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Let's Get Real: China's Higher Education Development and Its Global Significance

This special issue celebrates the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening up. When the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping had embarked on the reform and opening up policy with a formal declaration at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in December 1978, much of the nation was struggling under dire poverty. Today, China has become an economic juggernaut with the world's largest foreign reserves (\$3.12 trillion), second-largest GDP (\$11 trillion), and third-highest levels of foreign direct investment (\$170 billion), as well as a leading manufacturer and exporter. Its share of the world economy grew from a mere 1.8% in 1978 to a staggering 18.2% in 2017 (Smith, 2018).

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The rapid development of China in the past four decades has set an example of hope for many other countries. Since the reform and opening up policy started, the world has witnessed over 700 million people rise above poverty levels. Just 40 years ago, China faced numerous challenges to overcome poverty nationwide. The nation succeeded in enabling hundreds of millions of Chinese people to achieve greater prosperity along with improved standards of living for all its citizens. Such an experience is particularly appealing to people in developing countries. For instance, Africa sees China as a shining example of how a nation can be so poor and grow to become so prosperous within such a short period of time.

While the momentous policy shift has been far-reaching and remarkably effective, the experimental integration of market elements into China's centrally planned economy is still an ongoing and dynamically evolving process. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in 2017 redefined the guidelines of China's official development path in the "New Era." This refined developmental strategy reflects domestic challenges as well as changing constellations at the global level and China's role in international institutions. There is a great need for more systematic, theory-guided analyses of China's socio-economic development path in retrospective and comparative perspective. What is behind the miraculous turnaround? What are the challenges ahead?

Higher education development is part of China's social transformations and progress. Despite China's long tradition in higher learning, the first modern higher education institution in China, Imperial Tientsin University, the later Peiyang University, was established in Tianjin in 1895. By 1949, there had been 205 universities. China copied the Soviet model in the 1950s to emphasize the construction of industry and the dominance of science and technology. A national adjustment reduced the number of comprehensive universities from 49 to 13, while university places in the humanities and social sciences decreased from 33.1% to 14.9% (Ouyang, 2004). Following political turbulences during 1957–1966, colleges and universities were even suspended, leaving an entire generation largely uneducated during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

As shown by the first article in this issue, China's reform and opening up began with resuming the national college entrance examination (commonly known as *gaokao*) in 1977. Educational order was restored in the name of reform. An academic degree system was introduced, with Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral degrees, and a postdoctoral research system. Chinese higher education institutions are divided into two sectors: regular and adult higher education. The regular sector is the mainstream including 4-year universities/colleges and 2/3-year specialized college programs, leading to a Bachelor's degree and diploma, respectively. The adult sector

includes 2- and 4-year diploma programs of study. Students in the regular sector are overwhelmingly full-time, while students in the adult sector are usually part-time.

Higher education used to be elite in China. In 1999, China expanded higher education admission dramatically until the late 2000s. By 2017, 37.79 million students were enrolled in China's 2,631 regular and 282 adult higher education institutions, with a gross enrollment rate of 45.7%. Annual postgraduate admissions reached 806,100, with 722,200 and 83,900, respectively at Master's and doctoral levels and a total of 2,639,600 postgraduate students. Teaching and administrative staff members reached 2,443,000 with 1,633,200 full-time teachers and a student-teacher ratio of 17.74:1. There were 747 private higher education institutions, admitting 747 Master's and 1,753,700 undergraduate and associate degree students, with a total enrolment of 6,284,600 (Ministry of Education, 2018a).

China takes an independent stance yet also engages vigorously with the outside world. Since the early 2000s, China has begun to pay more attention to exporting Chinese knowledge to the world. China is now one of the largest countries in hosting international students (for more detailed information, see the article by Wei and Hu in this issue). In 2008, those coming to China to study (223,499) historically outnumbered those leaving China to study abroad (179,800) (Su, 2009). International students in China reached 489,200 in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2018b). The two numbers have ebbed and flowed over time, but both keep growing.

