Front. Educ. China 2014, 9(2): 151–162
DOI 10.3868/s110-003-014-0014-x

RESEARCH ARTICLE

YANG Rui

China's Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education: An Overview

Abstract Over the past decades, the internationalization of higher education in China has had considerable achievements, and has contributed to the current transformation of the Chinese system into one of the largest and arguably most promising ones in the world. Setting the Chinese experience in an international context, this article assesses the latest developments. It argues that China's internationalization of higher education is part of a much larger process of cultural integration between China and the West. From this perspective, it concludes that although China's recent developments deserve to be noted, China has a considerable distance to go before its aspirations to create truly world-class universities are fulfilled.

Keywords internationalization, China, higher education, cultural integration

Introduction

Within the past two decades, internationalization has been high on the agenda at institutional, national, regional, and international levels. In particular, the process has been facilitated by supra-national and regional initiatives such as the Bologna Process. While nearly all national governments are keen to promote internationalization to address both regional and global challenges (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2007), from comparative perspectives internationalization takes various forms and shapes. The actual experiences of various nations differ, often with strikingly imbalanced costs and benefits.

From the late 1970s, the internationalization of higher education in China has been motivated by a desire to realize "the four modernizations" (of industry, agriculture, defense, science and technology, through implementation of

YANG Rui(✉)
Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
E-mail: yangrui@hkucc.hku.hk

economic reform). Under this policy reform, the internationalization of higher education has taken three major forms: studying abroad including dispatching Chinese students and academic staff members abroad for advanced studies or research and attracting foreign students; integrating an international dimension into university teaching and learning including introducing foreign textbooks, references and the development of both English programs and bilingual programs; and providing transnational programs in cooperation with foreign/overseas institutional partners in Chinese universities.

Together with other policies, such strategies have drastically transformed China's high education in terms of both quantity and quality. Set in a comparative and international perspective, China's experience has been highly strategic. While it has been effective, China faces a number of fundamental issues. Within a much altered context, China's internationalization of higher education has begun to take a somewhat different orientation to meet new demands. Based on previous works (e.g., Yang, 2002; Huang, 2003) which remain largely valid, this article assesses some of the latest developments.

Chinese Understanding of Higher Education Internationalization

Since the 1990s, the concept of internationalization in higher education has been elusive. People use this same term with very different definitions (Knight, 1997; Callan, 1998). While universities worldwide are promoting internationalization, achieving a common definition has not proved simple. There has even been "an increasing fuzziness of the subject characterized by unclear demarcation of concepts" (Kehm & Teichler, 2007, p. 262). According to Bennett and Kane (2011), there is allegedly much confusion at the institutional level regarding what internationalization is. According to Elkin, Farnsworth and Templer (2008), whilst most U.K. business schools and departments offer numerous courses that incorporate the word "international," the contents, purposes, and directions of these courses vary enormously. In some cases, internationalization is interpreted to mean little more than a requirement to improve facilities for foreign students; in others it is associated with root and branch reform of syllabuses and teaching methods.

Different perspectives have been adopted to examine university internationa-

lization, and therefore various understandings of the term abound. Definitions of internationalization embody diverse emphases and approaches. The most cited definition was developed by Knight and de Wit (1995). Although refined later a number of times (e.g., Knight, 2008), its essence has remained largely unchanged. The concept defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of higher education. It has served the field extremely well, especially in its analysis of activities at institutional level.

However, this definition is only based on and thus suitable for Western experience. To non-Western societies, modern universities are an imported concept. They originated from Europe, spreading worldwide from the mid-19th century to the present time mainly due to colonialism. Even the countries that escaped colonial domination adopted Western models as well (Altbach, 2001). The European-North American university model has never been tolerant toward other alternatives, leading to the inefficacy of universities in non-Western societies, on whom a so-called "international" perspective has been imposed from the outset. What is lacking is an appropriate combination of the "international" and the local. Therefore, within the contemporary context of Western dominance, internationalization of higher education in non-Western societies necessarily touches on longstanding knotty issues and tensions between Westernization and indigenization.

