements known as 'the craze for traditional studies' (*Guoxue Re*) which sprang up during the early 2000s. Grassroots popularisation of Confucianism thus furnishes the state with opportunities to buttress its legitimacy by taking 'ownership' of traditional culture.

During the reform era (1978–present), the state's reappropriation of traditional culture, which can be understood as both opportunistic and politically motivated, seems to herald a new era; one where the Chinese state assumes both cultural and moral leadership. Promoting traditions cultivates much-needed patriotism and nationalism, embellishing the state's social contract, on the one

hand, whilst extending its control, on the other. In addition, many Confucian values, such as obedience to authority of the kind embedded in the *Three Principles and Five Virtues*,[3] justify authoritarian rule. Rediscovery of this convenient endorsement from tradition serves the interests of the contemporary Chinese state. Furthermore, a state-backed revival of traditions represents a vindication of China as a civilisation state, rather than a Western-type nation-state since cultural values played a formative role in the development of the Chinese nation (Jacques 2012).

This, in turn, enables it to relinquish the need for (and potentially neutralising the socio-political threat of) Western-style democratic political reforms. '(C)ultural nationalist belief in the exceptionalism of Chinese civilisation' and the view that ' … China's issues can and should be solved through a re-understanding of China's past' (Deng and Smith 2018, 295) implies that the CCP can revitalise tradition – under its watchful and corrective auspices – and make China great again. This traditionalist restoration, emphasised as a convergence between traditional wisdom and state power, has been propagated through the entire education system of contemporary China. The exhortations to transmit and foster 'excellent traditional culture' pervades all HE policies, including those aimed at promoting world-class universities (Woo 2023). Yet paradoxically the embrace of Confucianism has the effect of not only prioritising access to education at any cost but elevated and accelerated access to Western universities.

Dynamic 2: 'apartheid meritocracy', social stratification, and global injustice

To understand the current state of Chinese HE, as a sub-system of Chinese society as well as a site of social reproduction, we must first locate, describe, and explain, the HE/society nexus. Often, what is rendered invisible in the system matters most for the future of China's HE, and concomitantly, can also reveal something of the rationalities and values of that system. In this light, we shall use the urban–rural divide as an illustration of social injustices inherent in the Chinese HE. This topic hardly receives much attention in the charting the rise of the Chinese HE. As a systemic factor, it affects Chinese HE in subtle yet critical ways. Though its dynamics are different, effectively rural Chinese dwellers face a similar fate to their counterparts in many capitalist societies regarding education-mediated outcomes because of place-based inequalities (Marmot et al. 2020).

However, the state-sanctioned and institutionalised mechanism that intentionally and legally enforces place-based inequalities essentially differentiates China from its capitalist counterparts. *Hukou* (China's household registration system) is regarded as one of the most important institutional mechanisms which has precipitated the profound rural–urban chasm in communist China since its founding in 1949 (Chan 2019). Under the codified *hukou* (household registration) system, all Chinese citizens are divided into two categories: urban and rural. The *hukou* system ties a person's birth-right (urban or rural) to their allocated access to social services, such as education, health care, and social housing. In practice and in terms of life opportunities, having a rural *hukou* is the equivalent of an institutionalised penalty on one's life. The *hukou* creates a dual social structure which divides citizens into artificial castes. The *hukou* is thus antithetical to the concept of citizenship and is intrinsically related to China's political system and economic structure.

More pertinently, for our discussion, the *hukou* is an embodiment of the operational logic of the Chinese state. That is, the household registration policy sheds light on how the state has operated by prioritising control, stability, social services distribution, and economic development. The inception of the *hukou* system (formalised as a permanent system in 1958) was motivated by an ideological imperative to facilitate a Soviet-style centrally planned economy. Tied to their land by the *hukou*, the rural population were, by design, prevented from flooding into the cities. More importantly, combined with the state's compulsory procurement and monopoly over the sale of farm produce, rural agricultural communities were burdened with the responsibility of heavily subsidising state-led industrialisation in cities. During the post-1978 reform era, the large swathes of surplus rural labour provided an army of workers to support China's burgeoning export industry, and by extension, global capitalism. Furthermore, as Zhang argues, *hukou* reforms in recent years, such as the

point-based systems for urban *hukou* acquisition (pilot scheme launched in the late 2000s), has become a technology for governing differentiated citizenship – the 'inclusion of certain sections of the population in the neoliberal authoritarian city is conditional upon their migrancy and deportability' (Zhang 2023, 340).

