The Tightening Ideational Regimentation of China’s Higher Education System

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The operation of the contrary forces of diffusion and control in China’s higher education system is critically examined, highlighting the distinctiveness of China’s internationalisation of higher education. The history of internationalisation of higher education in China, including crucial phases from the Deng era, beginning in 1978 to the Xi Jinping regime is described. The ideational regimentation is discussed in detail and its implications brought forth, and important questions that emerge from the dualism in China’s higher education system are considered.

A major power in international politics, China is pushing beyond traditional domains of national power, such as military and economic power, by proactively adopting policies to internationalise its higher education. China has the world’s largest higher education system in terms of student enrolment. Between 2010 and 2015, it rose from approximately 29 million to 36.9 million, with a gross enrolment rate in the 18–23 years age group of 42.7%, and an annual production of eight million graduates. The number of higher education institutions increased from 1,867 in 2006 to 2,914, as of 31 May 2017, of which 2,631 are ordinary institutions (including 265 independent colleges) and 283 are adult colleges and universities (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2017).

Higher education is central to several Chinese central leadership goals. First, it is key to implementing its strategic plan to create “huge talented resources by 2020” and beyond. China’s Thirteenth Five Year Plan outlines a new growth model which moves away from export-reliant and carbon-based unsustainable growth and embraces technological innovation to which an educated population will be indispensable. Second, higher education can play a key role in realising the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation, by serving as a platform for promoting Chinese culture and language globally. Third, higher education acts as the “vanguard” of the communist regime by functioning as an ideological enterprise that enables state supervision and control, facilitates indoctrination, ensures the “acquiescence” of intellectuals, and supports research in indigenous “discourse power” (Perry 2015).

The twin but opposite undercurrents of diffusion and control underpin the above-mentioned goals. Diffusion involves global outreach through channels such as student exchanges, overseas campuses, and international collaborations in science and technology, whereas ideational regimentation involves circumscribing the frontiers of discourse, information dissemination, research, and knowledge using regime-sanctioned ideological and cognitive concepts such as the “sinicisation of Marxism.” This paper critically examines the operation of these contrary forces, while contributing to the literature on the internationalisation of higher education, by exploring the distinctiveness of the Chinese context.

The literature on China’s efforts to internationalise its higher education focuses on a number of different aspects—the origin and development of internationalisation in China (Chen and Huang 2013); local factors (political, economic, and traditional) that challenge internationalisation (Cai 2004); the role of the...
government in internationalisation (Li 2016); the interpretation of internationalisation as “cultural diplomacy” through Confucius Institutes (Kwan 2014); the “changing discourse” in internationalisation manifested in the paradigm shift from awareness of internationalisation in the 1980s to economic competition in the 1990s, and to the enhancement of China’s national competitiveness and international influence through higher education (Wang 2014); and the implications of “transnational partnerships” in higher education in China (Maoyuan 2009; Li 2009). Several of these will be discussed here.

Fuhui Li (2016: 47–52) outlines four main roles of the Chinese government in internationalising higher education—national strategy designer and programme planner, major funding provider, executive director, and regulator and supervisor. Yang (2014) describes China’s strategy for the internationalisation of higher education through extensive engagement with the Western world and English language education. He also points to the paradox arising out of China’s simultaneous concern for the protection of its “educational sovereignty” (2014: 156), but does not treat this aspect in detail. Some Chinese scholars, however, have expressed concern over challenges to China’s sovereignty in education. Maoyuan (2009: 90) points out that Chinese institutions’ partnerships with foreign educational institutions might “lead to infiltration of Western values and cultures at odds with current Chinese circumstances, adding to our [China’s] task to safeguard educational sovereignty, maintain Chinese cultural heritage, and resist the Westernisation of the Chinese lifestyle.” Similarly, Li (2009) made proposals for policy regulation of Sino-foreign educational programmes such as the protection of China’s sovereignty in honouring commitments to the World Trade Organization on the provision of market access to foreign education services.

