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Internationalisation of higher education in China – pedagogical analysis of historical development and political context

Abstract: The article concerns the development of internationalisation of higher education in China. The paper describes the historical development of higher education and the development of internationalisation of higher education, recalling the most important facts. The author points out that the first forms of internationalisation took the shape of student and scientific exchanges, and over time, along with the introduction of the country's economic development strategy, the country focused on creating strategic mergers, alliances and international cooperation, which are regulated directly by the PRC (e.g. OBOR) or are transnational (e.g. BRICS), where the Chinese state plays one of the main roles. The article is based on the analysis of existing research by the Chinese researchers, where the analytical perspective of a researcher from a different culture, participating in the process of internationalisation of higher education in the world, is presented.

Keywords: comparative education, internationalisation of education, China, internationalisation of higher education in China, higher education.

Introduction

Internationalisation as a concept and strategic agenda is a relatively new, broad and diverse phenomenon in higher education, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, socio-cultural and academic contexts. Over the past five decades, the internationalisation of higher education has evolved from being a marginal activity to a key aspect of the reform agendas

in many countries. In the last decade of the previous century, increasing globalisation, regionalisation of economies and societies, combined with the demands of the knowledge based economy have contributed to a more strategic approach to internationalisation at the level of higher education.

Research on the internationalisation of higher education is usually conducted from several perspectives. An analysis of the literature has shown that authors describe the development of internationalisation in a country in two main ways – they analyse political and governmental solutions (Hu and Willis, 2017, p. 245-261; Mok and Han, 2016, p. 19-39) or practical implications in university structures (Wang, 2016, p. 223-242; Wilson-Mah and Thomlinson, 2018, p. 635-648; Kwiek, 2021, p. 1-77; Domański, 2021; Kacperczyk and Górak-Sosnowska, 2020).

The internationalisation of higher education encompasses various forms of international cooperation, such as academic mobility of students or lecturers; mobility of educational programmes and institutional mobility; development of new international academic standards and programmes; integration of international dimensions and educational standards in curricula; institutional partnerships; creation of strategic educational associations (Domański, 2021; Kacperczyk and Górak-Sosnowska, 2020). In the case of China, it takes on Chinese local political, cultural and economic conditions.

Under the influence of economic globalisation, educational services in China, as well as their purpose have been changing similarly to other countries. In a short period of time, higher education has unfortunately become a significant commodity in the global trading system. Meanwhile, the dominant force behind the internationalisation of higher education has transformed, from cultural and political influences, progressively shifting to a market economy oriented towards economic profit.

For many years, the internationalisation of higher education in various countries has mainly involved two aspects. The first was the exchange and cooperation between teaching personnel and academic research, and the second was the mutual transfer between different levels of universities and education, e.g. providing collaborative education between countries, setting up foreign trade schools, conducting international exchange of credit points and other educational services. Nowadays, trends and trajectories of the worldwide internationalisation of education have changed, and economic reasons have become more dominant.

The second aspect of globally developing internationalisation concerns the participation of foreign international agencies in shaping local education policies. Eugenia Potulicka (2019) highlights that the reach of international

organisations which influence higher education is expanding worldwide at a very fast pace. To promote the rapid development of the transnational higher education service sector, these organisations play an increasingly important role in planning internationalisation strategies. First and foremost, it is worth pointing to local European Union (EU) programmes and others related to the Bologna processes. The World Trade Organisation, UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development are also actively involved in these processes and are intentionally promoting the development of transnational higher education with a particular direction and purpose.