This is particularly true in China, a country with a continuous history of fostering unique cultural heritages for thousands of years. China's oldest modern university was only founded in 1893 as a "Self-Strengthening Institute" with European advice (Kirby, 2012). While Chinese higher education has fundamentally operated within a traditional mode of thinking, the Western concept of the modern university has been taken up by the Chinese for its usefulness. Such a difficult mix is not always questioned thoughtfully. A modern Western-style of higher education system has rarely been successfully practiced in China, due to the constant tensions between the institutionalized yet invisible and powerful systems within Chinese universities, leading to ineffectiveness being a kind of norm (Yang, 2011).

Since the late Qing dynasty, the internationalization of higher education has been part of China's salvation movement. Its fundamental meaning is to learn Western knowledge and technology to make China strong, to "learn from the

barbarians to ward off the barbarians," in the words of one of the then best thinkers of China. Such a fundamental understanding of internationalization had remained largely unchanged until China's most recent rise. During the past one-and-a-half centuries, there have been changes of priorities and measures in China's internationalization in accordance with the changing situation of the international political economy and China's positioning within it. In the past, China imitated major Western countries and subsequently it leaned on the former Soviet Union, but now, China has turned again to looking at Western nations for standards.

Features of China's Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education

The most striking feature of China's strategies for internationalization has been its vigorous engagement with the outside world, especially with Western societies. This attitude is not only unprecedented in China's modern history, but also different from other developing countries' interactions with the developed Western world. China's embrace of the English language serves as a telling example here. At both national policy and individual career development levels, English language education has been a subject of paramount importance in China since its reopening to the outside world. Proficiency in English has been widely regarded as a national as well as a personal asset (Hu, 2005). English language education has been viewed by the Chinese, both the leadership and the populace, as a vital role to play in national modernization and development (Pan, 2011). Seeing the dominant status of English as a historical fact, China has initiated various policies to adapt to this, instead of resisting it, in an effort to promote internationalization. Learning English is no longer just important within China. It is the bare minimum for any serious student. China is home to more speakers of English than any other country in the world. Examinations in Chinese schools at all levels include English proficiency tests. English is widely required in the professional promotions of academics, including many whose work requires little use of English.

The central emphasis on the strategic role of English in the modernization process and the high priority given to English on the national agenda of educational development has proven to be beneficial (Hu, 2005). China's efforts

are already paying off. The communicative and instrumental function of English as a lingua franca and its global reach has accelerated China's foreign trade and helped China's economic growth in the past decades. It has also promoted China's exchanges with the outside world (Chang, 2006). Chinese scholars and students in major universities have little difficulty in communicating with international scholars. Their English proficiency has contributed to China's current rapid and successful engagement with the international community. Peer-reviewed papers published by Chinese researchers rose 64-fold over the past 30 years (Yang, 2012b). Such experience contrasts markedly with that of many other non-English speaking countries including many of China's neighbors.

Secondly, as shown by recent international studies, the meaning of internationalization, the means to implement it and the extent of internationalization policies all depend on the specific subject matter. The general situation is that the "hard" sciences usually attain higher levels of internationalization than the "soft." Hence development in the "hard" sciences, such as engineering, tends to be much more emphasized, while the humanities and social sciences have tended to under-represented in international programs (Cannon & Djajanegara, 1997; de Wit & Callan, 1995). This is due to the varied ideologies, paradigms, and discourses inherent in the humanities and social sciences and the high dependency on language to convey their meanings. In these fields, domestic considerations are given more weight than in the natural sciences, technology, and medical sciences (Altbach, 1998).

Chinese scholars in the humanities and social sciences have not achieved the emerging visibility of their natural science and engineering peers in the international community. While China's overall representation in the international scientific community has grown rapidly since reopening itself to the world (World Bank, 2000), few publications produced by Chinese social scientists have appeared in international citation indices, an assessment that has become increasingly important in the evaluation of research at the institutional, departmental, and individual levels, but has not been popularly employed as an effective means of evaluation in China's social sciences simply because Chinese social scientists rarely publish internationally. In 1985, Chinese mainland social scientists produced 80 international publications. The number increased to 202 in 1996 (Fan, 2000). In 2010, China had 121, 500 scientific publications listed by

the Science Citation Index, of which 5, 287 (2.41%) were in social sciences. However, China's social sciences are confronted with an unprecedented challenge from the global context, and it faces the urgent task of raising its level of internationalization.