In light of the above review of literature, the distinctiveness of this paper lies in its analysis of the dual features of internationalisation and regimentation as they play out in the Chinese context, especially in the current dispensation. The first section describes the internationalisation of higher education, including crucial phases in the Deng era (1978–89), continuing through to the Xi Jinping regime. The second section discusses ideational regimentation and its implications. The third section raises important questions about these opposing strands.

The internationalisation of teaching and research is becoming a prominent feature of higher education systems globally, though in varying degrees and forms (Delgado-Marquez et al 2013). The underlying motivations could be academic, social/cultural, political, or economic (de Wit 1995) such as upgrading the quality of education, spreading national influence, developing domestic human capital, and income generation for higher education institutions. This paper employs the conceptual framework offered by Knight (1994), which is composed of four approaches—activity, competency, ethos, and process. While the process approach envisions internationalisation as a process of integration of an international dimension into institutional functioning, the activity approach focuses on categories of activities such as “curriculum, scholar/student exchange and technical cooperation” (Knight 1994: 4). Its exclusive focus is on “the content of activities” (de Wit 2002: 116)—academic or extracurricular—rather than on organisational issues that support such activities. The process perspective presumes maturing of internationalisation akin to the gradual absorption of ingredients into a raw dish. The competency perspective emphasises the human dimension of internationalisation by including the development of “skills, attitudes and knowledge in students, faculty and staff,” whereas the organisational approach is concerned more with the development of an ethos that values “intercultural and international perspectives and initiatives” in an educational institution (de Wit 2002: 116). As such, the process and ethos elements are interlinked; while process is the form, ethos is the manifestation. As we will see in this article, the activity and competency perspectives are applicable in China’s case, whereas comprehensive internationalisation—that requires a change in ethos—is limited by ideational regimentation (Jie 2007: 66).

Internationalisation of Higher Education in China

At the basic level, internationalisation is not new to China—for thousands of years, the “transfer of knowledge” as an “international dimension of education” has been occurring (Jie 2007: 61). For example, during the Tang Dynasty, Chinese students travelled to India to study Buddhist doctrines at the reputed Nalanda University. In 1854, Yung Wing became the first Chinese to graduate with honours from Yale University. After his return to China, he helped China’s “last imperial government to send 120 Chinese boys to study in America” (cited in Jie 2007: 61). In the modern historical period dating from the early years of Communist China, international exchanges involved sending Chinese students to socialist countries, primarily the Soviet Union, to acquire knowledge of science and technology. As Suzanne Pepper (1987: 197) explains, “The rationale was that since the best of Western science and technology had already been absorbed by the Russians, the ‘quickest and best way’ was to take the distilled essence directly from the Soviet Union.” As Li and Yang (2014: 40) write, “From 1952, the Chinese higher education system simulated Soviet administration, teaching methods, textbooks, and even classroom design,” while Western educational models were primarily rejected. As a result, China emphasised technical education, leading to the creation of specialised higher education institutions led by central ministries. These became “the teaching units for ‘cultivating specialised talents’ with teaching and researching offices under them” (Qian and Verhoeven 2004: 4). In 1950, Tsinghua University received a group of 33 students from Eastern Europe (Dong and Chapman 2010).

A departure from the Soviet model took place in 1958, when higher education was decentralised and many educational institutions were placed under provincial control (Hayhoe 1996). China began to look beyond the Soviet Union for student exchanges, and between 1958 and 1960, around 2,000 foreign students—mainly from Asian and African countries—studied in China on government scholarships. In 1956, the Chinese
government awarded scholarships to students from Western countries (Hayhoe 1996).

However, China’s isolation from the West set in with the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which sought to “eliminate capitalist influence” (Wang 2014: 9). This resulted in the undermining of China’s higher educational system with the closure of 106 higher educational institutions, which were replaced with universities for workers, party cadres, and peasants to spread proletarian consciousness (Agelasto and Adamson 1998).

**Deng era**: Deng Xiaoping, leader of the People’s Republic of China from 1978 until his retirement in 1989, launched educational reforms with his acclaimed 1978 speech in which he described education as the “crucial basis for a drive towards economic and technological modernisation” (Qiping and White 1993: 410). This shift paved the way for the massification of higher education and autonomy for universities. Many Chinese students were sponsored to study abroad, and incentives were introduced in order to attract them back to China to build its human capital base. The Chinese government implemented educational reforms in parallel with the economic liberalisation programme, with the aim of boosting the country’s productive forces.