The *hukou* system has a preeminent impact on the sharp urban–rural divide in education attainment across all levels of education. Today 93% of urban youth attend senior secondary school. In contrast, in rural areas, only half of the secondary school (the 3 years of schooling after 6 years of primary school) graduates attend senior secondary school (Rozelle 2020, 8). During the stage of compulsory education stage,[4] the *hukou* category receives a qualitatively different provision of public resources. Rural students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds and from an area with a lower level of education provision and resources (such as teachers) are bound to lose out when competing with their urban counterparts for academic resources.

Moreover, due to the enormous difficulty, if not the impossibility, of enrolling migrant workers' children in cities' compulsory education provision, as well as the fact that senior secondary school students must take the university entrance exam where their *hukou* is (and not, for example, where their migrant parents have been working throughout their childhood), many children are left behind in rural villages with their grandparents. This reflects a structural issue within the Chinese education system. It is estimated that some 2.25 million migrant children are excluded from public schools in cities (China Labour Bulletin 2022). Wan and Vickers' (2022, 231) analysis of policy implications of the points-based systems for apportioning school places in urban China for migrant children suggests that despite its ostensibly meritocratic claim, it actually 'formalizes hierarchical stratification' at the expense of less resourceful migrants. This could potentially lead to what the authors call a 'meritocratic apartheid'.

Research has shown that senior secondary school enrolment – after 9 years of compulsory education – is the key watershed moment in the path of Chinese youth, insofar that it determines their ability to access HE. While university enrolment is determined primarily by academic results achieved during senior secondary school, the opportunity to enrol in particular kinds of senior secondary school (and thus access educational resources) is, in essence, predicated on one's *hukou* designation. For rural youth, their *hukou* thus acts as a signal for self-identification and future expectations, representing an implied social impediment which prevails more-or-less independently of fluctuations in China's economic development or labour market conditions. The risk-averseness of rural families regarding the profound and extra investment required to attain HE largely explains the persistent (and widening) gap between rural and urban youth in senior secondary school enrolments (Gao 2015, 59). Large-scale quantitative studies have consistently demonstrated that HE massification has not brought about a statistically significant decrease in urban–rural disparity in terms of facilitating access to HE. For instance, a recent study involving national-level data found that inequalities in access to HE between people 'holding rural and urban household registration … were not changed after HE expansion' (Wu, Yan, and Zhang 2020, 564). Although some studies have produced data suggesting that iterative waves of Chinese HE expansion could boost rural residents' enrolment over 2000–2015 period, expansion has not been conducive to reducing the rural–urban gap in participation in elite universities (Guo and Chen 2023). According to a study of 15 public universities in Beijing conducted by the Renmin University of China, rural students made up 27% of the student population across these universities (Chen 2020). That percentage diminishes to just 16% for the three elite universities of Peking, Tsinghua and Renmin. A plethora of reasons may explain the rural–urban divide in HE accesses and education attainment, both across the Chinese HE sector as a whole. and within top-tier elite universities. Nonetheless, the cause of these vast disparities is inextricably rooted in the prevailing *hukou* system, the pernicious effects of which extend beyond socio-economic impacts that characterise class stratification in capitalist societies, extending further to manifest an institutionalised social exclusion and stigma. As is to be expected, the resulting highly stratified HE system inherent to the rural–urban disjuncture not only results in an academic divide (with the inevitable intergenerational consequences all that

entails), but more detrimentally, it risks exacerbating significant emotional suffering as a result of what is essentially a second-class citizen status (Chen 2022).