Thirdly, China's internationalization faces various dilemmas and paradoxes, partially resulting from the aforementioned historical experience of external domination. China is concerned by the potential loss of its educational sovereignty. Although this issue is increasingly international in a context marked by the growing scale of foreign activities in national domains of higher education, China's concern has taken a particular form due to its tightly centralized higher education system and its often nominal emphasis on socialist ideology. One expression of its concern is the policy which requires foreign institutions to be partner with Chinese institutions, and calls for no fewer than half the members of the governing body of the institution to be Chinese citizens, and the post of president or the equivalent be a Chinese citizen residing in China. This concern has led to ambiguity regarding the legal status of foreign higher education activity in China. Rather than viewing it as an integrated part of China's higher education system, the Chinese have tended to see it as supplementary during certain stage of their higher education development.

Such dilemmas have caused contradictory decisions and inefficacies. For instance, while the central government aims to import the world's most advanced educational resources to boost the capacity of Chinese universities, individual institutions hope by partnering that they can capitalize on the demand for foreign qualifications as they often fail to attract students on their own account. This mismatch of purpose contributes to China's overall failure to upgrade its higher education and attract foreign capital through Sino-foreign joint programs. By refusing to give it a clearly-defined legal identity, China fails to govern this new activity within its regulatory frameworks. While the central government approves or charters the establishment of joint education programs in line with the existing legal frameworks and guidelines, a lack of consistent oversight after approval has left the responsibility for quality entirely in the hands of the involved teaching staff and program coordinators.

Fourthly, both uniformities and disparities are substantial in the purposes of and strategies for internationalization in China. Higher institutions of varying type and status within the system act in very similar ways, from national

flagships such as Peking and Tsinghua Universities to regional specialized institutions like the Ocean University at Qingdao in Shandong province and to Xinjiang University which is in an area neighboring Central Asian Islamic countries. At the same time, internal differentiation among Chinese higher education institutions is increasing. While China's best institutions have integrated internationalization into their daily work and life, internationalization is hardly visible in regional institutions. As academics at major institutions are pushed to publish in English-speaking countries and collaborate with peers there, such pressure is nonexistent for their counterparts in regional institutions. It is fair to mention some quiet achievers such as the institutions in Guangxi Autonomous Region and Yunnan province which have substantial collaboration and exchange with their counterparts in much-neglected Southeast Asian countries (Yang, 2012a).

From Importing to More Exporting

As shown above, elements of China's long historical traditions directly affect China's global engagement in higher education. Although China escaped colonial domination, it has still widely adopted Western models. Meanwhile, the contemporary scholarly world is becoming more multi-polarized. China's representation in the international scientific community has grown rapidly since its reopening to the world (Yang, 2012b). Instead of being a passive recipient to be influenced by the major world powers, China is reaching out globally and investing heavily overseas. China now actively uses international exchange and cooperation in higher education as an exercise of soft power (Yang, 2012c).

China has reached another phase of global engagement and internationalization in higher education, a new form of internationalization in the making, shifting from a one-way import of foreign (Western) knowledge into China to a much-improved balance between introducing the world to China and bringing China to the world. This might be seen as a kind of Chinese history, in which different periods have seen various forms of China's higher education internationalization. As partially demonstrated above, by the close of the 18th century, China's higher education had evolved according to its own logic, and never deviated from its own developmental path as a result of external influences. While Western higher education models had already demonstrated their strength,

China's communication with the West was intentionally hindered. China was thus unable to learn much from such advanced models to reform its higher education system.

Such a mentality of cultural superiority was smashed by repeated, humiliating defeats in China's modern history by Western powers and Japan (Yang, 2002). Since China's first modern university was established in the 1890s, learning from the West has been strongly advocated as the only way to make China strong. The past three decades of China's higher education internationalization continued to feature the importing of foreign (Western) knowledge into China. Starting from the early 2000s, China's higher education internationalization has begun to pay more attention to exporting Chinese knowledge to the world. In 2008, those coming to China to study (223, 499) historically outnumbered those leaving China to study abroad (179,800; Su, 2009). The number reached 265,090 in 2010. China is now one of the top 10 countries in hosting international students. Its strategy for internationalization in such a new era has multiple dimensions: from growing educational aid and fast-increasing overseas student numbers to an emphasis on the leading roles of Chinese scholars in international collaboration, a focus on the reputation of international partners in joint programs, and on deploying the Chinese knowledge diaspora.