This article provides an introduction to the subject of internationalisation of higher education in China. Its purpose is to present a history of the development of higher education, discuss how internationalisation has evolved in China and what are the main forces and policy trends shaping the internationalisation of higher education there. The article is important for several reasons. Firstly, it provides an understanding of how China has opened up to internationalisation processes and what political trends are evident in the development of such processes. Secondly, the analysis of solutions undertaken to internationalise education uncovers the kind of educational cooperation and expansion China is planning and engaging in. Understanding the educational trends and policies is important, as Polish universities are increasingly engaging in cooperation with Chinese counterparts. The article falls within the framework of comparative education, a section of pedagogy providing insights into the development of contemporary education systems around the world. It was written by an author from the Eastern European cultural circle who interpreted the phenomenon using available international research (secondary analysis of the already existing studies), including Chinese studies, as well as her personal research experience. The article is partially the outcome of an international project to analyse and interpret the processes of internationalisation of education in countries along the New Silk Road and China¹.

¹ Project title: “一带一路” 沿线八国国际教育合作与交流政策研究 (*The International Cooperation and Exchange Policy for Education in Belt and Road Countries*); participation in an international grant awarded by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016-01-01 to 2020-12-30.

History of the development of higher education in China

Higher education in China has a rich tradition and, at the same time, sets an example of progressive solutions for modern times. The traditions of higher education in China date back to the Tang Dynasty, that is the years 618-907, when the prototypes of university education were established (Cai and Yan, 2017, p. 169-193). However, from the point of view of internationalisation, the contemporary history of the development of higher education is more relevant, therefore the remainder of the article will refer to the current times, referring to the most crucial events in the history of the development of higher education.

The first essential fact for understanding the issue of higher education and the processes of internationalisation of education is the period of formation of the People's Republic of China. In 1949, there was a strong and significant influence of the Soviet model, characterised by central planning. It involved governmental allocation of resources, appointing the leaders of institutions of higher learning, allocating jobs to graduates or determining the number of students recruited to particular institutions. Another example of inspiration from foreign models, in this case Soviet one, was the lack of private institutions of higher education, as well as religious universities in China, until the 1960s. (Mańkowska, 2021).

The second significant fact, indicating that China can draw inspiration from abroad, but prioritises compliance with local political ideologies, is the period of the Cultural Revolution, when the government seized all authority in education and the higher education rigorously adhered to the unified requirements of the government. It was a highly centralised type of education system, with a high degree of state interference in teaching. At that time, higher education was practised exclusively in the national interest and constituted a national monopoly. Funding for higher education was very limited and developed slowly over a long period of time. University education was free of charge.

The 90s were a time when China began to build a socialist market economy, introducing profound changes in the social structure. The national concept and social logic underwent a process of transformation – from authority-dominated education to focus towards marketisation. Privately-funded universities began to reappear (Mańkowska, 2014, p. 127-137) and students were given the right to choose a university according to their purchasing power (although those schools were still subject to many restrictions), indicating a partial trend of commodification of higher education in China. Since the 90s, tuition at higher education levels has been subject to charge. Initially,

university education was reserved for the few chosen. Lisha Liu (2012, p. 107-113) writes that in China it fell within the elite model. The programme to popularise such education was introduced in the late 1990s and was linked to the introduction of the new Higher Education Law in China (1999), which brought with it an enormous organisational freedom for the private sector at this level (Mańkowska, 2014). Shi Li and Chunbing Xing (2010) refer to the late 90s period as the time of China's great educational leap. Comparative scholar Gu believes that the popularisation of higher education was intended to help China's underperforming economy (Gu, 2014). One solution was to invest in education at this level. For this purpose, the education sector was expanded (physically as well – by building new schools, university facilities, etc.), new teaching and research personnel was hired, learning centres were established, and so on. Interestingly enough, education fees also increased and Chinese parents, encouraged by, among other things, advertising spots, began to invest in their children's social capital.

Min Weifang (2018) explains that China's economic transition – from a steady, centrally planned economy to a dynamic, socialist one – has also led to a series of social changes, which have had a profound impact on the higher education sector. According to Weifang (2018), the enrolment rate at this level is 15%, which, by international standards, could represent a shift from elite to mass education at the level of higher education.

