

China's Repositioning its Higher Education Internationalization and Implications

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Received 06-11-2024

Revised 08-11-2024

Accepted 25-12-2024

Published 26-12-2024



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Abstract

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and collapsing foreign relations, concerns are rising about the tension in collaborations between China and the West overlooking the implication of China's latest initiative to 'open up' its education as part of its One-Belt-One-Road internationalization strategy. The initiative reflects China's new nationalism in repositioning its education internationally especially the higher education section, which signals a shifting focus from production capability building to soft power expansion. We finish this paper with a highlight on the initiative's multifaceted future implications concerning both China's domestic, including disabled students' population, and international communities.

Keywords: One Belt One Road, New Nationalism, Higher Education Internationalization, National Confidence, Disability Equality, the June Opinion

New Nationalism: China's Education 'Silk Road' and the June Opinion:

On 18 June 2020, eight Chinese government bodies co-issued the latest initiative to accelerate and expand the 'opening up' of Chinese education (referred to as the June Opinion; see Ma & Roy, 2024). Although issued amidst the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the impermanence of international students' reduced mobility (Hesselbart 2020) with a subtle 'greasing effect' over ongoing international tensions, June Opinion is nonetheless a probable progression following

past developmental trajectories. Accompanying its economic reform, China's education internationalisation has moved on to several focuses since the 1970s (Yang 2014), which respectively emphasise awareness in the 1980s, quality in the 1990s, 'going global' in the 2000s (Wang 2013), and 'world-class universities' in the most recent decade (Song 2018). In these processes, there has been a gradual shift from subsidising education import to promoting education export. Illustratively, this can be seen from the changing tone of the policies of 'inviting in' (请进来) and

'going out' (走出去). The former, initially focused on importing foreign policies, practices, experts, and institutions, has been substantially enriched by sponsorships for foreign students to study in China. During this the latter, initially anchored on supporting Chinese academics and students studying abroad, has been revised to also invest heavily in top Chinese universities for international presence and prestige. In accommodating these developments, China's education internationalisation has seen uneven developments especially in different universities, regions, and educational sectors, widening structural social divides.

Nonetheless, the general significance of the June Opinion lies in the solid footing in further aligning China's education internationalization as a cultural exchange aspect of its One-Belt-One-Road (一带一路) internationalisation strategy (hereafter referred to as 'Silk Road'). It sets a tactically readier stage for China's new nationalism through internationalizing Chinese (higher) education, which has been backed by more favourable policies, government funds, and cloud-based Chinese education platforms. The latest statistics released in 2022 by the Ministry of Education show that international students in China come from 195 countries, an increase of 35% compared to a decade ago (Xu, 2022). China has established official collaboration and exchange programs with 181 countries, 58 of which have arrangements in place for mutual education recognition with over 300 collaborative agreements. By the end of 2021, the Chinese language has become part of the national education system in 76 countries.

Officially, the June Opinion consists of four 'key deployments', including deepening educational reforms, cultivating globally competitive talents, achieving high-quality domestic developments, and contributing to international communities through Chinese education governance schemes (see Ma & Roy, 2024). While these deployments resemble China's previous internationalization strategies, the June Opinion proposes two new fronts for internationalization. First, the vocational education training (VET) is included in its

international higher education agenda which has learned from the German dual VET system. On this front, the June Opinion has a shifting focus for VET to increase the China's international influence via VET cooperation, rather than emphasizing the traditional goal for enhancing its domestic production capacity. The second front deals with China's compulsory education, which aims to popularize and legitimate China's comprehensive education model including moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetical, and labor dimensions ('德智体美劳全面教育'). In summary, the June Opinion attempts a more aggressive outward educational/cultural expansion by intensifying internal growth. While it has been largely overlooked in Western academic discourses, the initiative has sent a clear message to China's domestic audience: education internationalization is being repositioned to 'tell China's good stories and tell them well'.

