

# Exploring the Role of Higher Education in the Formation of Civic and Social Attitudes in Contemporary China

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# OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

1. Research Rationale and the Chinese Context

2. Existing literature on the role of HE in civic engagement and social attitudes;

Gaps in our knowledge on China

3. Data collection, methodology, ethical issues

4. Preliminary Findings and Concluding remarks

# 1. Research Rationale

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## Expansion of HE and public/private goods

Global expansion of recruitments to HE and Mass higher education systems (Marginson, 2016)

### ❖ **Public good:**

- ❖ Benefit national economies-High-value, high-skilled, knowledge-based sectors – national competitiveness (Brown et al., 2010);
- ❖ Social outcomes: social cohesion, trust and tolerance (McMahon, 2009; Putnam, 2000)

### ❖ **Private benefits**

- ❖ Economic benefits (the wage premium/the private rate of return) are generally positively related to the levels of education:
- ❖ Tertiary educated adults-1.5 times as much on average as those with only upper secondary level qualifications (OECD, 2013)
- ❖ Employment opportunities (Liu et al., 2016)

# Research Rationale continued...

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## Expansion of HE and the levels of inequality

- ❖ While the expansion of HE seen as a democratising process, some argue that differentiated mass HE may even be contributing to greater inequality (Carnoy 2011).
- ❖ At the societal level, inequality in income and wealth (Piketty 2013; Esping-Andersen 2005)
- ❖ In HE, hierarchies (institutions and fields)-pronounced (Liu et al. 2016; Shavit et al. 2007)→the increasing differentiation in the labour market outcomes (Green and Zhu 2010; Reimer et al. 2008).

## inequality and Social Outcomes

- ❖ Extreme levels of inequality→a major challenge to social cohesion (Green et al., 2006, 2011);
- ❖ Also associated with negative social outcomes such as public health and well-being, social trust, political engagement, social mobility and (Pickett and Wilkinson 2010)

# China represents a case that illustrates attributes of both trends

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## The expansion of HE as all-embracing public good

- ✧ the massive recruitment, the production of graduates in sciences and engineering, the project of world-class (double first- class) universities, the rising global status (Liu, 2016; Marginson, 2016a; Brown et al., 2010; Carnoy et al., 2013).
- ✧ the expansion opportunities → meritocratic selection → an attractive pathway of upward social mobility, particularly for working class and peasant families (Liu 2016).

## The levels of inequality

- ✧ The deeper structural adjustments in the late 1990s → further privatisation and decollectivisation, a further withdrawal of state welfare provision (Ding et al. 2009; Berik et al. 2007);
- ✧ Main consequence → rising inequality in employment, income, and wealth in access to opportunity structures between different social groups, between different regions and between men and women (Liu 2017; Dong and An 2015; Goodman 2014).

# Research Objectives

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## **The Role of the State the role of universities as strongholds of Socialist ideology**

- ✧ Top-down citizenship;
- ✧ and political participation and engagement through socialisation (Wang, 2016).

## **? On the role of higher education**

- ✧ in shaping young people's sense of citizenship, particularly in regard to civic engagement;
- ✧ in shaping social attitudes in the increasingly unequal society (in terms of gender equality, homosexuality and the urban underclass) .

# 2. Conceptual Framework 1 - Civic engagement

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## Conceptualising civic engagement

Ehrlich (2000): both political and non-political activities and behaviors to improve the quality of living in a community by those who are ‘working to make a difference’ and ‘developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference’ (vi).

- ✧ First cluster: the relationships between education and civic behaviour such as political engagement and civic activities (Doyle and Skinner 2017; Green and Janmatt, 2016)
- ✧ Second cluster: on the implications of education on non-behavioural sets of knowledge and skills (Marginson, 2011; McMahan, 2009) ;
- ✧ Third subset: a wide range of civic and social outcomes of education such as trust, tolerance, low crime rates and healthy lifestyles, (Putnam, 2000)



# The Chinese Context 1-Civic engagement

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## The role of the state in shaping citizenship and identity through formal and informal channels of civic education

- ❖ Informal Education: ‘quality’ citizenship (Murphy, 2014;2004)
- ❖ Formal education, prior scholarship-curricular contents and reforms (Leung, 2006; Li, 2005):
  - ✧ Responds to shifting state priorities in ideology and in and social and geopolitical circumstances;
  - ✧ New addition- traditional Chinese values beginning in 2001 (Li, 2009)
  - ✧ A hybrid of political ideology and civic values beginning in 2007 with a new core course entitled ‘Moral Cultivation and Law’ (Tan, 2013) ;
  - ✧ CE in HE seems to follow the State’s top-down approach to instil the concept of socially and politically appropriate citizenship –to prioritise the codes of conduct and to regulate university students’ behaviour, thus producing obedient and law-abiding citizens ( Zhang, 2016).