Despite rapid industrialisation and urbanisation and the removal of some restrictions on migration, rural *hukou* residents – those living in rural areas and working in cities – are still denied equal citizenship and equitable access to social benefits. The social stratification of students and the spatial stratification of universities (whereby the most prestigious universities are located in big cities, especially in Beijing and Shanghai) deprive many students of social mobility, for which education – especially tertiary education – carries the most weight. And whilst China has been gradually easing its *hukou* restrictions since 2019, with Zhengzhou (population 12 million), the capital of Henan Province, becoming the first megacity to relax *hukou* restrictions in September 2022, any meaningful structural redress of urban–rural divide is still a distant reality. Yet these cities, with now more relaxed regulations, are usually not magnets for migrants. More importantly, the burden of proof of residency and employment needed to apply for urban *hukou* are difficult for most migrants to acquire (The Economist 2022). In other words, rural students' reduced opportunities in (or exclusion from) HE is not so much a result of their lack of ability or innate aspiration, but rather the consequence of an institutionalised prejudice levied on them that materially and negatively affects their opportunities for social mobility. While immanent social injustice is construed as a dysfunction at the level of socialist ideology, it is also an integral feature and natural outcome of an authoritarian regime that perpetuates injustice by utilising such injustice to maintain control.

Dynamic 3: political power, economic instrumentalism, and global science

Throughout history, state rule in China has consistently taken the form of a monolithic political structure. As Lo notes: 'The state, personified by the emperor, painstakingly nurtured and recruited members of the literati into officialdom for more than two thousand years' (1991, 692). As a result, 'China's higher education sector mirrors the larger system, in some cases even symbolises the worst of the system' (Zhao and Jinjin 2010, 117) if factors such as the bureaucratisation of the academe, the Party's management of universities, and the special interest link between academics and the government are considered.

Although about a quarter of tertiary education students are enrolled in *Minban* (private universities), these institutions occupy a marginal and insignificant role in advancing the state's strategic thinking and developmental goals in areas such as human capital development, research and innovation, global competitiveness, ideological and political education, and social stability. Public universities are part of the state's bureaucracy. At the pinnacle of China's multi-tiered system are 31 vice-ministry-rank universities, followed by those at the ranks of the 'department/bureau' and then the 'vice-department/bureau'. Education in China falls under the remit of the Ministry of Education (MOE), but the CCP's monopoly of power is guaranteed by the Party structure inside ministries such as the MOE, whereby Party-loyal organs assume decision-making and supervisory functions.

At the helm of every university is the Party secretary, who, along with the university president, is chosen by the Party Personnel Organisation Department and is ultimately a political appointment. The appointment of mid-level administrators and above is also a political prerogative of the state. Despite the incrementally greater procedural and administrative autonomy and increased freedom in curriculum design and choice of textbooks enjoyed by universities and academics, academic freedom and autonomy remains objectively scarce. Yang, Vidovich, and Currie (2007) represent the situation as 'dancing in a cage'. Ostensible decentralisation in recent years masks the more subtle move towards entrenching the mechanisms of centralisation and control. At the central and provincial levels, the Party Committee can issue HE policy directives in areas they deem strategic. Moreover, the MOE 'has acquired many finance-based policies instruments with the growing central budget for education' and has introduced 'all kinds of national-level research projects, schemes,

programmes, and awards' (Zhao and Jinjin 2010, 116). The control of resources and the ideological conformity required of universities have ultimately consolidated the state's grip over universities, even as these same universities seek greater recognition as independent academic communities within Western academic rankings, and in the competition for inbound international students.

The state's co-optation and indoctrination of institutions and academics are also exercised through governing techniques aimed at academics' self-governance. For instance, in November 2018, the MOE issued *Ten Standards of Professional Behaviour of Higher Education Teachers in the New Era*. The first standard is:

> to strengthen the political direction; adhere to Xi Jinping's New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics; support the leadership of CCP and implement the Party's educational policy; there shall be no words or deeds that could damage the authority of the Party Central Committee and violate the Party's line, principles and policies in education and teaching activities. (MOE 2018)

Such rules combined with video monitoring system installed in many classrooms in the name of quality assurance inevitably construct a literal panopticon, to use Foucault's (1975) well known metaphor, by enforcing self-censorship and political conformity.