Student and faculty exchanges and joint academic programmes were the “major international activity” (Qiping and White 1993: 62) in the late 1970s. Between 1978 and 1991, following the issuance of the Notice Concerning Increasing Selected Overseas Students, over 1,700,000 students—government-funded, unit-dispatched, self-supported—went abroad. In 1979, China sent 69 teachers of Chinese language, science, and engineering to 23 countries. By the end of 1991, “a total of 165 teachers arrived in the secondary and tertiary institutions of 43 countries through the support of the Chinese government.” From 1978 to 1984, 413 Chinese educational delegations with a total of 2,506 scholars were sent overseas at the invitation of educational departments in foreign countries, while China invited approximately 557 foreign educational delegations, comprised of 3,090 educators (Chen and Huang 2013: 101–02). In 1978, China began to explore various forms of Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools. As a result,

> In the mid 1980s, Renmin University of China and Fudan University set up a Sino–American training class for economics and law respectively; Tianjin University of Finance and Economics and the United States Oklahoma City University held jointly an MBA class; Nanjing University and the United States Johns Hopkins University founded together the Sino–American Center for Cultural Studies. (Chen and Huang 2013: 103)

Curriculum internationalisation mostly consisted of introducing “original and/or translations of foreign university textbooks, and bilingual instruction” (Huang 2003).

**From the late 1990s to the present era**: In the post-Deng era, China’s internationalisation of its higher education began to be motivated by the goals of increasing its global competitiveness in a knowledge-based economy, spreading its cultural influence, and building the reputation of China’s higher education institutions by raising its global ranking and increasing the enrolment of international students. During this period, China’s internationalisation of higher education became connected to its pursuit of soft power (defined as a nation’s cultural appeal) as part of its comprehensive national power. As Yang (2007: 25) points out, “Beijing’s innovative and most systematically planned soft power policy involves a two-way strategy: hosting international students and building up the Confucius institutes worldwide.” At the end of 2015, more than 500 Confucius institutes and over 1,000 Confucius classrooms operated in 134 countries, promoting Chinese language and culture. These Confucius Institutes offer a range of services: teaching the Chinese language; providing training for Chinese language instructors; delivering Chinese language teaching resources; administering the Hányǔ Shūpíng Kǎoshì (HSK) examination (Chinese Proficiency Test); providing information and consultative services concerning China’s education, culture, etc, and conducting language and cultural exchange activities between China and other countries.

The perceived importance of internationalisation can be gauged from the outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–20), which lists the following elements: expansion of international exchange and cooperation at all levels of education (both inbound and outbound); introduction of high-quality education resources; emphasis on substantial and quality-orientated educational exchange and cooperation models; and strengthening of international partnerships based on the principle of mutual benefit. The competency perspective of internationalisation outlined earlier is reflected in the Chinese leadership’s imperative to boost national competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world, requiring educational reforms. To that end, Project 211 (Hok and Hawkins 2010) was launched in 1995, introducing decentralisation, the involvement of provincial governments in education, depoliticisation (though the Chinese Communist Party’s [CCP] supervisory role continued), and private sector-led commercialisation (Gow 2012: 204). In 1998, Project 985 was launched to establish world-class universities. The competency drive behind Project 211 is reflected in a China Education Centre document:

> Primarily aiming at training high-level professional manpower to implement the national strategy for social and economic development, the project has great significance in improving higher education, accelerating the national economic progress, pushing forward the development of science, technology and culture, enhancing China’s overall capacity and international competitiveness, and laying the foundation of training high-level professional manpower mainly within the educational institutions at home.

