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Chinese Universities: Capital for the Beijing Consensus?

Alan Hunter

Introduction

The higher education sector of any country is of critical importance to its future economy, society, defense, and international standing. This paper specifically interrogates how China's leaders may be trying to shape perceptions abroad through educational institutions. How is the shift in soft power priorities playing out in the university sector? And are cultural changes driving policy changes, despite China's embedded top-down structures?

China now has global outreach, mirroring its status as the world's second largest economy. In recognition of its growing soft power, scholars have identified the emergence of a 'Beijing Consensus' or 'China Model' that is more attractive to many nations than the 'Washington Consensus' and US model of democracy. Meanwhile the Chinese government has greatly increased its defense expenditure, part of its strategy of building 'comprehensive national power.'¹

This China Model embodies cultural strategies. The first is the continuing deployment of cultural nationalism as legitimacy for the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).² The state has traditionally been a cultural as well as political hegemon, a heritage appropriated by the CCP. A second strategy is more innovative: the current leadership promotes 'convergence' as a way of bootstrapping China into a new, super-developed economy. Convergence particularly emphasizes synergies between cutting-edge IT, manufacturing, and cultural creativity. Whether or not formally students or staff, people participating in this 'convergence' are products of the university sector and often in close contact with it.³

In this context, China has radically reformed its university sector. Some key features have been the upgrading of research, increase of student numbers, and internationalization. These strategies are implemented by a mix of conventional state funding, new market mechanisms, decentralization, and investment in capabilities and standards.⁴ In terms of international perceptions, the Chinese government expects its universities to contribute to its priorities in four key areas: 1/ conducting world-class research; 2/ becoming an education hub for the developing world; 3/ training the next generation of Chinese 'global citizens'; and 4/ jumpstarting the convergence economy. After a discussion of the macro-context, this paper analyses these four strategic areas and their potential for success, concluding with policy recommendations.

International and domestic agendas: The Beijing Consensus and stability

International analysts, including the US Department of Defense, seem to concur about the grand lines of China's core strategic concerns. First, the Chinese government is committed to maintain national security, regime security, and territorial integrity.⁵ Recent years have seen a rapidly escalating growth of defense industry procurement in China, which is capitalized through markets and creating huge profits for the armaments industries. Detailed information about the R&D processes of the Chinese military is not made public, but they surely rely heavily on the cohorts of students emerging from

China's advanced research universities. As one example, Reuters published an account of alleged close collusion between the prestigious Shanghai Jiaotong University and the Chinese Army in cyber-espionage against US targets.⁶ There are numerous allegations of cyber-attacks against military and civilian targets in the US and other countries; doubtless many cases have close connections with universities. Second, China seeks energy and resource security through trade, especially in long-term partnerships with resource-rich countries. The simple equation is that, to maintain prosperity and stability, China needs more natural resources than are found inside its borders. It has a good endowment of coal and rare earths but poor resources in oil, metals and other essential materials relative to size and population. Failure to acquire sufficient energy and raw materials would very likely lead to much greater poverty, unemployment, and instability.

China therefore pursues long-term resource supply contracts with supplier nations. China wants excellent relations with these and other countries for at least two further reasons: first, to create markets for its manufactured goods; second, to form a global network of nations that turn their attention to Beijing rather than Washington. This would support the characteristics attributed to the China Model by commentators: a market capitalism, where the state holds more assets than in most Western economies; political stability achieved through an authoritarian, non-voted government that nonetheless achieves a level of legitimacy; demographic control; and constant pragmatic experimentation.

The domestic priorities of the CCP also seem relatively clear in general terms. The party wants to maintain its hold on power indefinitely, without permitting any legitimate opposition. Its main strategies are therefore presumed to be the achievement of political stability through legitimacy, based on public perception of the CCP as the 'least bad' available option. Moreover, the CCP seems committed, if not to a voting democracy, then at least to a system of government with less corruption, more transparency, consultation, accountability and access to public goods. E-government portals and frequent internet or mobile-phone-based interactions between citizens and public bodies enhance these trends.

