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Field of Higher Education Research, China



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Synonyms

[Continuing education](#); [Further education](#); [Study in tertiary education](#); [University and college](#)

Definition

Providing an overview of the emergence and development of higher education research in Chinese higher education, focused on publications of higher education research, its publications by source of funding, by research institute, and topic from 1949 to 2017 and its changes and trends.

Introduction

Changes to the landscape of higher education research in China have varied considerably throughout different phases of development of its higher education system. Underlying these changes is the assumption that higher education

is seen as a fundamental means of producing higher-level talent for the state, training professional manpower, contributing to modernization and economic growth, and bolstering the socialist construction of China. With the implementation of the reform and open-door policy in the late 1970s, and especially the advancement of the internationalization of China's higher education in recent years, higher education research in China has become involved in more and more debates which are internationally or globally relevant. However, compared to many Western countries, and even neighboring Japan, it is still more closely and directly affected by changes in its domestic political, economic, and social systems. Therefore, higher education research in China displays striking features that are reflective of its national character. This study attempts to present an overview of higher education research in China from both historical and quantitative perspectives. The study discusses major characteristics of higher education research in China in different phases by using publicly available publications data. The data are mainly concerned with publications of higher education research, its publications by source of funding, research institutes, and by topic from 1950 to 2017. Subsequently, it presents the key issues and challenges facing higher education research in China. The study concludes by summarizing the striking features of higher education research in China.

Emergence and Changes in Higher Education Research

Review of Literature

Prior to the 2000s, the most comprehensive study of higher education research in China is the book entitled *Higher Education Research in China for 50 Years (1949–1999)*, which was published in 1999 (Chen 1999). Chen's study analyzes the historical development of the field, key theoretical advances, and the main issues Chinese higher education research faced in the latter half of the twentieth century. It points out that important achievements and progress have been made in higher education research in China over the past 50 years, especially since the implementation of the reform and open-door policy in 1978. According to Pan and Li (2009), the history of higher education research since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (New China) in 1949 could be practically divided into four phases, characterized by changing research focuses, symbolic events and the emergence of research outcomes, microcontexts of higher education research, and other factors. Wang and Liu's research outlines the growth of higher education research institutes in mainland China, from their history through to their current development, and also provides an overview of these institutes' roles and functions, as well as their future developmental trends and challenges (Wang and Liu 2014). Hu and Chen (2017) outline how higher education research in China developed as a well-recognized independent academic field in its unique national and historical context. Their research indicates that the rise and formation of higher education as a research field in China was closely related to the substantive growth of the higher education system itself. Higher education research in China is characterized by a strong institutional basis, an obvious orientation toward policy and practice at the macro- and microlevels, and support from and legitimization by a strong state. Knowledge production in the field is currently characterized by

being increasingly outward-looking continued support from the state.

Changes and Trends

There are various approaches to analyzing changes in higher education research in China; however, analyzing changes in publications of higher education research, its publications by source of funding, research institutes, and by topic based on publicly available data from 1950 to 2017 can largely suggest the most important characteristics of higher education research in China. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) is a publicly available online database providing the most comprehensive information on academic publications. It includes almost all publications made in academic journals, major news outlets, doctoral theses, conference proceedings, research and conference reports, commentaries, notes, etc., in Mainland China. By entering the key phrase 高等教育研究 (higher education research in Chinese) in the web portal of CNKI (http://kns.cnki.net/kns/brief/default_result.aspx) as of 4 October 2018, 84,206 pieces of higher education research were found between 1950 and 2018. However, not all data from publications made in 2018 are included in the CNKI at the time of writing and as such the present study only analyzes publications on higher education research in the CNKI between 1950 and 2017.

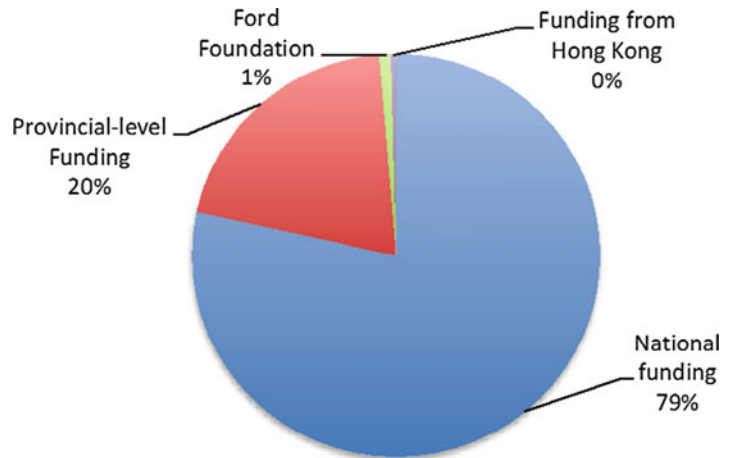
There is no doubt that higher education research was already conducted before the establishment of the New China in 1949; however, no publications made prior to 1949 were included in the database making detailed analysis of these early papers impossible from the CNKI dataset. It is also notable that higher education research was not present in the database every year. For example, there was no evidence of published higher education research in 1955, 1960, 1961, 1963, 1965, and 1967–1974 when the Cultural Revolution occurred and almost all higher education institutions were abolished or closed. The prevalence of higher education research has varied over time. As Table 1 shows, in 1950 there were eight articles and reports in the field of