Research funding is one of the most effective governing tools mobilised by the Chinese state (as is also the case in the Western neoliberal universities). China's National Social Science Fund (NSSF) is the state's flagship philosophy and social sciences funding body. The NSSF expenditure on social sciences grants jumped 44.3% from 1.8 billion yuan ($257.6 million) in 2015 to 2.6 billion yuan ($371.9 million) in 2019 (Thomas 2020). However, unlike science and engineering, social sciences primarily dwell on China-specific issues, many of which are ideological.

As Figure 2 illustrates, major projects on Marxist ideology, the Party, and senior CCP leaders have steadily increased over the years, illustrating the utilisation of education resources and education provision to boost the power of the state. This increase occurred concomitant with an increase in funding for social sciences to tell the 'China story' as well as the CCP's call for 'accelerating the construction of philosophy and social sciences with Chinese characteristics' (He 2020). Since President Xi took office (2012), by 2019 the top three funded areas among the 23 social

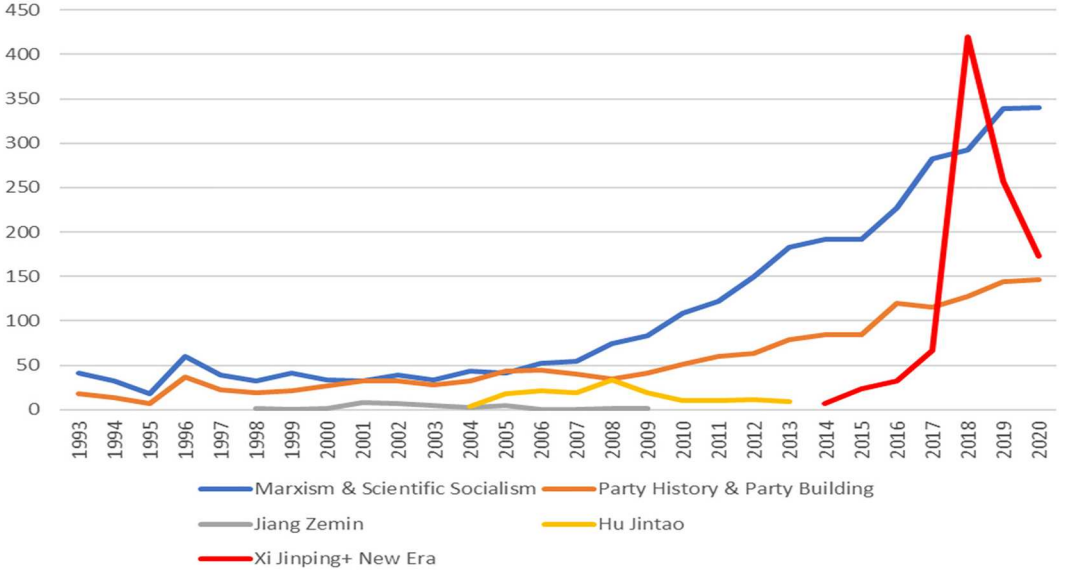


Figure 2. Number of ideological projects funded by NSSF, 1993–2020. Source: Computed from Macro Polo's dataset on NSSF projects. 1993–2020 (Thomas 2020). The full dataset is available online: https://macropolo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NSSF-Data-Appendix.xlsx.

science disciplines were: (1) Marxism & Scientific Socialism; (2) Ethnic Studies; and (3) Party History & Party Building (Thomas 2020). This strengthening of ideological emphasis in social science research mirrors a broader political trend; that of tightening Party control over both the academy and society. The ideological sphere is thus reshaped through the allocation of academic resources which incentivises more Chinese scholars to build careers by acquiescing to, and providing theoretical justification for, the Party's rule. In an interesting way, this situation can be read as a reflection of the ancient Chinese emperor's co-optation strategy of the literati class.