State policy is also responsible for the popularisation of higher education in China. It operates under the slogan: 'let's revitalise the country through science and education' and is, as researchers Hongxia Shan and Shibao Guo (2016, p. 9-23) note, a part of the socialist modernisation programme. Education is considered the key element for the development of the Chinese economy, with highly qualified personnel being particularly valuable. However, it is important to remember that in educational reforms and transformations, the discourse in the socialist spirit is accompanied by the one of normative modernisation, meaning decentralisation, privatisation, financial diversification, elitism and institutional stratification. The history of the development of Chinese higher education demonstrates that China is responsive to political and social change and is able to draw on and learn from international solutions, though only within a specific range, under specific conditions, typically leaning towards centralised solutions.

Key points in the development of higher education internationalisation policy in China

There has been extensive discussion as part of the research on the internationalisation of education in China, including consideration of its development history, policies and issues (Huang, 2018, p. 23-33; Wang, 2016, p. 223-242). Knowing how these processes have changed and what trajectories they are currently taking is significant, and the processes of internationalisation and their effects on local communities cannot be ignored. Let us therefore look at how the political strategy of internationalising higher education in China has evolved.

The first period, which marked the history of internationalisation of higher education, is when the implementation of the processes of internationalisation of education begins – from 1978 to mid-1980s, especially after the passing of the Open Door Policy (Huang, 2011, p. 265-282). Since China opened up, there have been four transition stages of internationalisation of its higher education, from exploration of opportunities for development, adjustment of internal policies, establishment of cooperation to updating cooperation models. The aim behind the new reforms was based on the will and need to serve the society and to prepare for the emergence of a new China, hence, among other things, investment in talent, observing foreign solutions and adapting them to local conditions were all carried out in an intensified manner. During this time, the first rules were established for students and researchers, so that they could benefit from internationalisation.

In the initial phase, internationalisation of higher education took a basic form in China, mostly limited to sending students abroad to study and carrying out small foreign educational projects (Mańkowska, 2017, p. 37-54). After the end of the Cultural Revolution, there was an urgent need to rebuild the concept of universities as well as the university personnel, thus the support of foreign concepts and personnel was a fairly common practice and significantly outlined the shape of the internationalisation of education in China. It is worth mentioning at this point that strict regulations for educational migration were implemented at that time and rules for departure and return to the country were defined. Migration was possible, however with the obligation to return and rebuild the country with knowledge and skills acquired abroad. Further regulations on travel policy appeared in 1994, with the adoption of recommendations and the establishment of a committee to regulate, recruit and select candidates for overseas departures. By the end of the 20th century, China had established a relatively good policy system to regulate studying abroad, and overseas studies had entered the path of

legalisation and standardisation. In 2009, scholarships for applicants to study abroad were regulated, which, among other things, contributed to an increase in the number of people studying outside of China (Zhou, 2020, p. 110). Nowadays, the opportunity to study abroad is regulated by policies to support the development of overseas studies, encourage returns and regulate movement, but the literature reports that the scholarship system needs monitoring. Currently, most state-funded Chinese student migrations involve departures of 3 months up to 1 year. Such a short experience abroad, according to various researchers (Li and Xue, 2020a, p. 986-998; Li and Xue, 2020b), is not sufficient and does not contribute to building a modern Chinese economy.

I would like to emphasise that the imbalance in the economic and social development of different regions in China has entailed inequalities in the development of higher education and the processes of its internationalisation. The most recent political strategies for ranking universities in China and introduction of university development strategies concern a reform called the 'Double first class' (Mańkowska, 2021). The reform was announced in October 2015 and its main objective was to increase and intensify the internationalisation processes of all universities. It deepens the discrepancies in the development of higher education institutions. The requirement of participation in internationalisation processes forces some higher education institutions, which are not ready for such processes, to engage in actions which bear the hallmarks of internationalisation (artificially increasing the number of international students by referring to dual nationality) or to introduce practices, which appear as related to internationalisation, but only at the formal level (entering into cooperation negotiations with foreign universities and deliberately prolonging this process/status for years). The plan to create 'Double First Class' universities has been centrally imposed and is mandatory – it has been prepared for the next 30 years, and universities and colleges are responsible for its implementation. Under the current rules, universities are tasked with the development and implementation of local strategies to internationalise education, with a particular focus on reaching out to foreign scholars and lecturers, creating Chinese and foreign study programmes and increasing the number of foreigners in Chinese universities. Another example of new international responsibilities imposed on universities is the running of pilot university branches, colleges and Confucius Institutes abroad. Not all units succeed in these efforts. Universities that are not at the top of the ranking lists are, unfortunately, much less likely to engage with universities from the world's top ranking lists, preferably English-speaking ones. Thus,