National Confidence and China's New Nationalism:

Despite recent skepticism on whether China is 'decoupling' its higher education from the West (Altbach & de Wit, 2023), China's education internationalization strategy is moving toward mainstreaming its sociocultural values and political ideologies on the global stage. Against international students' reduced mobility and China's contentious global image, the June Opinion officially crowns China's international education with 'Chinese characteristics' (Ma & Roy, 2024). The nebulous concept is the identifying feature of China's economic reform (Wu, 2004). In the context of China's international education, it is especially intended for courses designed to cater for audiences outside China, including online platforms (Ma et al., 2022). Thus, China's signals on restricting international academic collaborations should not be read as a regressive step in internationalizing Chinese education. On the contrary, these are part of the Chinese government's effort to resist ideopolitical and sociocultural influences from the West (Wang et al., 2023). The colonial project of 'modernity' (Mignolo, 2007) has been taken uncritically by

contemporary China when importing Western policies and practices, despite censorship and local adaptations. From this viewpoint, the June Opinion can be seen as both an international strategy and a domestic imperative, in the sense that it sets a cornerstone for domestic initiatives to boost educational confidence, particularly in redefining the understanding of concepts such as 'modern' and 'advanced'. Importantly, there is an implicit intention to reshape the understanding of progress in education and society to suit China's own political, social, and economic goals, diverging from Western perspectives that have traditionally held sway in academia. For the international audience, it serves as a timely reminder that the very notion of 'science', an often taken-for-granted paradigm in the West (Harding, 1994), was a cultural import that suppressed indigenous knowledge traditions in China at least in higher education. It was imposed on its society in its reacting pragmatically to the impending invasion and war during the Qing dynasty. The pragmatism in China's taking in of Western thoughts is reflected in a well-known and often-used phrase in Chinese 'If you fall behind, you will get beaten' ('落后就要挨打'). The phrase was originally used as a political slogan to highlight the imperative of making economic progress in catching up with the West, which is now widespread in Chinese society as an individual and collective reminder of working hard and staying competitive. The imperial logic embedded in the phrase reflects the context when China was being invaded and the concept of 'science' was instrumentally adopted in Chinese society as the quickest way to stop 'falling behind'. This is why that parallel with 'If you fall behind, you will get beaten', at least historically, is another phrase 'Sciences saves the nation' ('科学救国'). While the cultural complexities of 'modernization' in contemporary Chinese society deserve a separate piece on its own, it suffices the present purpose to conclude that the June Opinion unambiguously signals China's eagerness, if not readiness, to extend its global footprint and enhance international influence through higher education, serving as a gateway for cultural export.

It has been well-specified among Western media that China is gradually expanding its soft power to boost its international status as a scientific powerhouse. This conjecture aligns with the views of Chinese academics who have similarly interpreted a recent change in publication requirements. This involves the inclusion of domestic publications as a criterion for applicants for one of China's most prestigious awards, the National Natural Science Award. As a result, millions are being spent on cultivating home-grown journals, while Chinese universities now place more scrutiny on ranking English journals, many of which have established their own rankings and 'blacklists' (Cyranoski, 2018; Wang et al., 2023). China is using these initiatives to enhance its 'national confidence' (民族自信, literally translated as 'ethnicity confidence'). The June Opinion emphasizes this by heightening the need to cultivate Chinese academics and students who are studying abroad to become 'stern protectors of patriotism'. The explicit aim to increase Chinese education's international influence with a 'culturally confident' stance somewhat puts its academics in a difficult position. China's education involves ideopolitical work, including President Xi's instruction for Chinese world-class universities to follow a correct political direction (Ma et al., 2022). The ideological agenda of higher education in China and the asserted commitment to value-free science in the West inherently clash. Since Western philosophies and methodologies dominate academic discourses including publication, Chinese academics are placed at the forefront of conflicting ideologies between China and the West (e.g., Li & Lash, 2023). This dilemma mirrors the tension between China's intensifying new nationalism through boosting national confidence against Western domination in higher education including knowledge production.