Field of Higher Education Research, China, Table 1 Changes in publications of higher education research from 1950 to 2017

1950	1956	1959	1966	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017
8	2	1	1	3	32	266	298	758	1794	3654	5044	3814	3891

Source: CNKI with author’s modifications

Field of Higher Education Research, China, Fig. 1 Publications of higher education research by source of funding. (Source: Data from the CNKI with author’s modifications)



higher education. This declined to only three articles in 1975, but since 1975, there was a rapid growth in the published higher education research. As many as 3,891 articles were included in the database in 2017 alone.

With respect to the source of funding for higher education research papers, Fig. 1 reveals that the majority of research funding allocated between 1950 and 2017 came from the central government, including various central-level agencies and departments, as well as research and academic councils, followed by research funding from individual provinces (20%). Interestingly, the Ford Foundation and a tiny amount of research grant from authorities in Hong Kong also contributed to higher education research in China. However, provincial level funding distribution is not completely clear as it appears that not all the provinces are listed in the database. Generally speaking, some wealthy provinces such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang provided relatively more funding for higher education research, though there is no information on research funding for higher education in provinces such as Anhui and Jiangxi.

By institute, the top ten institutes in which researchers made publications in relation to higher education research include Xiamen University (1,987), East China Normal University (1,621), Central China University of Science and Technology (1,496), Beijing Normal University (1,105), Central China Normal University (923), Southwest University (866), Hunan Normal University (860), Nanjing Normal University (777), Zhejiang University (765), and Peking University (677). As will be discussed in the following section, the Higher Education Institute in Xiamen University was established in 1983 and it has the longest history of all such institutes in China. It also houses a relatively large number of full-time researchers in the field of higher education. These researchers are engaged in a wide variety of research streams, from basic theories, principles of higher education, policy, the evaluation of higher education, and even institutional research. Except for Xiamen University, Central China University of Science and Technology, and Peking University in which there are no faculties of education, researchers, and academics working in normal universities

contributed a large quantity of publications in relation to higher education, too. In most cases, there are many more researchers and academics in normal universities in which they teach undergraduate students while also conducting research, some of which concerns higher education.

By topic, among eight relevant publications made in 1950, six of them are not formal research papers, but reports and opening and closing speeches of national education conferences by leaders of the Ministry of Education. One article is about the issues of learning from the former Soviet model by an expert from the former Soviet Union. The other is a collection of critical remarks of the US education system by returned Chinese scholars and students from the USA based on their personal experiences while studying in the USA. By 1966 when the “Cultural Revolution” occurred, a large number of publications related to the introduction of higher education reforms guided by the former Soviet Union, and explanations of higher education guidelines and principles of the Chinese Communist Party. Considering all publications to date, the greatest proportion relate to keywords such as higher education reform (about 23,000), followed by Chinese higher education (about 78,00), adult higher education (about 4,900), higher education in North America (about 3,800), including higher education in the USA (about 3,600), massification of higher education (about 3,500), higher education (about 2,300), non-government (private) higher education (about 2,100), higher education development (about 1,800), internationalization of higher education (about 1,700), higher education quality (about 1,500), higher education financing (about 1,500), self-taught examination system (about 1,300), higher vocational and technical education (about 1,100), higher education in the UK (1,100), and others. This clearly indicates that higher education research in China has come to include a hugely wide range of topics in recent years.

According to research by Pan and Li (2009), the development of higher education research in China since 1949 could be practically divided into the following four phases. The chapter discusses important features of higher education research in

each phase in reference to existing research and also by analyzing relevant data from the CNKI.

The most important feature of the first phase (1949–1977) is that higher education research had not yet formed an independent academic discipline. More specifically, there were not any professional researchers in higher education, nor were there any institutions specifically focusing on research into higher education. In reality, there was no concept of higher education research in China. Furthermore, higher education research was primarily based on personal or subjective experiences, and there was a lack of theoretical research. By analyzing the data from the CNKI, it seems that little attention was paid to the employment of scientific research methods. Almost all so-called higher education research was descriptive and based on personal observations or subjective feelings without any theoretical or conceptual frameworks. Perhaps predictably, despite efforts made by some academics, almost no significant research achievements were accomplished. For example, according to the CNKI, only 33 publications were made in the field of higher education research from 1950 to 1977. Nearly half concerned the former Soviet Union, followed by educational administrative organizations and the Ministry of Education, socialism (11), adult higher education, and part-time and night universities (9).