they often engage in projects and undertake activities of little importance or international relevance, merely fulfilling an obligation imposed on them by law and ranking – looking for formal solutions, not practical, yielding long-term collaborations. In recent years, however, there has been a noticeable increase in financial investment in the educational internationalisation processes, which can certainly accelerate the internationalisation of higher education (Li, 2021). It turns out that the issue of additional funding does not solve the problem, which is the quality of the procedures implemented and the internationalisation activities undertaken. The effect of suddenly announced new funding strategies and promises is that Chinese universities of varying research and teaching quality are looking to undertake international cooperation wherever possible. In many cases, foreign universities, which are also faced with the need to internationalise higher education, undertake cooperation on either unfavourable or Chinese-dictated terms, becoming a pariah in the inter-university community. It is not uncommon for cooperation arrangements and rules to be ‘coordinated’ by special Chinese consulting firms.

In line with the existing policy and strategy for the development of internationalisation, as early as 1999, the Ministry of Education, together with the Ministry of Public Security, investigated, verified and allowed the existence of special agencies in the market responsible for mediation concerning the provision of overseas educational services. Such consultancy-mediation agencies are engaged in organising foreign educational offers for Chinese universities. Despite state regulation and supervision of said companies, China still struggles with problems such as illegal mediation, unlicensed activities, subletting, subcontracting, high fees, fraud etc. According to researcher Jian Li (2021), there is an urgent need in China to strengthen the legal system of policies for abroad studies and standardise their coordination.

A significant moment for the internationalisation of higher education in China happened when the country joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. That time saw intensified efforts, with the Chinese name and character given to the internationalisation of higher education ‘Chinese Foreign Cooperative Running School’ (CFCRS) (Hou, Montgomery and McDowell, 2014, p. 300-318). China began to engage more significantly in internationalisation processes, globally as well, following the principles of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) (Mok and Ong, 2014, p. 133-155), which considered education as a service that could be sold worldwide. Today, Chinese higher education follows neoliberal trends, however, without understanding of the market ideologies or interpreting them in its

own manner. Many Asian countries actively 'buy' educational services from developed countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Altbach and Knight, 2007, p. 290-305), but also sell them; it is a common practice.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, economic progress in Western Europe, South America and Asian countries, as well as elsewhere in the world, gave way to the liberalisation of the global investment market, which over time created an open labour market, contributed to the growth of multinational companies, sudden development of information technology, leading to the emergence of a global economy. Since the early 80s, one can observe the impact of the global economy on local politics, culture, science and technology, as well as education, which over time has become one of the main areas occupied by globalisation processes. In the case of China, the economic globalisation of the world has provided a major stimulus to the internationalisation of education. The rapid growth of multinational companies has contributed to the promotion of foreign solutions, work ethic, culture in general and, above all, knowledge, which has gained an unprecedented value under the new conditions. Knowledge and new opportunities to acquire it have changed the way people view their abilities and talents, and increased the desire for a solid foundation of knowledge, which no longer had to be local. The widespread use of information technology around the world has made it possible for information and knowledge to break down the barriers of time and space, allowed for them to synchronise, to flow at the same time, thus improving access to both general as well as specialised knowledge. Thus, it was natural to coordinate the processes of internationalisation of knowledge, transfer of people and ideas according to one's own, local conditions.

One of the plans involving the internationalisation of higher education refers to the concept of the Outline of the National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development, envisioned for 2010-2020, according to which there is an urgent need in China to continue the economic and educational opening and to increase the requirements for the introduction of high quality education, as well as to expand and strengthen the exchange and cooperation of Chinese universities with the world's top-ranked universities.

