

Higher education and public good in East and West

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Introduction

The year 2020 has been marked not only by the Covid-19 pandemic but by the geopolitical tension between the United States and China. After almost four decades of cooperation, which began in shared opposition to Soviet Russia and a shared interest in China's modernisation, the leaders of each country have become strident critics of the other. The escalating war of words has led to disruptions in trade, communications and visas and now threatens the vast and fruitful cooperation between universities and researchers.

Much is at stake. Many US universities are in China, such as Stanford with its state-of-the-art centre at Peking University, and NYU with a branch campus in Shanghai. Chinese universities benefit from visits in both directions, from bench-marking using American partner templates and from the return of US-trained doctoral graduates. US-China links in science are focused in crucial areas like biomedicine and epidemiology, planetary science and ecology, engineering, materials, energy, cybernetics. In 2018 there were 55,382 science papers co-authored between the US and China, the largest country-to-country collaboration in world science, compared with 23,616 US-Germany papers and 10,664 Germany-France papers. Yet researchers with Chinese names holding dual appointments are being prosecuted for sharing US grant applications in China. Some US politicians even typecast all Chinese students and researchers as spies for the Communist Party of China (CPC). For many, academic freedom is simply incompatible with China's system. Meanwhile, there is pushback in China. Future openness in both directions is in doubt.

Across the US-China divide universities have much in common. At the same time, they are nested in cultural traditions and political systems that are very different, including relations between universities and government or state. There are divergent ideas about the public responsibility of higher education institutions, the

nature of academic duties and freedoms, and student learning and self-development. These differences are much older than the CPC's assumption of power in 1949.

Can East-West trust and cooperation be sustained and where necessary restored? Can universities maintain fulsome connections despite government sabre rattling? This will depend on the extent to which the similarities and differences between East and West social, political and university systems are understood. Especially, it depends on the evolution in the US and elsewhere of better international understanding of Chinese civilisation and within it higher education in China. Chinese language, ideas and institutions are less well known in the US and Europe, than the West is known in China.

This edition of *CGHE Research Findings*, which is derived from CGHE's research on the public good role of higher education and Lili Yang's doctoral project as part of that CGHE research, examines similarities and the differences between China and the US/UK through the lens of ideas about *the public role of higher education* – the contributions of universities additional to the economic benefits for graduates. This lens readily brings the national comparison into view. We consider not just current policies but key ideas in each tradition. The task is challenging because there are few concepts common to the two traditions.

Anglo-American tradition

There are two foundational differences between Chinese and English-speaking governance. One concerns state power. The other is about the individual.

Western governance is rooted in divided powers, the legacy of the post-Roman division between church and state, the medieval cities and merchants, and the evolution of the law and later electoral politics as both outside executive authority and in continuing relation with it. The medieval university also emerged as semi-independent, incorporated and partly separate from the church that nurtured it and the state that tried to control it. Between the two larger powers the university built a space for scholars and later for science. In modern times government reasserted itself but partial autonomy survived.

Despite periodic attempts to establish absolute rule, from feudal monarchs to twentieth century dictators, the Western state is essentially a limited state and reverts to that default position. Arguably, the Anglo-American political systems, in which the state is habitually distrusted, liberty is defined as freedom from state coercion, and the market is primary in relation to equality and solidarity, are one extreme of the Western tradition. In some European countries, the state is seen as synonymous with civil society whereas in the English-speaking polities, civil society is positioned outside the state. In the US even the public university is understood to be primarily part of civil society and the market.

The second difference between China and the West, especially the English-speaking West, is the normative primacy of the individual. Medieval culture imagined the self in a unique relation with God and this morphed into the rights-bearing property owning individual who stood alone, like John Proctor in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Later, democratic reformers defined the rights-bearing person as all adult men, then all adults. The Western reading of individual and society has many variants but

central to Anglo-American culture are the beliefs that the individual is separable from the society that provides her/him with conditions of existence, and self-realisation of the individual is the purpose of life. Individual liberty, within the 'private' sphere, takes priority over other social goods. Hence the essential role of higher education is to provide opportunities for individual fulfillment.