# Gaps in existing research-Civic Engagement

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## **The majority of studies still focus on civic engagement through political activities and participation.**

- ✧ Li's empirical: civic activities among university students are often politically motivated, such as organised patriotic demonstrations (2009);
- ✧ Zhang's recent survey in Beijing: students are passive participants in political activities the constraints from the curricula and rigid ideology education (2016).
- ✧ Further reflected in Wang's recent study (2016): political participation and socialization in HE do not make a significant impact on graduates' political attitudes compared to non-graduates
- ✧ Gaps: Little about the civic and social dimension; a lack of adequate knowledge about civic behaviour, such as voluntary activities or participation in non-profit organisations.

# Conceptual Framework 2 – Social Attitudes

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## Social attitudes and tolerance

The level of social trust and tolerance in a society is developed through research on social cohesion, for instance, interpersonal, inter-/intra-group and institutional trust, tolerance for other individuals and cultures (Green and Janmatt 2011:6);

Inequality is central to understanding different patterns of social cohesion:

- ✧ inequality in income, wealth and opportunities undermines collective, shared values and identity in a society (Green and Janmatt 2011);
- ✧ Inequality among different individuals and social groups widens ‘social distance’ (Green and Janmatt 2011), thereby weakening social trust and tolerance.

Conceptually, social trust has identified the distinction between ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ (Nanestad, 2008; Welsh et al. 2007).

# The Chinese Context 2-Social Attitudes

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## **The visible inequality in income and wealth, along with invisible inequality in the opportunity structures-implications on changing social relationships.**

- ✧ the ‘out-group’ often refers to those from outside patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal kinship as well as outside the traditional cultural norms and values, for instance, women, LGTB groups, the migrant workers:
- ✧ Social attitudes about women and gender issues → dramatic shifts as a result of political movements and social transformations-qualitative and quantitative studies (Ding et al. 2009; Berik et al. 2007).
- ✧ Prior Existing literature on the legal and civil dimensions of homosexuality in the Chinese society → analysis of traditional culture and persistent Confucianism as the main explanations for the general lack of tolerance toward homosexuals (Lin et al. 2016; Chi and Hawk 2016; ).
- ✧ Research on the low trust between migrant workers and urban residents → their segregation in terms of housing, identity and socialization (Liu et al. 2017; Gu et al. 2016; Fu et al. 2010);

# Gaps in existing research-Social Attitudes

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**The majority of studies have considerable flaws in methodology .**

- ❖ These studies do not specify demographic characteristics of social attitudes:
  - ✧ we have little knowledge about the perceptions of highly educated youth on the migrant underclass;
  - ✧ Nor on young people with higher education qualifications and experiences and their attitudes regarding gender (in-)equality;
- ❖ The quantitative survey questions designed with dubious wording that failed to capture the attitudes towards these groups.
- ❖ Therefore we use in-depth individual interviews to explore the respondents' narratives on the impact of their advanced knowledge and higher education experiences on shaping their social attitudes

# Research Design and Data Collection

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## **In-depth, semi-structured interviews with young people from the birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999**

- Ethical Approval by King's Research Ethics on February 2017;
- We posted a research recruitment advertisement in Chinese via several social media outlets.
- A total number of 68 respondents selected randomly from different types of universities and fields of study;
- The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one and two and a half hours on average.
- All of the interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the respondents,
- All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese; interview data were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed in Chinese, and analysed in English.
- The students' identities and institutions were anonymized, and pseudonyms were coded instead.