China remains the world's top source of overseas students. In 2012/13, Chinese outbound students constituted nearly 29% of the global total of international students. Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that 399,600 Chinese students were admitted to overseas educational institutions in 2012 alone, which was 657 59,900 more than the previous year, making for 658 a 17.65% increase (Tang, 2013).

Meanwhile more foreign experts work in China. In 2011, the number reached 529,000, with 35% in higher education institutions. Chinese higher institutions recruit more and more returnees. It has already been the case that a doctorate from a prestigious foreign university is expected when applying for a post at China's best universities, although the bulk of Chinese academics are still trained domestically. Returnees are more likely to have higher positions. They also tend to be in science and technology fields. China Agricultural University, for example, has recruited 73 senior administrators since 2006, and 85% of them were directly hired from overseas. Two-thirds of its newly employed professors were returnees. According to a survey of 39 higher education institutions in Shanghai in 2012, 80% of their institutional leaders, deans, and departmental heads were returnees (*International Talent*, 2013).

Chinese universities make progress every year in global rankings. In the 2018 Academic Ranking of World Universities, China respectively has 3, 12, 23, 35, and 16 in the top 100, 200, 300, 400 and 500, featuring 51 times in the top 500 (Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, 2018). In the Times Higher Education World University

Rankings 2019, China has Tsinghua University as the 22nd and Peking University the 31st, respectively 4, 5, 2 and 11 in the top 200, 300, 500 and 600 (Times Higher Education World University Ranking, 2018). In the QS World University Rankings 2019, China has Tsinghua University as the 17th, Peking University the 30th, Fudan University the 44th, Shanghai Jiao Tong University the 59th, Zhejiang University the 68th, and University of Science and Technology of China the 98th, featuring 40 in the top 1000 (QS World University Ranking, 2018). While it needs to note the flaws with such ranking systems, it is fair to state that such impressive performances indicate, at least partially, the achievements Chinese universities have made.

Similar to the global significance of China's progress under reform and opening up, China's higher education development has historical implications for the Chinese nation and even beyond. Since the meaning of and approaches to the internationalization of higher education differ greatly from one society to another depending on how a society is located within the global system. Unlike those in Western industrialized societies, the experiences of most non-Western developing countries have been soul-stirringly painful, fundamentally due to the cultural conflicts between Western ideas and their own traditions in higher learning. Meanwhile, the unprecedented human connectedness and emerging ways of knowledge creation and dissemination entail learning across civilizations and cultures.

Such mutual intercultural learning lies at the core of the internationalization of higher education in a context of globalization. China's internationalization of higher education started as a humiliation in the 19th century. Its century-long diligent learning from the West seems to pay off. While China has not yet completely figured out how to combine its cultural traditions that remain omnipresent and ubiquitous in the society with Western values that underlie the function of modern universities, there appear to be emerging signs of hope that China's major universities could possibly help to strike a balance between Chinese and Western ideas of a university and, by extension, achieve a cultural combination that incorporates both Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. This would be a significant contribution to our understanding of the internationalization of higher education, with historical and global implications.

China is not just an emerging economy but has surely returned to its status as a major world power, which accounted for nearly 30% of the world economy in the 15th and 16th centuries (Holodny, 2017). Its paths to development, including twists and turns and costs and benefits, have great implications for other countries especially developing nations. Aiming to connect Chinese and international perspectives and create a platform for a deepening understanding of the global significance of Chinese education, *Frontiers of Education in China* is determined to bring China and the world closer. China's contemporary educational practice is a

major part of our endeavor. Comprised of 5 articles, this special issue takes a closer look at the great impact of China's ongoing process of reform and opening up on its higher education development over the past four decades, and explores the wider implications of such developments.