In 1995 and 1996, respectively, two policies were adopted to regulate cooperation with foreign partners: Contemporary Regulations on Operation of Higher Education Institutions in Cooperation with Foreign Partners and the Notice of Strengthening Degree-Granting Management in Activities Concerning Operation of Institutions in Cooperation with Foreign Partners (Huang 2006: 3). In 2003, the government adopted Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Chinese-foreign cooperation in running schools to introduce “high-quality foreign
education resources” (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2013). Accordingly, foreign universities opened branch campuses or joint ventures such as NYU (New York University) Shanghai and the University of Nottingham Ningbo. In 2015, China launched the Double World Class Project creating “international hubs” for cooperation with overseas universities.

The Chinese government has pursued proactive policies for attracting international students and foreign governments, with a dedicated section in the Chinese education ministry designated for international cooperation and exchanges and “Study in China.” In 2015, 3,97,635 international students from 202 countries studied in China, of whom 46.47% were academic degree students (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2016). The ministry’s website glitters with flashing images of international students, bearing such captions as “Foreign Students Fascinated with Chinese Culture.” In its stated objective of promoting mutual understanding, cooperation, and exchanges between China and other countries, the Chinese government has set up a series of scholarship programmes to sponsor international students, teachers, and scholars to study and conduct research in Chinese universities; 279 designated Chinese universities offer a wide variety of academic programmes in science, engineering, agriculture, medicine, law, economics, management, education, liberal arts, philosophy, history, and fine arts for scholarship winners at all levels. Scholarships include Chinese government scholarships (Bilateral Programme, Chinese University Programme, and Great Wall Programme), Confucius Institute Scholarships, local government scholarships, foreign government scholarships, enterprise scholarships, and university scholarships.

A “going out” approach has recently become more prominent in China’s internationalisation of higher education. Peking University is poised to open a branch of its HBS Business School in Oxford’s Foxcombe Hall, the 19th century residence of the eighth earl of Berkeley, which it bought for nearly £9 million. The university, which opened in 2018, draws students from both Europe and China, and focuses on “professional knowledge of China’s economy, financial market and corporate management” (Phillips 2017). In contrast to the HBS campus, which will have a stand-alone presence, the Global Innovation Exchange (GIX) between the University of Washington at Seattle in the United States (US) and China’s Tsinghua University is being touted as a “global partnership,” and will award master’s degrees in technological innovation. Tsinghua University is China’s first research university to have a presence in the US. As its President Qiu Yong states: “In the face of challenges related to the environment, resources and health, we need to cooperate across national boundaries to find solutions, GIX creates an innovative educational model that will facilitate international and interdisciplinary integration for technological innovation” (Global Innovation Exchange nd). Such globally-orientated partnerships reflect China’s current cultural ethos of embracing an international perspective.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a research think-tank under the direct control of the State Council, has reached out to academia and research institutions globally, calling for collective efforts to resolve human development issues. This potentially contributes to its relevance and credibility beyond ideological boundaries and its role as a mouthpiece of the communist government. In May 2017, CASS launched a think-tank in Hungary—the CEE Institute (China—Central and Eastern Europe Institute)—with the objective of promoting academic exchange between China and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. As noted by the Bureau of International Cooperation, “CASS has become China’s main channel for academic exchanges with major countries and regions across the world, driving Chinese-foreign cooperation in the fields of humanities and social sciences.” In its “go global” strategy, CASS’s international exchange and cooperation has manifested in over 160 agreements with “global academies of sciences, universities, think tanks, government departments and international organisations,” with exchanges taking place in the form of visits, seminars, and joint research on such issues as environment, employment, and economic globalisation (Bureau of International Cooperation Chinese Academy of Sciences 2017).

The practice of regimentation is at odds with the “ethos” of an internationalised higher education as well as with the process approach, which is more comprehensive than internationalisation activities. China’s internationalisation is selective, especially in the current regime of Xi Jinping. The ambition of deepening China’s global visibility in higher education and affirming China’s meteoric rise under the leadership of the CCP is being manifested as a surge in its overseas campuses and in the global promotion of, and increasing access to, China’s higher education programmes, along with the curbing of the inflow of foreign textbooks and the monitoring of joint ventures with foreign universities.