Contrary to popular perception, the systematic amputation of academic freedom seems to have had little or no impact on the deluge of research in STEM subjects and the concomitant meteoric rise of elite Chinese universities in international university rankings. Does this phenomenon represent a unique 'China model' to HE? China's massive investment in science and engineering is motivated by the desire to catch up with the West and the practical (social, economic, and geopolitical) need to modernise and upgrade its economy. One of the key driving factors of Chinese success in science and engineering is an intensive programme of financial and human investment. According to one study, from 2000 to 2017, China's spending on R&D grew by more than 17% per year, compared to 4.3% in the US over the same period (Viglione 2020). The current total annual expenditure of China's 30 elite universities exceeded US $1 billion (Hartley and Jarvis 2022, 9). However, this intensive input-investment model (like China's investment-driven economy) has its limits, including diminishing returns, inefficiencies, neglect of fundamental research, to name a few.

China's role in the global production and dissemination of knowledge, a vital component of the contemporary knowledge-based global economy, has grown to become integral and indispensable not only to China, but globally. To be sure, from the Bandung Conference to the BRI, China has identified itself more as a member of the Global South than the Global North. Yet, it is *also* the case that China's integration with the North is much deeper than it appears. China has become a significant leader in international education and one of the top destinations for international students from Global South countries. In this regard, says Lee: 'Studying global China means reimagining China beyond China, connecting, contextualising, and comparing "Chinese" development with that in other parts of the world' (2017, xiv). China's post-1978 HE developments have also taken place in lockstep with neoliberal globalisation.

These synchronised developments have transformed both Chinese HE and that of the Global North. In other words, what is important is to view these developments through a world system optic. Instead of viewing China as slavishly following Western academic practices, Vickers (2020) has argued that China has been at the forefront of moves to deploy market-based methods and neoliberal governmentality in education. As a case in point, China devised the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* index as early as 2003 (Robertson 2022); Shanghai's stellar performance in OECD's PISA tests stoked up well-documented anxiety about the education systems in many Western countries. Put another way, 'the tyranny of metrics' typically attributed to the disease of the West, in no small part explains their meteoric rise in Chinese publications and patents (Vickers 2020). Furthermore, Chinese universities' growing status in international rankings demonstrates that academic reputation can have little to do with values of academic freedom; on the contrary, its clever management can advance the interests of an authoritarian regime (Kinzelbach, Saliba, and Spannagel 2022).

A brief examination of China's integration into global HE from the perspectives of the flow of international students and academics, as well as in terms of cross-border scientific collaborations, is also instructive. Arguably, these areas are the more manifest expressions of globalising HE. Indeed, China's accession to the World Trade Organisation coincided with its HE massification. According to Chinese government statistics, the cumulative number of students studying abroad (of various types – foundation to postgraduate) has reached 5.19 million, having grown steadily during the 40 years of the reform era (1978–2017). In 2017 alone, 608,400 Chinese students were going abroad to study, representing an 11.74% year-on-year increase (People's Daily 2018). In 2020, with the pandemic raging, the number of Chinese students studying outside its borders reached nearly one

million (UNESCO 2020; cited in Mason 2021). In other words, Chinese students positively impact the financial health of the foreign institutions they enrol in as well as the local economy where the institution is situated.

In the academic year 2018–2019, Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students who had enrolled in STEM subjects in the United States reached 45,720 and 76,060, respectively (Feldgoise and Zwetsloot 2020). More importantly, a 2022 study revealed that as of February 2017, approximately 90 per cent of Chinese nationals who completed STEM PhD programmes in the United States between 2000 and 2015 were still living in the USA (Corrigan, Dunham, and Zwetsloot 2022). The global flow of education is never a one-way street. Foreign HE institutions *also* come to China to compete for Chinese students. The development of transnational higher education – that is education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based – kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand, transnational education can satisfy the growing demand for HE from the 'newly-minted' Chinese middle class. On the other hand, allowing foreign higher education institutions to offer degrees in China enables China to fulfil the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services requirements. China has also grown into the world's leading host of transnational higher education; recent data shows that approximately half a million students are enrolled in transnational education programmes in China (Clayburn 2022).