Economic performance and living standards are likely to be key in determining political loyalties. China's spectacular growth in GDP until now has been largely due to traditional manufacturing and agricultural sectors – for example, in clothing, footwear, and vehicles. However, a massive manufacturing sector also brings disadvantages. First, the relatively low level of technology required for much of it can be easily emulated in countries such as Indonesia, which have lower labour costs. Second, manufacturing can cause pollution, and environmental improvements are supposed to be a key delivery target of the current leadership. Third, the advanced economies are rapidly moving towards production based on IT including forms of artificial intelligence (AI) linked with robots, sensors, and other new hardware. These new 'products' are intensely linked to cultural creativity, not to the routinization of the industrial age. China is obliged to join the small number of nations capable of such emerging technologies if it is to avoid being locked into a low-profit, high-impact manufacturing economy dependent on foreign R&D.

From the above analysis we could identify the four somewhat contradictory implications for Chinese universities mentioned in the Introduction. These are discussed in the following sections.

World-class research

To maintain its trajectory, China must become a world leader in military technology and in sectors directly related to the new economy such as material science and AI. Only significant advances in these areas will allow it to close the currently very large gap with the USA in defense technologies, and to manage its resource deficits.⁷ Evidently, it will need to upgrade its elite universities to produce the necessary R&D; hence, the government has concrete initiatives to assist key institutions like Peking University start to rival the top US and European research universities. Within a decade they plan to host significant numbers of Nobel Prize winners, technical patents, and scientific breakthroughs.

A World Bank report provides a detailed explanation of what is meant by ‘world-class university’ and how governments may achieve them. Three key components are concentration of talent, abundant resources, and appropriate governance, all of which are priorities of the current strategy.⁸ These aspirations have been articulated by Party leaders, translated into educational policies, and implemented by universities, local governments and ministries.

Two flagship programmes, the ‘211 Project’ and the ‘985 Scheme’, which both started in the late 1990s, raised standards across the whole higher education sector through massive investments. This process was further refined in 2009 with the launch of ‘C9’, a grouping of just 9 top universities like Peking University and Tsinghua University that now receive about 10% of China’s entire research budget and produce 20% of its academic papers. These investments are analysed in a recent specialist publication *China's Rising Research Universities: A New Era of Global Ambition* which documents these trends, and also provides case studies of the transformation of four leading Beijing universities.⁹ Analyzing new data on the sector’s modernization and expansion seems to me a very important task for international scholars.

In 2013-2014, four Chinese universities (two in Beijing and two in Hong Kong) were classed in the top 100 worldwide in the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings. Several others are in the top 300 or so, a significant achievement for a country that had fundamentally wrecked its educational system during the Cultural Revolution period ending only in 1978. Given the high levels of investment and strong platform for growth, we may expect many more to be in the top 200 within a decade.

Global education hub

A study makes the important point that

China seems to be alone among lower-income economies in having focused its educational transformation in recent years on the tertiary educational sector ... Previous efforts in other countries to use educational transformation as a mechanism either to maintain high growth or to initiate episodes of high growth have generally been regarded as unsuccessful, but those efforts focused on primary and secondary education.¹⁰

The authors point out some global implications of successful reforms: they allow China to rival the US in doctoral studies, and also make an education hub for students from Africa and Asia. The Chinese government has presumably calculated that investment in scholarships for developing countries is likely to bring long-term benefits in terms of increasing understanding and sympathy for China among the next generation of political and business leaders.¹¹ By the end of 2013, there were over

35,000 African students in China (many of them beneficiaries of Chinese government scholarships) with numbers increasing rapidly.¹² This trend could anticipate a more China-friendly elite across the developing world, following the current generation of ‘pioneers’.¹³ We also see a growing focus on new partners such as Russia, Central Asia, and Korea. China may become a preferred destination for education, alongside more traditional providers such as the USA, the UK and France.