Another significant plan to internationalise education under local conditions is the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, an expression of China's *going global* or *Go Global* policy. It is a way to open China to new markets and create a network of Chinese businesses and influence, strengthening China's position as a global player. China needs a vast transfer of knowledge

and access to foreign technology, and education, especially at the university level, constitutes its ideal source (Mańkowska, 2020, p. 151-160). China has a long-term experience in combining science and industry and organising the transfer of knowledge. OBOR is not the first global-Chinese plan and will probably not be the last. Already in 2017, at the initiative of the Middle Kingdom, the Asian Universities Alliance (AUA) was established in Central Asia and North Africa, with research centres in Astana, Kazakhstan, or even in Casablanca. Under the OBOR plan, the scope and scale of cooperation has changed, interpreted on Chinese terms². The OBOR plan in the context of university education envisages strengthening of connections between the countries, new cooperation and bilateral agreements, talent scouting – new scholarships and abroad trips to China, cooperation between educational institutions and enterprises, creation of institutions for the acquisition of double diplomas, establishment of Polish-Chinese consortia, foundations dedicated to science, facilitating cooperation (Mańkowska, 2020). The said cooperation between universities is to follow the principles of maintaining the Asian framework, as well as taking into account local politics. Another mega-strategy involving the internationalisation of education among its member states is the alliance of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), a powerful economic lobby group in today's competitive global environment.

Summary

Currently, the policies governing the internationalisation of education focus on how to attract students, increase the number and scale of students studying in China. The Chinese are particularly interested in attracting knowledge and skills capital from abroad. The whole strategy behind the initiatives mentioned and described above shows that the plan has been prepared and will be implemented. China thinks and acts globally, with momentum and international reach, yet, there still remains a lack of detailed discussion and attention to the effect of implementing local solutions. China focuses on macro-scale projects, which introduce alliances and international solutions regulated directly by China itself (e.g. OBOR), or transnationally (e.g. the BRICS alliance), where China is one of the main players. Local solutions and

² I analysed whether OBOR will shape higher education globally in 2020 in an article titled *Chiński plan OBOR. Czy Chiny zmienią edukację wyższą na świecie?* [eng. *China's OBOR Plan. Will China Change Higher Education Worldwide?*] Details are provided in the bibliography.

problems (on micro-scale), especially in less developed areas, are neglected or overlooked. In international education policy, the Chinese authorities look for opportunities to influence the global academic scene and seek new and profitable ways to trade knowledge and to educate.

The analysis of the history of higher education development indicates that China has been able to benefit from foreign solutions, knowledge and skills in the past, and the current ongoing internationalisation strategy illustrates that such activities will be continued, on Chinese terms, however.

Current internationalisation measures fail to provide for the needs of even, economic progress. Regulations should include qualification standards to be met by candidates for abroad studies, transparent rules and fair qualification of international programmes at all universities in the country. It is within the interest of the state to coordinate internationalisation processes throughout its entire territory, not just in the selected areas at the highest ranking universities.

Accumulated internal problems, not solved in time, will certainly lead to an accumulation of difficulties. Some of these were referred to in the body of the article – fraudulent networking, engagement in cooperation only at the level of negotiations, illegal educational mediation, etc. There is a need for politicians and scientists to look at local solutions, to agree on a plan of action focused on ways in which internal inequalities in internationalisation processes within China can be affected.

From my personal point of view of undertaking international cooperation on an individual level – as an assistant professor (engaging in projects with Chinese entities) and at university level (creating hybrid studies, so-called joint studies, etc., preparing educational offers for Chinese students), it seems important to familiarise oneself with political trends and existing cultural differences. Chinese institutions and centres are currently looking for solutions, also in Poland. Moreover, they will be looking for cooperation opportunities that, in European terms, do not necessarily fall within the same research and teaching ethical framework, which is something I would also like to indicate.

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