China's contribution to global science is no less influential than its remarkable student mobility. Cross-country co-authored papers serve as barometer of the global network of science knowledge production. Chinese or collaborative publications tend to concentrate in the areas of technology and physical sciences, and in this respect, predominantly applied sciences (Johnson 2021; Marginson 2022). China overtook the US in total science publications in 2017 (Zhu and Liu 2020). By 2018, China emerged as the world's largest producer of scientific papers in physical sciences (Marginson 2022). Both the quality and quantity of these scholarly outputs have risen dramatically; from 2014 to 2018 the number of highly cited mainland China researchers on 21 Essential Science Indicators had tripled (University World News 2019). Taking China–UK collaborations as an example, their co-authored papers numbered fewer than 100, prior to 1990. They then rose rapidly from 750 joint papers in the year 2000, 3,324 in 2010 and 16,267 in 2019. In other words, 11 per cent of the total British scientific output resulted from Sino-British collaboration in 2019 (Johnson 2021). Furthermore, over a fifth of research in many high-impact subjects, including those related to science and technology, involved collaborations with Chinese scholars or institutions (Johnson 2021). In gaining a preeminent status in HE scholarly output, China has upended the traditional conceptualisation of the centre-periphery model of global knowledge production (cf. Marginson and Xu 2021) in so far as China's contribution to global science is concerned.

The Chinese academic diaspora, which plays an important facilitating role in many cross-border collaborations, have also become a target population that China wants to court through a scheme known as the *Thousand Talents Plan*. Established in 2008, this programme targets professors and chief scientists in the West, especially those of mainland China origin, with a generous compensation package – a starting bonus of 1 million yuan (US $151,000), and the opportunity to apply for a research fund of 3–5 million yuan (Jia 2018). Additional incentives, such as accommodation subsidies, relocation expenses, and paid-for home-country visits, are also doled out to foreign scholars, that is, those not of Chinese origin (Jia 2018).

Yet suspicion and distrust has dogged China's relations with other countries, illustrated for example in the conviction of Charles Lieber (former Chair of Harvard University's Chemistry and Chemical Biology Department) by the now-defunct United States Department of Justice's *China Initiative*. Such actions, aimed at prosecuting purported 'Chinese spies' in American research and industry, have instilled new fears of red McCarthyism throughout the Chinese diaspora and academic community, as well as amongst foreign academics who collaborate with Chinese universities. Despite these developments, we continue to witness a remarkable outflow of students, at the same time as recruiting overseas researchers. Is this openness to ideas, or is it China's openness to,

and its integration into, the global knowledge economy. Such movements can also be read as reflecting the failure of domestic HE to nurture talent and catalyse e innovations due to structural constraints such as ideological control, state planning (Schulte 2019).

The claims made by Western media, ranging from arguments that the CCP is engaged in extra-judicial policing of free speech through institutions such as the Confucius Institutes, or the Chinese Students and Scholars Association located in university campuses, might in specific instances have some basis in fact. It is fair to say that such fears are justified given China's 'long-arm intervention' in Western academics. Two examples suffice to illustrate this point. In 2017 the Chinese government asked the University of Cambridge to block access in China to 'sensitive' scholarly articles such as those on the Cultural Revolution in the prestigious *China Quarterly*. After the National Security Law in Hong Kong was passed in 2020, some Western universities have also taken extra precautions to protect students and staff. SOAS, the University of London, instructed academics not to record lectures or seminar discussions to avoid the risk of staff being arrested when visiting Hong Kong or China (Woolcock 2021). Yet in labelling all links with Chinese universities as 'risky' (Scott 2023) and warranting (in the UK as an example) oversight through risk assessments defined by the Centre for Cyber Security (Robertson 2022), leads to a racist 'slaying the dragon' script where China is portrayed as the villain. At the heart of these stand-offs is a shifting geo-politics of knowledge and economic competitivism.