Ideational Reglementation

This section highlights how ideational controls and indoctrination operate as other features of China’s higher education system. From 1949 through the mid-1970s, higher education in China was largely confined to ideological indoctrination and technical training for serving the planned economy (Vaughan and Chunzhou 1996). China has had a tradition of preserving social order through the “regimentation of knowledge” (Hayhoe 1993: 291), with a focus on “classical studies and narrow specialisation” (Vaughan and Chunzhou 1996: 214). However, as noted earlier, Deng Xiaoping encouraged contact with the West in order to bring about educational reform and build China’s human capital for rapid economic development. The turning point in the Chinese higher education scenario came about with the student-led pro-democracy protests in June 1989 in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, marked by slogans such as “Long Live Democracy.”

Impact of the Tiananmen incident: The Chinese government not only severely crushed the protests and declared martial law, but it was also prompted to reform education along politico-ideological lines. Party secretaries at universities came to be entrusted with “expunging all tendencies towards bourgeois
liberalism” (Hayhoe 1993: 297), by controlling and reforming the curricula. The previously popular disciplines of humanities and social sciences were primarily affected, experiencing huge cuts in funding and, as a result, a decline in enrolment (Gow 2012; Hayhoe 1993). Moreover, it led to “the stratification of Chinese academia” (Gow 2012: 204) with the transformation of the intellectuals of the 1980s into experts and scholars who supported “the emerging technocracy of the 1990s” (Gow 2012: 204).

Efforts towards the development of the “socialist education enterprise” persisted through successive regimes (Kennedy et al 2014). As Jiang Zemin noted, “A far-sighted nation always attaches great importance to the development of its youths. A far-sighted political party always regards the youth as a major force driving historical development and social advancement” (Kai and Xu 2014: 67). This view is held even more strongly by the Xi Jinping administration, as discussed below.

Military training for first year students: Chinese first year students receive mandatory military training in the form of physical training and theoretical knowledge—a provision that has elicited both praise and criticism in Chinese society (Evans 2013). In April 2001, the National Defence Law was promulgated in China with a view to bolstering “national defense education, developing patriotic spirits, promoting the construction of national defense and socialist spiritual civilisation” (Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China 2001). Article 15 of the Law states: “The higher education institutions, high schools as well as schools equivalent to high schools shall offer national defense education to students by combining the in-class teaching with military training.” Some universities send freshmen to the countryside, while students at universities such as Tsinghua receive the training mostly on campus (Economist 2017).

Course reforms: Cheung and Pan (2006: 44) write that the State Education Commission issued two decisions on moral education in 1989, stipulating that educational institutions should “unify minds” in line with the “Party’s direction, promoting the Four Cardinal Principles and rejecting the wholesale Westernisation and Western bourgeois liberal ideas.” The Four Cardinal Principles were upholding the leadership of the CCP, upholding the Socialist Road, upholding the People’s Democratic Dictatorship, and upholding Marxism- Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. Qinghua Wang (2013: 334) points out that the post-1989 communist regime attempted to strengthen and professionalise political education in universities in order to “nurture more professional teachers of political education, to enhance the teaching effectiveness of political education courses, and to ensure students’ political reliability.” Political reliability is accorded a high priority. The Chinese government also required that “the socialist core value system known as the “Eight Honors and Disgraces” (Ba rongba chi) be included in textbooks and classes in higher educational institutions” (Kai and Xu 2014: 74). In December 2005, Marxist theory was elevated to the status of a “first-order discipline” that consisted of six second-order disciplines: Essential Theories of Marxism, Research on Sinicised Marxism, Research on Essential Issues in Modern and Contemporary Chinese History, Political Education, History of the Development of Marxism, and Research on Marxism in Other Countries (Wang 2013: 340). Patronage and preferential policies were also introduced for political education teachers such as “provision of material and career benefits and … [construction of] a professional identity” (Wang 2013: 340; see Fairbrother 2008) to imbue them with pride in their profession.