The ‘Confucius Institutes’ form an interesting case study of some dilemmas in this agenda. These institutes, while not universities themselves, provide an entry-point to Chinese education for foreigners. On the one hand, they have certainly promoted access to the study of Mandarin overseas, which must deter many potential applicants for study in China. On the other hand, the benefits are slow and uncertain compared to easy wins from big contracts for oil and other resources. Moreover, Western critics discern sinister motives such as spying on Chinese students or the undermining of academic freedom at partner institutions.¹⁴ The official Chinese position is that the Confucius Institutes are non-threatening ‘soft power’ outreach, comparable to the British Council or Alliance Francaise. While some certainly suffer from lack of experience, internal rivalries, corruption, ministerial in-fighting, and other ills familiar to institutions struggling within an essentially bureaucratic power structure, I have seen no evidence that they are specifically linked to espionage or illegal practices. The Confucius Institutes thus embody tensions between Party controls and the priority of securing positive international endorsement, issues discussed in more depth in a paper on religion and culture in China’s foreign policy.¹⁵ The provision of scholarships to the developing world may be seen in a similar light: surely one could find examples of misuse or undue influence here and there, but overall they seem no more sinister than scholarship programmes offered by other countries.

Global citizens

China needs an increasingly cosmopolitan workforce for business; and increasingly to represent China in an ever-growing number of organisations, including the UN and the World Bank. China needs to communicate with the rest of the world, and for that its citizens should be competent in foreign languages, embedded in digital networks, and confident in international settings. The universities of Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities are key to the rapid development of networked communications. The traditional Leninist media in China were a form of monologue. They transformed into dialogue only when obliged to respond to a variety of news sources, to the public, and to competition within the sector; still, news management was largely in the hands of ‘gatekeepers’ such as editors, censors, and proprietors. Now, however, almost the whole of Chinese society engages in an infinite complexity of discussion between citizens, elites, on- and off-line communities, and businesses using different forms of media and technology.

So, while Chinese universities are indeed ‘about’ future Nobel prizes and patents, they are also about communication. As the stream of non-Chinese students to China grows, future netizens of Africa and parts of Asia will very likely find ways to tap into the resources of the Chinese internet as well as Western media, adding to the communicative strengths of the ‘Beijing consensus’.

At the same time, we should not forget the equally committed investments in defense capabilities and the possibility that the Chinese ‘military-industrial complex’ may become increasingly assertive. It may well maintain pressure on Chinese politicians to strengthen loyalty to the nation state; at the same

time, they need to educate the well-qualified Chinese professionals who will become active in the global economy and international organisations. There are certainly tensions between the academic freedoms needed to generate new ideas, and the demand for conformity. In China these tensions are exacerbated by the advanced sophistication of the netizen community, which is now strong enough to subvert state attempts at hard controls. In the interests of at least a kind of ‘soft conformity’, the government might well prefer a large proportion of its best scholars to be educated in China rather than outside.

Perry argues that the CCP continues to be very effective at this kind of cultural governance: she concludes that ‘decades of inventive and intensive cultural positioning and patronage on the part of the CCP have paid off handsomely.’ Some kind of ‘communicative democracy’ exists in China, but censorship and, perhaps more importantly now, self-censorship are still strong.¹⁶

The ‘convergence’ agenda

The cultural sector is thus far from shaking off the legacy of censorship, media manipulation and conformity. Yet at the same time, authorities acknowledge the urgent need to move from ‘copied in China’ to ‘created in China’. Until recently the great majority of Chinese products were either clones of successful foreign brands, or were manufactured domestically after outsourcing design work to other countries. Amongst other issues, this has led to weak recognition outside China of leading domestic brands. Given restrictions, how can China nurture the highest quality of cultural productions in the ultra-free realms of digital and post-digital media? It poses a dilemma for the CCP to manage a balance between the release of creativity and academic freedoms with controlled, non-political participation in public life.

The state in China has a long tradition of deep intervention in economic life, reflected currently in the idea of ‘convergence,’ which broadly means the cross-fertilization of new technologies and cultural creativity. There are numerous innovations in digital media used by the vast number of netizens in China who micro-blog, upload videos, and share user-generated materials. Key features include synergies between advanced IT, manufacturing, and creativity with the aim of bootstrapping the country to a post-industrial, IT, and AI economy. If successful, these developments will certainly become an important international demonstration of the ‘China model’.