Another demonstration of this shift of focus in China's internationalization of higher education is the recent Confucius Institutes program. Realizing the critical role of higher education in the projection of soft power, China promotes international exchange and collaboration to expand its global influence, and seeks to formalize the benefits of its rich heritage by establishing Confucius Institutes, which are centers for language study linked with universities around the world, named after the Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 BCE. The network of such institutes is a significant tool China has used to expand its international influence via Chinese language and culture. The move is arguably China's most systematically planned soft power policy. This combination of higher education with the appeal of Confucianism gives Beijing a definite comparative advantage in its soft power approach (Shambaugh, 2005; Kurlantzick, 2006). It provides Chinese and foreign universities with a platform for collaboration and exchange. As part of the message China sends to the world, with the Chinese government's keen sense of history, it reveals China's ability to plan for the long term.

Concluding Remarks

In Chinese history, there have only been two cases in which foreign influences brought to Chinese culture had such a great impact that the host culture was fundamentally changed. One was the introduction of Buddhism into China, and it took over a millennium for the Chinese to receive Buddhism and respond to its challenges with a resultant reshaping of Chinese mentalities at both the intellectual and the popular levels. The other, the intrusion of Western culture into China since the 19th century, is still on-going, as the result of a large-scale Western expansion. The magnitude is far greater than in the first case, at a time when the vitality of Chinese culture was just about exhausted while the momentum of Western culture was at its zenith (Hsu, 2001). The process is far from completed, and pain is felt on a daily basis. China's contemporary internationalization of higher education is part of this much wider process. Therefore, certain definitions of internationalization of higher education that work well in Western societies are not a good fit for China. Any analysis that fails to recognize this would not be able to grasp the essence of the real issues and might well be self-deceptive and misleading to others.

Contemporary comparative and international studies of China's internationalization of higher education have been overwhelmed by the powerful influence of economic and political realities. A cultural perspective is lacking, although history has repeatedly shown that the transfer of Western practices conflicts with Chinese traditions. Modern universities are a foreign transplant to China. Indigenous Chinese highest learning institutions only shared superficial resemblance with the medieval university in Europe. The central purpose of China's internationalization of higher education is to combine Chinese and Western elements at all levels (Yang, 2011).

Such a combination has never been achieved. The development of Chinese modern universities is always confronted by the absence of both classical and modern ideas of a university. Chinese longstanding traditions never attempted to seek the ontological significance of knowledge. Practical demands have always been the highest priority. In continuity with reforms since the 19th century, China's contemporary policies remain similar. At a certain stage, the strategies for internationalization have been effective. Chinese universities excelled over India's in almost every international ranking. According to the latest Academic

Ranking of World Universities conducted by the Graduate School of Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2012), China has four in the top 200; three in the top 300, seven in the top 400, and 14 others in the top 500, featuring 28 times in the top 500, while India appeared only once.

Nevertheless, this apparent is doomed to be limited. China has a considerable distance to go before its aspirations to create truly world-class universities are fulfilled. In the present great leap forward in Chinese higher education, what has often been missing is attention to cultural and institutional establishments. Simply buying state-of-the-art laboratory equipment or pushing for more English journal articles will not guarantee the kind of intellectual atmosphere that has developed over centuries on European and American campuses. In a context of growing Chinese power, internationalization of higher education plays a significant role in the preparation for China's global roles. This requires a mixture of vision and boldness.

References

Altbach, P. G. (1998). *Comparative higher education: Knowledge, the university and development*. Hong Kong, China: Comparative Education Research Center, University of Hong Kong.

Altbach, P. G. (2001). The American academic model in comparative perspective. In P. Altbach, P. J. Gumport, & D. B. Johnstone (Eds.), *In defense of American higher education* (pp. 11–37). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ayoubi, R. M., & Massoud, H. K. (2007). The strategy of internationalization in universities: A quantitative evaluation of the intent and implementation in UK universities. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *21*(4), 329–349. doi: 10.1108/09513540710749546

Bennett, R., & Kane, S. (2011). Internationalization of U.K. university business schools: A survey of current practice. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *15*(4), 351–373.

Callan, H. (1998). Internationalization in Europe. In P. Scott (Ed.), *The globalization of higher education* (pp. 44–57). Buckingham, England: SRHE and OUP.

Cannon, H., & Djajanegara, O. (1997). Internationalization of higher education in Indonesia. In J. Knight & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Internationalization of higher education in Asia Pacific countries* (pp. 65–81). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: EAIE.