Student affairs offices: Student affairs offices maintaining detailed files on every student, including information on their ideological views, were set up to prevent the spread of democratic values among Chinese students in foreign universities (Onsman and Cameron 2014). Students are deterred from voicing anti-party opinions lest their actions be recorded as misdemeanors and preclude them from getting employment. Similarly, student youth leagues are entitled to inform the
Co-optation of academics and intellectuals: The CCP’s strategy is to rope academics and intellectuals into service of the state by giving them influential positions in research institutions or think tanks, including the cccp. The objective of the co-optation strategy is to spread the cccp’s ideology by creating social consensus among intellectuals—an exercise in building intellectual hegemony of the cccp in the Gramscian sense. As Gow (2012: 21) puts it:

Hegemony in the Gramscian sense, thus describes a situation where a ruling group or elite has its values, dispositions and interests represented, taken up and internalised by a variety of subaltern groups. It requires engagement between the leading and subaltern groups of a given society in an ongoing process of negotiation which serves to build consensus and promote social cohesion through articulating the interests of various subaltern groups under the leadership of the dominant group.

Gow (2012: 336) further writes that there are “traditional intellectuals,” to use the Gramscian phrase, in China who have been “assimilated, or at the very least neutralised as a potential counter-hegemonic force, through the doxic conventions of Chinese [higher education’s] administrative culture.” Elizabeth Perry (2015: 19), a distinguished scholar of Chinese politics, notes that “control methods have been ‘modernised’ with the aid of new techniques and technologies.” For example, freshmen in Chinese college campuses undergo mandatory mental health screening, the results of which are submitted to “political cadres for analysis and possible preventative or punitive action.” In this context, “mental illness” is associated with “ideas and inclinations” that are construed as harmful to the communist regime.

XI Jinping and Higher Education
During the current regime, ideological controls have further tightened with President Xi Jinping’s vociferous advocacy of socialist ideology. Xi has instructed China’s higher learning institutions to “shoulder the important tasks of studying, researching and publicising Marxism, as well as training builders and successors of the socialist cause with Chinese characteristics” (Ramzy 2014).

First, course content is being monitored even more closely to ensure “ideological sanctity.” In 2015, the then Chinese Minister of Education Yuan Guiren summoned administrators from China’s universities, including Tsinghua University and Peking University, to announce that colleges must prevent the infiltration of textbooks that spread Western values in classrooms or disparage socialism and cccp leaders. The minister called for greater scrutiny of Western textbooks, cautioning: “Never let textbooks promoting Western values appear in our classrooms” (Yue and Xinying 2015). In sharp contrast, the Chinese leadership is keen to spread Chinese philosophy and social sciences at the international level. Wang Weiguang (2017), a member of the cass, writes:

[President] Xi Jinping also tasked cccp with raising the international prestige and influence of Chinese philosophy and social sciences. In response, we should further implement the “going out” strategy of Chinese academics and enhance international communication among scholars of philosophy and social sciences by building platforms for international academic exchange and hosting high-end international forums. In this way, we can proactively communicate China’s theories and vision to the world.

After “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” was incorporated into the Communist Party constitution in October 2017, as many as 20 Chinese universities, such as Renmin University, opened research centres to promote this doctrine (Sharma 2018).

Second, China has sharpened its coercive claws to better pounce on educational institutions, especially those partnering with Western universities, for breaching “political discipline” by permitting penetration of Western values such as the freedom of speech. As reported in the Financial Times in April 2017, in the middle of the previous month, teams of agents from the Communist Party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection visited the campuses of China’s 29 top universities to begin inspections, which continued until early May. “University presidents and senior administration staff have been told to remain on campus and cancel all travel plans, according to two people familiar with the situation” (Feng 2017b). Universities like Shantou were put under surveillance for “religious infiltration” from foreign influences (Jie 2017). As reported in the South China Morning Post (Gan 2017), the chief inspector of the Guangdong provincial party team, which conducted a 50-day inspection of Shantou University in 2016, stated that the party committee at Shantou University was “weak in playing the role of political leadership and political correctness” and “untimely in implementing decisions from the central and provincial party leadership” because of inadequate efforts to prevent “illegal religious infiltration.” The South China Morning Post reported in September 2017 that Chinese universities such as Zhejiang University are encouraging faculty and students to post online content that endorses socialist values by offering them such incentives as academic credit (Zhou 2017).