This volume begins with a special issue dialogue between two eminent comparative education scholars from two sides of the Pacific Ocean: Professor Gu Mingyuan from the Institute of International and Comparative Education in the Faculty of Education at Beijing Normal University and Professor Ruth Hayhoe from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the University of Toronto in Canada. Entitled "The Global Significance of China's Development in Education: Retrospect and Prospect in the 40th Anniversary Year of Reform and Opening Up," the dialogue was moderated by me, with comments made by Professor Liu Baochun from the same Institute at Beijing Normal University. Questions raised and discussed touched on some fundamental issues about the nature of China's policy shift towards reform and opening and its profound impacts and implications on the Chinese society in general and in higher education particularly. As the best China watchers respectively in China and Canada, they share with us their many excitements, deep observations and a theoretical depth that provides readers with a platform for a better understanding of the subsequent articles in this volume.

Echoing the dialogue on one hand and linking nicely to the following articles, Professor Anthony Welch from the University of Sydney School of Education and Social Work contributes the second major piece of this special issue, “Global Ambitions: Internationalization and China’s Rise as Knowledge Hub.” He portrays a changing picture of China’s higher education system over the past 40 years. He points out particularly that China’s reform and opening up goes much beyond economic and political spheres. It is indeed an opening of the mind to the outside world, especially after the disastrous Cultural Revolution. From a valuable historical perspective, he reminds us that China’s relations with the outside world have a much longer history, with the spread of Confucian ideas to East and Southeast Asia, and the importation of Buddhism from India; both during the Tang dynasty. Stressing the ability of Chinese culture to incorporate ideas from outside, he argues for the significance of China as a knowledge hub and destination for international students, and assesses the prospects for further development.

With a similarly positive assessment and an international perspective, the third article, “National/Global Synergy in the Development of Higher Education and Science in China since 1978,” is by Professor Simon Marginson who directs the Center for Global Higher Education at the University of Oxford and leads the Center’s global higher education engagement research program. As always, Professor Marginson holds a highly optimistic view of the future development of

Chinese higher education and positions China's achievements against a global backdrop. In the article, he first reviews the fast growth of higher education and science in China over the past four decades. He then analyses the conditions and strategies of that development, including the extent to which it embodies a distinctive Chinese approach to higher education, and in particular reflects on the effective use of globalization after 1978 in building national capacity and global influence.

WEILiqing and HU Yanhua are the authors of the fourth article "Retrospective and Prospects for International Educational Exchange in the 40th Anniversary Year of Reform and Opening Up." Based on one of the authors' rich experience in international exchange in higher education, they have shown how China has reached a new phase of global engagement and internationalization, shifting from one-way import of foreign knowledge into China to a much-improved balance between introducing the world into China and bringing China to the world over the past four decades. Focusing on Chinese students studying abroad and international students studying in China, they argue for the importance of global international student flows as an important part of international educational exchange. With detailed information about the development of China's sending its talents abroad and hosting international students on Chinese campuses, at both policy and practice levels since the People's Republic of China was founded, especially during the past four decades

of reform and opening up, they have analyzed the importance of such educational exchanges for the nation and for the world as well as the challenges ahead.

Last but not least is the piece by Dr. Michael Mitchell Omoruyi Ehizuelen, “The Importance of Education and Skills Development in Advancing China-Africa Cooperation.” Looking at China-Africa collaboration in education from an African perspective, it is a major contribution to this volume. Echoing the previous article and supported by rich data and statistics, it argues convincingly that China has reached a new stage of global engagement in education. Centered on the much-needed skills development in African workforces and labor market, the author challenges the stereotype that Chinese firms in Africa do not care about African development, education, and skills transfer. With thick description and analyses of the current skill levels in Africa and the priorities for skills transfer that can successfully address Africa’s skills gap, the author reveals the diversity of Chinese firms’ labor and skills transfer patterns and the reasons behind them. It argues that there is a need to change the way employees and students are trained, including curriculum reforms that favor science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, with emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, discovery, and experiential training.

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