Chang, J. Y. (2006). Globalization and English in Chinese higher education. *World Englishes*, *25*(3–4), 513–525. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-971X.2006.00484.x

de Wit, H., & Callan, H. (1995). Internationalization of higher education in Europe. In H. de Wit (Ed.), *Strategies for internationalization of higher education: A comparative study of Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States of America* (pp. 67–98). Amsterdam, The

Netherlands: EAIE.

Elkin, G., Farnsworth, J., & Templer, A. (2008). Strategy and the internationalization of universities. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *22*(3), 239–250. doi: 10.1108/09513540810861874

Fan, B. S. (2000). 当代中国社会科学报刊文献分析: 1978–1995 [*An analysis of the contemporary Chinese social sciences newspaper and journal literature: 1978–1995*]. 上海, 中国: 华东师范大学出版社 [Shanghai, China: East China Normal University Press].

Graduate School of Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University. (2012). *Academic ranking of world universities*. Retrieved August 16, 2012, from http://www.arwu.org/ARWU2010.jsp

Hsu, C.-Y. (2001). Chinese encounters with other civilizations. *International Sociology*, *16*(3), 438–454. doi: 10.1177/026858001016003012

Hu, G. W. (2005). English language education in China: Policies, progress and problems. *Language Policy*, *4*(1), 5–24. doi: 10.1007/s10993-004-6561-7

Huang, F. T. (2003). Policy and practice of the internationalization of higher education in China. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *7*(3), 225–240. doi: 10.1177/1028315303254430

Kehm, B. M., & Teichler, U. (2007). Research on internationalization in higher education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *11*(3–4), 260–273. doi: 10.1177/1028315307303534

Kirby, W. C. (2012). The world of universities in modern China. *International Briefs for Higher Education Leaders*, *1*, 4–5.

Knight, J. (1997). Internationalization of higher education: A conceptual framework. In J. Knight & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Internationalization of higher education in Asia Pacific countries* (pp. 5–19). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: EAIE.

Knight, J. (2008). The internationalization of higher education: Are we on the right track? *Academic Matters: The Journal of Higher Education*, 5–9.

Knight, J., & de Wit, H. (1995). Strategies for internationalization of higher education: Historical and conceptual perspectives. In H. de Wit (Ed.), *Strategies for internationalization: A comparative study of Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States of America* (pp. 5–32). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: EAIE.

Kurlantzick, J. (2006). China's charm: Implications of Chinese soft power. *Policy Brief*, *47*, 1–8.

Pan, L. (2011). English language ideologies in the Chinese foreign language education policies: A world-system perspective. *Language Policy*, *10*(3), 245–263. doi: 10.1007/s10993-011-9205-8

Shambaugh, D. (2005). Return to the Middle Kingdom? China and Asia in the early twenty-first century. In D. Shambaugh (Ed.), *Power shift: China and Asia's new dynamics* (pp. 23–47). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Su, Y. (2009). 08年17.98万人出国留学 16.16万人自费出国留学 [Numbers of students going abroad to study]. Retrieved December 19, 2011, from http://learning.sohu.com/20090326/n263029186.shtml

World Bank. (2000). *Higher education in developing countries: Peril and promise*. Washington, D. C.: Author.

Yang, R. (2002). *Third delight: Internationalization of higher education in China*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Yang, R. (2011). Self and the other in the Confucian cultural context: Implications of China's higher education development for comparative studies. *International Review of Education*, *57*(3–4), 337–355. doi: 10.1007/s11159-011-9208-x

Yang, R. (2012a). Internationalization, regionalization and soft power: China's relations with ASEAN member countries in higher education. *Frontiers of Education in China*, *7*(4), 486–507. doi: 10.3868/s110-001-012-0025-3

Yang, R. (2012b). Scholarly publishing, knowledge mobility and internationalization of Chinese universities. In T. Fenwick & L. Farrell (Eds.), *Knowledge mobilization and educational research: Politics, languages and responsibilities* (pp. 185–167). New York, NY: Routledge.

Yang, R. (2012c). Soft power and higher education: An examination of China's Confucius Institutes. In E. Hartmann (Ed.), *The internationalization of higher education: Towards a new research agenda in critical higher education studies* (pp. 65–76). New York, NY: Routledge.