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Trends in Chinese Higher Education

This special issue of *Frontiers of Education in China* is comprised of six articles from ten authors and co-authors who document several new trends in Chinese higher education. Many of the contributors include an analysis of how government policy, globalization, and internationalization have helped shape these trends over time. Many of the trends identified constitute unique elements toward and against progress within the world's largest higher education system. We encourage further research to better ascertain if these trends will continue in the near future, as China further positions itself as a leader on the global higher education stage.

In their article, “Promoting Entrepreneurship and Innovation in China: Enhancing Research and Transforming University Curriculum,” Ka Ho Mok and Kan Yue provide an historical overview of how East Asian economies have evolved over the past 50 years. The article critically examines Chinese policies that continue to crescendo toward the development of science, technology, and innovation in higher education. The authors argue for a need to reform the higher education curriculum toward a more entrepreneurial ethos, which will help increase the innovation and employability of current and future graduates. At the other end of the hiring scene, the authors also detail government initiatives to help improve the overall innovation focus of the national economy to achieve a sustained culturally-strong power. Documenting the tremendous strides the government has made in recent years in helping to establish entrepreneurialism within the higher education curriculum, the authors share several examples of progress made, including the establishment of (1) several types of entrepreneurial programs and courses in many higher education institutions, (2) a Steering Committee within the Ministry of Education, and (3) an increase in industry-specific partnerships with HEIs. Mok and Kan's thesis demonstrates how focusing on entrepreneurialism within HEIs has helped transform the

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country to become more competitive at home and abroad.

Yan Fengqiao documents the historical landscape of research conducted on the academic profession in Chinese higher education from the 1980s to the present. His article, "The Same Term but Different Connotations: Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Studying the Academic Profession in China and Other Asian Countries," claims that most previous studies were too Western focused and had substantial limitations in terms of being grounded on a solid theoretical, methodological, and representative basis. Yan's article helps fill this void, while emphasizing the need to examine the academic profession of Asian and Chinese higher education from a more critical and local lens. He draws from Arimoto's (2008) particularism-universalism and ascription-achievement dimensional model to explain how modernization theory can help explain the progress the Chinese academic profession has made in recent decades. While concluding that China's academic profession has made tremendous shifts, he notes that it has still been able to maintain its unique culturally-relevant underpinnings.

Anthony Welch and Jie Hao share some of the research they have conducted over the past few years on how Chinese students who were sent abroad contribute to innovation in Chinese higher education by either remaining overseas or by returning home. In their article, "Returnees and Diaspora as Source of Innovation in Chinese Higher Education," the now dated notion that brain drain is entirely negative reflects a failure to understand the entire picture of human resource disbursement according to the authors, and collective *brain gain*, *brain investment*, and *brain circulation* are what is happening with the now large and global Chinese diaspora that helps research and development initiatives and business partnerships in China. Welch and Hao show how the Chinese government is actively exploring ways for recruiting from abroad rather than passively accepting the fact that many of China's talented students who pursue graduate work overseas may never return home. They point out how these foreign recruitment schemes are generally open to all foreigners, however the vast majority of recruits have been overseas Chinese. As China's economic influence continues to strengthen on the global scene, the number of returnees has also increased according to the authors. Despite all of the government's efforts, however, Welch and Hao identify some barriers related to long-standing cultural and economic climate issues that often prevent recent Chinese higher education graduates and professionals from returning, and this is especially the case among many of the more junior scholars and among women scholars.

Another important sub sector of the Chinese higher education system is described by Jie Xiong in her article, "Institutionalization of Higher Vocational Education in China: A Neoinstitutionalist Perspective." Xiong argues that higher vocational education has struggled to overcome long-held views and cultural

barriers (a “cultural-cognitive legitimacy” stigma) that for the most part view it as a second tier within the overall higher education system. Much of the cultural prejudice against attending vocational HEIs reflects the fact that China is grounded in a Confucian-oriented society, where upward mobility in society remains paramount. Xiong concludes that if China is to re-establish genuine legitimacy for vocational expertise within the higher education system, there needs to be policy support at all levels and a reinvention of how vocational higher education is portrayed and valued by society at large.

Frank Bickenbach and Wan-Hsin Liu’s article “Regional Inequality of Higher Education in China and the Role of Unequal Economic Development,” expands on prior research of Thomas, Wang, and Fan (2001), Holsinger and Jacob (2008) and others who examined inequality trends among many countries, including China. The authors recognize the unparalleled economic progress the Chinese government has made over recent decades nationwide, yet inequalities remain between the predominantly Eastern coastal provinces and the rest of the country even though the gap is lessening over time. Government funding in recent decades has been channeled to help provide financial assistance and development assistance to interior provinces and regions. The authors outline how government support toward higher education in these hinterland regions has helped level the higher education enrollment percentages across provinces. Based on a statistical analysis of provincial data from 1997 to 2008, Bichenbach and Liu show how the distribution of higher education opportunities has increased throughout the country and this increase has helped reduce the overall higher education inequalities that existed in the 1990s and earlier between the Eastern region and the rest of the country.

In their article “Professionalization and the Training of University Administrators in China: A Comparative Perspective,” Geng Yiqun and John L. Yeager continue their research on the importance of training higher education administrators in China and the US. The dearth of higher education management training programs at the graduate level in China stands in stark contrast to the many different types of higher education management training options available in the US. The authors offer a comparative perspective from both countries, with examples of best practice which are suggestive for improving higher education management training in Chinese HEIs. Specialized, short-term in-service higher education management training programs for top-level higher education administrators have been common practice for many years in China, according to Geng and Yeager, but very little training exists at the pre-service level in doctoral programs. Geng and Yeager noted that traditional higher education management offerings at the doctoral level were largely for research-focused students pursuing Ph.D. degrees. The lack of practical training experiences for higher education management professionals in Chinese HEIs has been a weakness

compared to those in the US. They argue that while things have changed with the government recognition of the Ed.D. degree in 2008 and establishment of several Ed.D. programs in higher education management, the demand for training higher education management personnel far exceeds what current capacity can meet.

This issue not only sheds light on new trends of higher education development in China but also illustrates the increasingly sophisticated conceptual and quantitative methods being used to analyze these trends both in a comparative light and in relation to China's rich and unique socio-cultural context. Four of the six articles are co-authored by scholars in the Chinese Mainland and academics in such diverse contexts as Germany, USA, Australia, and Chinese Hong Kong, while the other two are single authored by two Chinese Mainland scholars, one based in Beijing the other in Canada. This illustrates a global interest in understanding Chinese higher education, while the theoretical and conceptual frames used for analysis increasingly reflect the dialogue going on between established Western theories and emerging Chinese ones. Of particular note is the call made by Yan Fengqiao for comparative higher education as a field to engage more seriously with broad economic and social theories as well as giving greater attention to diverse cultural contexts when creating their frames of analysis. This would enable the field to move beyond a dominant Western-centric paradigm and open it up to theoretical and conceptual inputs from other regions and civilizations.

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