In mainstream economics, the atomised individual is associated with methodological individualism, 'a doctrine about explanation which asserts that all attempts to explain social (or individual) phenomena are to be rejected ... unless they are couched wholly in terms of facts about individuals' (Lukes, 1973, 110). In higher education policy, the main expression is human capital theory (Becker, 1964). Here higher education produces portable qualities in individuals, occupational knowledge and skills, which generate higher earnings and other economically defined benefits for those individuals. The larger contributions of universities to scientific knowledge, culture, health, civic education or better international relations are seen as 'externalities', marginal to the core purpose of individual benefits.

However, the doctrines of the limited state and the absolute primacy of the individual create a gap in explanation. What is the basis of shared human society? What is higher education's contribution to the public or common good? Economic theory's externalities and market 'spill-overs' are not large enough for this. This gap has led to ambiguity in the Anglo-American usage of the term 'public', which has three differing meanings.

The first meaning is the public/private dualism. 'Public' and 'private' are seen as two halves of a whole, excluding and opposed to each other, so that the analytical relation between them is determining. Higher education is either a public good or a private good. There are two kinds of public/private dualism. One is the distinction between state or government ('public') and market, household or individual ('private'). There is also the overlapping distinction in economic theory between private goods produced in a market, and public goods that cannot be profitably produced in a market because their benefits are not confined to individuals and must be financed by governments or philanthropy.

In Anglo-American higher education, basic research is seen as an economic public good and so needs government funding. There is no consensus about teaching, which is variously understood as a private or public good. However, it is widely agreed that the equal opportunity of individuals in higher education is a public good. Here the public/private dual intersects with the second meaning of 'public', meaning inclusive social relations, access, open communications or democracy, as in terms 'the public', or 'public opinion'. This understanding of 'public' has its origins not in England but in the eighteenth-century French and American republics. It is not opposed to 'private' or exclusive of the individual. Here the broader public role of universities moves from margins to the mainstream. Universities are expected to prepare graduates as citizens for all social roles and not just for the economy.

This broader open public realm shades into the third meaning of 'public good' as the shared and universal welfare. However, in the Anglo-American world a problem with the larger ideas of 'public' is that the term retains the connotation of limited government. The term 'common good', which includes non-government community building activities as well as the legal public sector, has been suggested in place of 'public good' (Locatelli, 2018).

Chinese tradition

The norms of Chinese governance have older roots, dating back to the Western Zhou dynasty (1046-772 BCE). The largest influence is the Confucian social system. There the spheres of individual, family, state and *tianxia* (all under heaven) are not ordered on the basis of a separation of powers and partial autonomy. Each smaller sphere (*si*) is nested in the larger sphere (*gong*). The person is nested in the extended family or kin group, and the family in the state. The state is not a limited Western state. It has a comprehensive mandate for order and prosperity and intervenes freely anywhere at will to further the collective good, *tianxia weigong*, a concept that is close to the 'public good' in the West.

In Imperial China, unlike the West, the state was always supreme in relation to the military, merchants, towns or religion, though local villages mostly ran themselves. Higher education was established not as autonomous from church and state but as a branch of statecraft, training officials for government service. Under the Song and Ming dynasties (960-1644 AD), it expanded to provide partly meritocratic opportunities to enter the gentry on a large scale.

The Confucian individual is not separate from society. She/he is a relational and role bearing individual. Compliance is achieved not primarily by state coercion but through shared values about right conduct established by education. Habits of self-cultivation and lifelong learning, the will to continually improve oneself, are installed early in the family. Confucianism values free will but distinguishes between the inner self centered on mortal autonomy, and social action by the outer self. Persons are obliged to restrain from enacting their will if there are negative social consequences. Self-determination is absolute but self-realisation is not.

There is no translation of the English terms public/private in Chinese but the priority given to the larger unit (*gong*) over the smaller unit (*si*) ensures the primacy of the collective and public over the individual and private. Where there was fundamental tension between public and private interests in Imperial China, the larger collective was supreme. This led to recurring arguments from scholars that the individual was insufficiently protected.