The Chinese government issued a directive in November 2017 to extend its political control over foreign-funded universities in China by requiring these universities “to install party units and grant decision-making powers to a party official, reversing an earlier promise to guarantee academic freedom” (Feng 2017a). Elizabeth Redden writes in Inside Higher Education (2017) that it “affects joint ventures operated by Chinese and foreign universities, including full-fledged campuses such as New York University’s campus in Shanghai, a joint venture with East China Normal University, or Duke University’s campus in Kunshan, a joint venture with Wuhan University,” though it is not yet clear to what extent and in what ways the academic freedom of such institutions would be compromised in practice.

Third, party control over faculty has increased. In 2013, China’s mainland universities were instructed to avoid seven discussion topics in classrooms: universal values, freedom of the press, independent judiciary (Zhang 2017). In November 2014, the Liaoning Daily published an article titled “Teacher, Please Don’t Talk about China Like That: An Open Letter to Teachers of Philosophy and Social Science” (Bandurski 2014). It reported finding three major issues with Chinese university classrooms, based on approximately 130,000 words of class notes compiled by its reporters who, in 2014, had visited nearly 100 classes in
20 schools in Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang, and Wuhan. First, there was a lack of theoretical recognition of CCP ideology on the part of faculty. Second, there was a lack of political recognition, with some teachers praising Western “separation of powers” and questioning policy decisions of the CCP’s Central Committee. Third, there was a lack of identification on an emotional level, with some teachers making such remarks as “I won’t enter the Party.”

The above article apparently had official support since it was published by the newspaper of the Communist Party Provincial Committee of Liaoning province and republished on the website of People’s Daily, a prominent party newspaper (Ramzy 2014). Similarly, education authorities in the Guizhou province ordered the installation of surveillance cameras in university classrooms. They justified it on the grounds of facilitating appraisal of professors, while the latter argued that it was intended to monitor the content of their lectures. Wang Zu who teaches at Renmin University in Beijing commented, “To introduce surveillance of anyone who has not broken the law is a mindset that assumes everyone is guilty” (Dongxu 2014). The expulsion of professors known for championing free speech and the rule of law is another controversial facet of the ideological whirlpool surrounding the Chinese education system. Zhang Xuezhong from the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai, and economics professor Xia Yeliang from Peking University in Beijing, lost their jobs in this context. Peking University claimed that Yeliang was expelled on account of his poor teaching, based on over 300 student complaints, but Yeliang attributed the expulsion to his straightforward political beliefs. While it is debatable as to what actually prompted his expulsion, in Yeliang’s interview with the Wall Street Journal, light is shed on the university–party relationship by his statement, “All universities are under the party’s leadership. In Peking University, the No 1 leader is not the president. It’s the party secretary of Peking University” (Feith 2013).

Fourth, knowledge production in the domain of ideology and philosophy has been the territory of the Chinese government or the CCP, rather than the intellectual enterprise of independent individual scholars. Though intellectual warfare, insofar as it is a constructive clash of differences of opinion, is not undesirable per se, what is striking is that Chinese scholars are expected to act as soldiers carrying out the commands of the chief, while the state provides the uniforms and ammunition. The recent spurt in ideology-based projects has contributed to the following features of the research landscape.

Encouragement of the ‘Sinicisation’ of Marxism: Not surprisingly, social science as a discipline in Chinese institutions is tied to the endorsement of Marxist–Leninist–Maoist thought. The phrase “Chinese characteristics” is sprinkled over government speeches, guidelines, policies, and “theoretical innovations” of the CCP to the extent that course curricula and research have state-defined epistemological borders. On its 40th anniversary in May 2017, the CASS received accolades from the President for serving the nation, advancing “sinicisation of Marxism” and developing Chinese philosophy and social sciences (Xinhua 2017). Chinese scholars at CASS have praised “sinicisation of Marxist poverty theory” for its success in lifting millions of Chinese people out of poverty. Zhang Wei (2017) credits President Xi Jinping with contributing to such sinicisation by proposing “the concept of targeted poverty alleviation,” reflecting China’s peculiar conditions. Wei (2017) writes,

The concept of targeted poverty alleviation enriched and developed the basic connotation of the Sinicisation of Marxist view on poverty. China’s great achievements in poverty reduction have demonstrated the superiority of the socialist system. The UN Millennium Development Goals Report 2015 found that the proportion of population living in extreme poverty in China dropped from 61% in 1990 to below 30% in 2002.