The second phase (1978–1984) is characterized by the emergence of higher education as an independent discipline of study. Some senior researchers published articles and advocated the necessity of undertaking higher education research. The significance of the establishment of Research Division of Higher Education Science as an independent discipline of study in May 1978 cannot be overestimated, for it was the first research unit which specially researched higher education, and was symbolic that higher education was recognized as a specialized area of research in China. In 1981, the master’s program of higher education became available, and the establishment of the China Association of Higher Education in May 1983 suggests that higher education research had extended beyond individual higher education institutions at a regional level, and began to be conducted at

a national level. With the recognition of higher education as a second-level discipline within education sciences by the Ministry of Education in 1983, higher education was officially accepted as a new independent discipline of study. Meanwhile, several influential textbooks and academic studies of higher education, such as *Lectures of Higher Education*, *Principles of Higher Education*, *Brief History of Higher Education*, *Management of Higher Education Institutions*, and *History of Chinese Higher Education*, were also published in this period. Further, scientific research methods came to be more widely used in higher education research. CNKI data indicate that the number of publications in this newly recognized discipline numbered 445, a ten-fold increase over the previous phase. Keyword analysis indicates that more diverse and new topics were addressed such as higher education finance and funding, comprehensive universities, higher education reform, higher education research, university graduates, and 34 articles about North America, 33 of which were concerned with higher education in the USA.

The third phase (1985–1998) is characterized by the expansion of the scale of higher education research. There was a remarkable increase in the number of research institutes of higher education nationwide, professional researchers, universities in which doctoral students were specialized in higher education, and research outputs in higher education. The CNKI data reveal that 7,329 pieces of higher education research, including research papers, conference proceedings, reports, news and notes, etc., were published during the period. Further, the scope and range of higher education research was also massively expanded. As a result of additional research into its theories and guiding principles, higher education as an independent discipline of study was strengthened, and more research into issues which arose from the introduction of the market to higher education was undertaken, particularly focusing on measuring quality and privatization. Noticeably, the CNKI database also indicates that research into new areas of interest increased remarkably. For example, there were 573 publications discussing the market economy, 242 publications dealing with the socialist market economy system, and

121 publications about private universities released during this period. Further, nearly 600 publications were concerned with North American higher education, with a particular focus on the USA. This appears to indicate a shift in research interest towards higher education in the USA and away from the former Soviet Union. More importantly, compared to the previous two phases in which most publications were made by administrators, such as officers of the Ministry of Education, other educational departments at central or provincial levels, or institutional leaders of higher education institutions, the top ten most prolific authors of higher education research were all discipline-specific researchers working in research institutes of higher education affiliated to universities or associations of higher education.

The fourth phase (1999–2017) is defined as a period of stable improvement, whose main features include: first, a greatly improved level of professionalization of higher education research; second, further emphasis on research into theories of higher education; third, a closer linkage between higher education theory and practice; fourth, a great deal of progress in applying a variety of new research methods to higher education research; fifth, rapid internationalization of higher education research, including more international conferences, the promotion of international collaborative research projects, the translation of more leading international research into Chinese, and the international publication of leading Chinese texts. The database of the CNKI suggests that approximately 73,492 publications were made during the period. By keyword or theme, in addition the existing emphasis on issues such as adult higher education, the self-taught examination system, nongovernment higher education, and higher education reform, huge numbers of publications concerned mass higher education (~3,500), higher education in North America and the USA (~7,000), internationalization of higher education (~1,500), and higher education quality (~1,400). In terms of institutions, similar to the previous phase, researchers and academics from individual universities contributed the largest numbers of publications.

Issues and Challenges

Despite enormous achievements in higher education research in China, especially since the late 1990s, the field today remains confronted with numerous issues and challenges. First, compared to other disciplines such as sociology and economics, the field remains small and the quality of publications is poor by comparison. An important reason for this is a lack of undergraduate students who are specialized in higher education, so it is more difficult for universities that provide doctoral programs in higher education to attract the best undergraduates for higher education-specific programs. Second, some supervisors of master's and even doctoral programs are not well trained in higher education research, even in doctoral degree-awarding institutions. A large number of doctoral students' supervisors used to be institutional leaders who are experienced in the practical issues of higher education, but are not necessarily familiar with higher education theory, research methods, or new trends of higher education research worldwide. Third, in many universities higher education research is not highly recognized or valued by the university administration, and it suffers from a shortage of research funding and financial support. Finally, because of increased ideological control over research in the humanities and social sciences, research into some issues of higher education is not encouraged or may be prohibited. Examples include how to build civil society through higher education and how to evaluate the effect or efficiency of the Party's control on university governance arrangements, etc.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter analyzed the context of higher education research in China and changes that occurred through four key phases of development. With reference to prior research and original analysis of publication data included in the CNKI database, the study identified the main characteristics of higher education research from 1950 to 2017. It argues that higher education research in China has transformed from an initial phase

characterized by unsystematic research based on personal observations and experiences to its present state in which researchers in the field are gradually addressing a wide variety of themes as an independent discipline in a more organized and scientific way. Due to strong support from both the central government and local authorities, and more professional researchers and doctoral students participating in higher education research, there has not only been an expansion of publications, but also noticeable qualitative improvement of higher education research. Further, on the one hand, higher education research in China has devoted huge efforts to focus on issues of Chinese higher education and practical issues related to national reforms. On the other hand, it also paid increased attention to the introduction of foreign higher education ideas and models, especially higher education in North America and the USA.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Higher Education Systems and Institutions, China](#)
- ▶ [Internationalization of Higher Education, China](#)

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