The bottom line, however, is that key destination countries in the West have become deeply dependent on Chinese fee-paying students. So much so that any pandemic (as with SARs outbreaks in the early 2000s) was likely to challenge those universities with large numbers of international students from Asia. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the British Council in 2020 projected a potential £463 million drop in tuition fee contributions from prospective East Asian students, the bulk of these students being Chinese (Yang et al. 2020). The UK's transnational higher education (UK HE institutions operating in China) is equally dependent on China as it overtook Malaysia as the top host country for British transnational higher education in 2022 – 12% (510,835) of the UK's total transnational education students are in China (Universities UK 2022). Other Anglo-Saxon countries who 'export education services' were not spared. International education is one of Australia's top three exports in terms of GDP (goods and services), with Chinese students generating close to US $7 billion in onshore revenues in 2017 (Gu 2022). Chinese largess in research collaboration is also an important source of funding for Western universities. The Cambridge University-Nanjing Centre of Technology and Innovation, Cambridge University's 'first overseas enterprise' was 'funded by Nanjing Municipality for five years in the first instance' (Cambridge University News 2018, para 2–3).

These examples illustrate how the Global North has created its own 'China problem' by adopting and promoting a neoliberal marketisation approach to education. Within such a neoliberal model, students are treated as consumers, education a tradable service, research output a metric, and academics potential revenue generators. Chronic and massive underfunding of HE in countries like the UK has been normalised; universities are viewed as best functioning in a competitive market to build human capital and promote innovative institutional growth. Yet viewed through a different ideational lens, such as that of capitalist imperialism (Fraser 2022), a rather different rendering of social relations is made visible; one characterised by systemic pathology that is leading to the erosion of autonomy of the academy and the instrumentalisation of knowledge. Global North institutions and countries fail to acknowledge, or are reluctant to admit, that the 'Chinese vulnerability' is their doing – the cost of their market ideology (c.f. Mintz 2021).

Conclusions – three dynamics implicated in global entanglements

We began this paper by asking about 'the idea of the Chinese university' in the face of exogenous and endogenous global dynamics? Substantively, we focused on the intended and unintended outcomes of three contradictory dynamics. Here we draw three broad conclusions.

The first conclusion is that Neo-Confucianism, a deeply rooted civilisational culture, has been politically mobilised by the state. The expansion of access to mass education has been followed by pressure to access a university education. Family and individual aspirations coincide with state's need to develop a knowledge economy. Western universities inadvertently provided the human capital that all these parties desire. Yet at the same time, we also can see that, recently, China has selectively mobilised aspects of its civilisationally-anchored cultural values to advance the idea of a distinctive set of attributes (such as *Tianxia*) that aims to strategically set Chinese HE aside from, as well as above, the values of the Western academy.

However, it could equally be argued that at least for some students and academics in China, the movement to the West is a reaction to the subjugation of knowledge in the Chinese academy (and beyond). The narrowing of science research to satisfy (and justify) the state's needs and the increasingly politicised nature of humanities and social science research is attributable to the Leninist–Marxist root of the Chinese state. According to the latter, the fundamental purpose of the university as a socio-political apparatus is to exercise and cement the Party's control. Chinese intellectuals – those with a greater propensity towards critical thought – have always been in the crosshairs of ideological rectifications of the Party, a party which was (ironically) founded by leftist intellectuals. The renowned historian Levenson's comparison of Communist and Confucian China is illuminating: 'Both Communist and Confucian China were institutionally bureaucratic and despotic, intellectually dogmatic and canonical, psychologically restrictive and demanding' (Levenson 1968, 62). That said, some excellent Confucian ideas that can be productively used in HE, including notions such as humanist mission (*Zhi-Xing*) and institutional diversity (*He'er Butong*) (Li 2016), are prevented by the party-state from flourishing. Curtailment of free thinking is detrimental to creativity and innovation, and in aggregate, risks seriously undermining China's great national rejuvenation that policymakers had hoped universities could catalyse and incubate.