The robotics industry provides a good illustration of China’s urgent need for bootstrapping, and also its capacity to progress. In 2012, China had only 11 robots per 10,000 workers in manufacturing industries; Japan had 332 and South Korea 396. Moreover, although China bought one in five robots sold globally, 90% of them were imported from overseas (primarily Japan) and even domestically produced robots relied on imported components. There are deficits in speed, precision, sophistication and branding of Chinese products in the sector, compared to its competitors.¹⁷ It has, logically, become a high priority for the higher education and research institutions to bridge this gap. The government appears to be investing on several fronts in high-risk, blue-sky, and innovative research work in robotics that will compete head-on with advanced robotics design in Japan and the USA.¹⁸ This project demands the participation of thousands of young scientists graduating through Chinese elite universities, and also the recruitment of foreign specialists. It seems to be paying off – according to a Forbes report in September 2014, Shanghai and Beijing come 1st and 3rd respectively in a large survey of international business leaders predicting the most important cities worldwide for technological innovation.¹⁹ Shanghai especially scores high for its concentration of research, digital

media, entertainment, fashion, finance and arts: a typical ‘convergence’. According to the survey, China is predicted to be a world leader in technological innovation within as few as four years.

Conclusion: Communication in an authoritarian context

Many key factors seem to be intimately related to the future of higher education in China: demand for national ultra-high-tech military capabilities; a post-industrial economy based on AI and other innovations; a new model of multilateralism by-passing US supremacy; and a charm offensive including media, soft power, education, and elite engagements. There are policy implications for Chinese and non-Chinese actors.

For the US and other ‘Western’ countries:

Overall orientation should be close engagement with the Chinese HE sector. We have some illustrious examples of good practice, for example the Hopkins-Nanjing Center which celebrates its 30th anniversary next year.

Young Westerners should be encouraged to study in China, and if possible in Chinese.

Joint effort to enhance the education of young scholars is one of the best investments for a more harmonious world. Student mobility in all directions is likely to reduce prejudice and stereotyping, and to increase international co-operation.

We need a firm stance on our core values, but also sensitivity to the inherent constraints faced by academics in China. We must have ‘red lines’, for example no compromise on issues of free speech within US institutions; we do not necessarily expect that colleagues in China enjoy the same privilege.

For China:

Higher Education in China is on a successful reform trajectory; it is an integral core component of ‘China Rising’. The more investment, the better for China.

The sector is making a great contribution by education partnerships with foreign universities, even in countries like Japan and Taiwan which have admittedly sharp political tensions with the PRC. All international links should be supported.

Scholarships for students from developing countries are an excellent investment for those countries, and also for China’s soft power.

A post-industrial economy just does not function without free creativity. Wherever there is a legacy of stifling bureaucracy, forward-looking politicians and educationalists should try to mitigate it.

Despite some predictable obstacles, the reform of the sector appears to be proceeding successfully. The next generation of Chinese academics should have ample opportunities for advanced study within China as well as outside. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of young foreigners may study at Chinese universities in the coming decades. Overall, the university sector would be making a significant contribution to China's pursuit of a better reputation and a stronger presence in the world. While we may anticipate major contributions in mainstream disciplines such as medicine, there is likely to be a special emphasis on the 'convergence' and communicative priorities of new generation IT, robotics and other advanced manufacturing, and cultural creativity. Such developments may intuitively seem to us subversive of established bureaucracies and media; it will be interesting to see how the Communist Party manages emerging challenges.

This paper argues that overall, the higher education sector appears to be successfully generating more positive international perceptions of China, though doubtless it has a long road to travel before directly competing with the USA. Lively technology and culture synergies, endorsed albeit cautiously by Party leaders, are likely to make a strong contribution to China's soft power, especially among younger generations of foreigners from developing countries. However, I have also

noted some inherent dilemmas: how to maintain stability at home, while promoting support for China internationally; how to release the creative energies of a sophisticated, networked population, without legitimizing political opposition; how to balance the demands of the military-industrial complex with the non-military economy. Soft power, higher education, cultural creativity, and government by networked negotiation between interest groups all imply communication rather than rigidly imposed authoritarianism. If China can indeed achieve new forms of communication within the higher education sector and beyond, it would be a tremendous cultural and social capital for the 'Beijing consensus'.

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