Confucian self-cultivation remains the cornerstone of personal development but much has changed, especially since 1949. The authority of the family has declined though it is still important. The party-state continues the comprehensive state but reaches more effectively into village, workplace and household. Geographical and social mobility, entrepreneurship, consumption and mass higher education have all enhanced the agency of the individual.

Modern higher education combines Western and Chinese features. Like the Imperial academies it serves national development but its academic forms and disciplines map have been closely influenced by Western and especially American examples. On the other hand, state-nested governance, with dual leadership by the university president and the party secretary, and the potent spirit of continuous self-improvement that animates both persons and institutions, are more traditional. Compared to many Western universities, China's institutions are closely regulated in leader selection, curricula and student numbers. Yet like Western universities they have corporate autonomy, and a large measure of academic freedom in the

sciences. Faculty shape their research and freely conduct foreign relations. China could not have become a global science powerhouse without disciplinary autonomy. On the other hand, the social sciences and the humanities are more politically constrained and faculty in China do not engage in American-style freewheeling public commentary.

Although modern China has a history of courageous intellectuals, when central political control is tightened there is limited scope for the American idea of the university as a centre of public discussion in civil society. Faculty value the social responsibility and status entailed in their role. They understand academic freedom as positive, in terms of their potential to contribute, rather than as negative, freedom from the state. Chinese universities are expected to contribute to local economies and communities. Faculties provide expertise to government at all levels, perhaps even more than in the West. Professors are expected to be critical of government policy when this is merited. The difference is that such exchanges take place behind closed doors, inside the party-state rather than open public settings.

Other notions of 'public' have more resonance in China. In interviews reported by Tian and Liu (2019) some faculty draw on the Western economic dualism of public/private to describe Chinese higher education as a 'quasi-public' good. Fees are charged and corporate universities compete for students, resources and status. Though this might suggest a US-China convergence, important differences remain. The same research shows that all of faculty, university leaders and government officials identify universities with the state, seeing them as unequivocally 'public' in sense of ownership, governance and mission. The regulated private sector is included within the ambit of this comprehensive 'public' domain.

Further, while in both the US and China higher education is valued to the extent it helps individuals to advance in social and economic terms, research on family and student attitudes in China (e.g. Chen, 2020) finds that achieving good Confucian personhood is as important as maximising human capital. The two are not seen as necessarily in conflict. The stronger individualism that has developed in China passes through a social system in which self-improvement, family and contributing to society remain strong motivators. In American terms, people in China want higher education that is both more 'private' and just as 'public' as before, a double ambition sustained by both state policy and popular culture.

Summary

How then do the higher education systems compare? In both, the individual is important. An attractive feature of China's system is that the student is nested in social context. What matters is not just private enrichment but also personal and social ethics. There is also a stronger sense of governmental responsibility, placing China closer to, say, the Nordic systems than to the US. But it is too easy for the state to dominate. The independent civil order is relatively weak, reducing the scope of the university as constructive critic. The US offers a richer potential for university engagement in civil society. However, the American state, potentially the corrective to inequality, is on the back foot, and methodological individualism in policy narrows university contributions to both individuals and society. These similarities and differences colour the way each system sees the other. They are longstanding and will not disappear. The key is to understand them and work with them.

This CGHE Research Findings is a short version of papers produced as part of CGHE's research project on the public good role of higher education in ten countries. Further discussion is in:

Marginson, S. and Yang, L. (2020). The role of higher education in generating 'public' and 'common' goods: A comparison of Sinic and Anglo-American political cultures. *CGHE Working Paper 52*. ESRC/OFSRE Centre for Global Higher Education, University of Oxford.

Marginson, S. and Yang, L. (forthcoming). China meets Anglo-America on the New Silk Road: A comparison of state, society, self, and higher education. In M. van der Wende, W. Kirby, N. Liu and S. Marginson (eds.), *China and Europe on the New Silk Road: Connecting universities across Eurasia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Marginson, S. and Yang, L. (in review). Individual and collective outcomes of higher education: A comparison of Anglo-American and Chinese approaches. Draft journal paper.

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