# 3. Findings-Civic Engagement

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## *Encountering Civic Activities*

- ❖ The majority of interviewees- no regular contact with public associations;
- ❖ For those involved in social activities, the majority based on individual self-interests, including leisure, sports or the activities related to their study;
- ❖ For the majority of respondents, political activities-the most normalized pattern of civic engagement, ranging from the local Party/Youth League recruitment and events, to voluntarily promoting national products whilst boycotting foreign products, to writing online petitions for patriotic purposes.
- ❖ Interview sample 1

# Civic engagement-findings 2

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## **Voluntary engagement in associations that transcend individuals' interests and hobbies:**

Just over ten per cent of the respondents (8 out of 68) - charitable and volunteering activities, although not on a regular basis

- ✧ the Free Medical Service Association;
- ✧ the One-Tree-For-Life Team;
  
- ✧ Interview Samples 2,3,



# Civic Engagement-Discussion

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A fragile and inconsistent pattern of involvement linking themselves to the society and the state;

- ✧ to validate their vague sense of citizenship by re-affirming their patriotism and Party loyalty, or by imagining participation through politically charged petitions and sanctions.
- ✧ a small number-a sense of moral obligations and public responsibilities through charity work.
- ✧ However, the competition (HE+ employment) prevented from engaging on a regular basis.
- ✧ the competitive university culture -allow expressive individualism to thrive while undermining the collective consciousness of the public good and social issues.

# Social Attitudes-Findings

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## Gendered Attitudes and 'Angry' Feminists

- ✧ The majority of male respondents-the contemporary society is more or less equal between men and women (education, earnings, opportunities, and status): Interview Sample 4
- ✧ By contrast, the majority of female informants- women are still at a disadvantage in almost all respects, even with HE degrees: Interview Sample 5
- ✧ The overwhelmingly conservative attitudes towards feminism and feminist activists (Confucian cultural roots and the Communist legacy) Interview Sample 6

# Culturally or Scientifically Confined? Attitudes towards LGBT Groups

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- ✧ Most expressed their views as ‘none of my business’ or ‘don't support and don't disagree’ (DSDD); but did not support the legalization of same-sex marriages and civil rights;
- ✧ Female students -more tolerant than their male counterparts, and students from urban areas -more tolerant than those from the rural areas or small counties, which is consistent with the findings from (Lin et al. 2016; Chi and Hawk 2016);
- ✧ The majority had some reservations about homosexuality, particularly regarding the legalization of the same-sex marriages.

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- ✧ These attitudes vary from the typical social taboo (Interview Sample 7) to reflections on the complexity of deep-seated social inequality (Interview Sample 8);
- ✧ Gender-biased: ‘the liability of being a lesbian’ (Interview Sample 9);
- ✧ Some informants even seek to utilize the knowledge derived from their studies to justify their prejudices and discrimination (Interview Sample 10).

# Migrant Underclass

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The vast majority-recognised the importance contributions of migrant workers, lower income compared and their poor quality of life; poor/dangerous working environments; but divided in benefits and entitlements.

- ✧ The students from rural areas or ethnic minority backgrounds were more sympathetic and called for progressive policy implementations for social welfare;
- ✧ By contrast, urban students were comparatively less sympathetic and tended to reject social reforms on entitlements equal to those of the urban citizens;

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- ✧ Urban female respondents' narratives - 'soft' discriminations regarding linguistic and lifestyle barriers to integration into urban communities (Interview Sample 11);
- ✧ Urban male students seem to demonstrate 'hard' discriminations against legalising citizenship and providing social entitlements to the migrant underclass (Interview Sample 12);
- ✧ Respondents from rural areas: Xionghaizi (bear cubs); the effects of the lack of citizenship and job security on self-esteem, identity and a hardening sense of inferiority (Interview Sample 13);
- ✧ high-skilled' migrant workers (Interview Sample 14)

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

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- ❖ As our data revealed, university students and those with a university education demonstrate varying levels of positional trust and tolerance according to their socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics.
- ❖ Although past research has suggested a wide range of spill-over effects of public goods such as liberal citizenship, social cohesion, tolerance and trust associated with higher education, our research does not provide sufficient evidence to support the extension of this argument to the contemporary Chinese context.

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- ❖ Instead, we argue that higher education might be an alienating factor that creates further social distance between the privileged and the vulnerable social groups in two ways.
- ❖ At the contextual level, our findings highlight the toxic consequences of persistent rural-urban inequality on social attitudes.
- ❖ On the side of policy, our findings also suggest a vacancy in the civic dimension of higher education.



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