The second conclusion is that the distinct cultural political economy of Chinese socialism, including the *hukou* system, over-determines the lack of education opportunities, and what this means for social mobility and social justice for an avowedly socialist country that disparages inequalities of capitalist societies. In this sense, China's socialist ideals of linking labour to place/land, has the effect of strengthening education-mediated forms of stratification. China's urban–rural income disparity has become more pronounced since 1978, and the *hukou* system has played a critical role in widening this gap (Zhang 2021). Seen from Marshall's (1992) seminal rights-based account of social citizenship, the rural population can hardly be classified as citizens. Consequently, it is unsurprising that they are denied fair and equal access to quality education. Even for China's urban residents, the rising middle classes who enjoy many more *hukou*-bestowed social rights than their rural counterparts, it is an illusion to think that education is a public good for them. We see a similar development in highly unequal societies like the UK and the USA, where increasingly place matters to education outcomes. As we noted earlier, though the structuring mechanisms are different, the outcomes for these rural dwellers in different parts of the globe is much the same.

Yet this raises the related and thorny question: what is public about this good? What is it that education gives an individual or a social group access to? From primary school up to university, students undergo ideological indoctrination – indeed, ideological and political education comprises up to 10% of all undergraduate course credits (Xinhua News 2018). In addition to administrative order and political control, academics are co-opted through strategic funding and research projects, lured by opportunities for progression and development at the cost of adherence and acquiescence. Direct and subtle governance techniques manufacture political allegiance and regime loyalty among students and academics (Perry 2015, 17). The media, especially Western media, often talk about China's growing middle class. However, this middle class exists more in an economic than a political sense. They have indeed spurred a consumption revolution in China. However, 'China's middle class has necessarily grown up in the shadow of – and, indeed, inside – the party/state', which has remained Leninist in practice and socialist/communist in rhetoric since its founding (Fewsmith 2017, 6). As a result, and indeed by design, the interests of China's middle class have

paralleled those of the state and have even converged with those of the state. According to de Mesquita and Downs (2005, 82), we might best view higher education as a 'coordination good'; that is good that authoritarian regimes use to secure control over their populations in turn securing their power. After all, generous access to higher education as a public good could have the effect of creating a dissident class, dissatisfied with authoritarian rule.

Our third conclusion is that China and the West are complicit in a myriad of global knowledge networks. Despite the political intention of ploughing a separate path to the Western development model, China's efforts to advance the 'idea of a Chinese university' ultimately in/advertently feeds both off, and into, a pervasive neoliberal logic of Western universities whose corporatisation has brought about its corrosion and corruption. This mind-set plays into the hands of an authoritarian state that is sufficiently well versed in mobilising all resources to achieve specific goals through central planning. Perry is insightful on this point:

> Instead of bringing political liberalisation, China's impressive globalisation of higher education has encouraged a frenzied 'scaling' of its ivory tower that diverts interest and energy away from independent criticism in favour of enjoying state-supplied rewards for fulfilling 'objective' production targets. (2015, 18)

The neoliberal HE model advocated and promoted by the West not only provides fertile ground for the flourishing of Chinese sciences, but more crucially, China provides both a lifeline and legitimacy for sustaining this model as a poster child for global HE. The alignment of Chinese universities to the neoliberal economic logic of marketisation, efficiency, and outcomes-based evaluation, on the one hand has catalysed their rise to prominence in the global HE landscape, and on the other hand, has fed into the continuing intrusion of neoliberalism into the academy in the West. As Franceschini and Loubere point out, we should

> … de-emphasise the 'Chineseness' of examples of 'Chinese influence' and instead shift our focus to the model of the neoliberal, managerial university – [which are] perpetually facing reduced budgets and [are] focussed on vacuuming up as much external funding and tuition fees as possible – which currently dominates the Western academic landscape. (Franceschini and Loubere 2022, 53)

At the same time, we must also be reminded that on the domestic front, the Chinese state has been relatively successful (thus far) in forging a neo-socialist governmentality fusing the 'centrifugal forces of socialist, market, and civilization subjectivities and authorities' as a means of securing its legitimacy to rule (Palmer and Winiger 2019, 554).

Notes

1. The terms 'higher education' and 'universities' are used interchangeably.
2. Designated universities are called '211' or '985' Universities.
3. The three principles: the ruler guides subject, the father guides son and the husband guides wife; the five virtues: benevolence (*Ren*), righteousness (*Yi*), propriety (*Li*), wisdom (*Zhi*), and fidelity (*Xin*).
4. Compulsory education is 9 years: 6 years of primary school and 3 years of secondary.

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