Concluding Remarks:

As the implicit nature of the June Opinion is in seeking an ideopolitical maneuver in its education, conflicts are inevitable between Western and Chinese stakeholders as well as among Chinese academics and students, especially given the

historical background of Chinese higher education. This creates uncertainty and an interesting arena for further observations. China is unlikely to diminish its ongoing efforts to mainstream its cultural influences globally under its current leadership, while the Anglosphere remains steadfast in its commitment to maintaining a prominent world position. In China's further pursuit of its 'Silk Road' with the strongly emphasised branding of Study in China in June Opinion, these systematically produced uneven regional developments and education inequalities are likely to persist or even grow, especially in light of the fact that foreign students by far prefer Chinese universities in more developed regions (Textor, 2020). Most notably, Beijing is home for eight such elite universities including Qinghua University and Beijing University, hosting more degree offering HEIs ($n = 68$) than the total of five northwestern provinces ($n = 65$) which together occupy more than half of China's territory nurturing well over threefold of Beijing's population, i.e., Gansu (22), Xinjiang ($n = 18$), Inner Mongolia ($n = 17$), Tibet ($n = 4$), and Qinghai ($n = 4$) (MoE's 2020).

Perhaps more concerning, China's neoliberal reform has also been a strong thrust for systematic education inequalities (Zhang & Kanbur, 2005) with regard to the accessibility of basic education in China, whereby northwest regions are likewise significantly worse off (Gao et al. 2016). In the same vein, urban-rural education disparities have been increasing since China's earlier globalisation where rural areas receive significantly less funds (Knight & Shi, 1996, Wang 2011).

We should reemphasise that concurrent with the 'world-class universities' movement are both invisible Chinese children with specific learning differences lacking established diagnostic procedure in Chinese schools (Ma, 2020) and students with disabilities in higher education who have yet to appear in MoE's official reports. In the same year that China deployed its Double First-Class University scheme, its Regulations on the Education of People with Disabilities (2017) was also amended. Currently in effect, this legislation is guided by an outright 'rehabilitation' orientation

strongly encouraging students with disabilities to take vocational training after compulsory education. There is currently no legal provision for accessibility or adjusted learning in higher education considering China has just issued a guideline to specially address these issues in compulsory education (see MoE 2020a). The lack of higher learning opportunities for students with disabilities is alarming, especially since enhancing their participation in higher education has been proven to be very slow and difficult even in more developed countries (see Ryan 2011, Shevlin et al., 2004, Parker and Myers 1995). With June Opinion showing a determined direction driven by ambitious goals regarding world university rankings and global influence, the neglect on the higher learning of students with disabilities will remain (if) without a redirection of China's education strategies, whose underrepresentation in turn is expected to persist for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, with June Opinion's deepened commitment to internationalise China's education, there is hope that international communities, in particular multilateral organisations concerning disadvantaged children, may exert stronger forces in (re)shaping and (re)directing China's education development *for* education equality and inclusion. In particular, on June Opinion's featured advocacy of 'aiding education equality' and 'reducing regional gaps' by raising teaching capital in the middle and west regions specifically targeting the quality of teaching in foreign languages (MoE 2020b), there needs to be a potent reminder that particularly in those regions the issue of education equality, and generally in China education inclusion, should be prioritised more robustly.

For China, there is a long and challenging way ahead in 'catching up' with the developed world where 'state education has a singular and foundational role in the promotion of equality and human rights' (Chaney, 2011, 431). For the rest of the world, it was about time that we discussed China's progressively enthusiastic 'Silk Road' more reflectively not only for the present of Chinese children but also the future of children elsewhere. We end this paper by calling Anglo-American universities, which still hold stronger

bargaining powers, to start to establish/reform partnerships in China thinking about the concerned children as children, *not* Chinese children: who, with or without disabilities and coming from a socioeconomically or otherwise deprived background, deserve to be given a fair chance in education and life just as much as their home students.

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