Intellectual warfare—A contest for hegemony: The Chinese leadership is seeking global recognition for its indigenous theories, social science evaluations, and Chinese philosophy. It has flung a challenge to political liberalism, a reigning Western ideology, and has seemingly entered the intellectual contest, demanding recognition of its “theoretical innovations”—a phenomenon that goes beyond the ideological clashes of the Cold War era. Just as theories or concepts developed by American scholars have dominated the methodological landscape in social sciences literature, especially after the end of the Cold War and the accompanying triumph of neo-liberalism, Chinese leadership has embarked on an ambitious agenda of hoisting the flag of Chinese intellectual might. This flag is two-layered. One layer consists of colouring Western concepts of “soft power” with the brush of “Chinese characteristics.” The second, separate layer is what the Chinese government refers to as its theoretical innovations, such as the Three Represents.

Stimulation to strengthen discourse power: In order to establish its ideational hegemony (as discussed above), and to refute current or future Western criticism of the hollowness of China’s soft power owing to ideological controls on education, Chinese leadership is likely to take measures to enhance the regime’s “discourse power.” One such initiative is the National Collaborative Innovation Center for Culture Soft Power Research, which was opened in Beijing in May 2015. It “aims to enhance the capacity of its members in cultural soft power research by deepening communication and becoming a leading global center for cultural soft power research” (Hongli 2015). According to Zhang Guozuo, the centre’s director, a dozen research platforms will be launched to provide “a theoretical framework for cultural soft power with Chinese characteristics” (Hongli 2015). The Shanghai Academy was launched in June 2015 as a prospective high-level think tank, with CASS President Wang Weiguang calling for “adherence to the correct political and academic orientation” (Yu and Jianguo 2015), among other goals.


Xi [Jinping] is exceptionally hostile to … “universal standards,” such as free speech, academic independence, freedom of religion and the rule of law. His views arestringently enforced in China’s education system, from the earliest years up to university level, where academics
find themselves lucky if they are merely disciplined and not purged should they slip into championing academic freedom and learning from other countries.

What accounts for the ideological renaisance in higher education during Xi Jinping’s regime? First, Xi’s personal background sheds light on his passionate advocacy of communist ideology. His father was one of Mao’s closest allies. Lam calls Xi a “princeling” who has exorted the Chinese to “learn from Chairman Mao” (Lam 2015: 41). Second, Xi is putting into effect his “China dream” of achieving state prosperity, collective pride, and national rejuvenation. Yongnian and Gore (2015) point out that this might have been inspired by Colonel Mingfu’s (2010) “grand strategy” to replace the US as the superpower, and that Xi understands that the China dream demands consolidation of CCP rule, and that higher education is a territory of state control where challenges to communist rule can be counteracted. Third, China watchers agree that Xi’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, “presided over a decade of political stagnation” (Pei 2014). Xi and his colleagues need to determine “whether to stay the course and rely on the same post-Tiananmen strategy of economic growth, social co-optation, and political repression, in order to maintain the CCP’s rule” (Pei 2014). If this analysis offers any clue to President Xi’s aggressive posturing in virtually all domains of public policy, it is that he is cynical of the political resilience of the CCP. As noted by the New York-based organisation Human Rights Watch, “Under President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Government and Communist Party have unleashed the harshest campaign of politically motivated investigations, detentions and sentencing in the past decade, marking a sharp turn towards intolerance of criticism” (Shunli 2015). The implication is that higher education is receiving heavier doses of communist ideology to sustain the political health of the CCP.

Conclusions
Since opening up to the world in 1978, communist China has rapidly internationalised its higher education system for economic, political, and strategic reasons, by upgrading the quality of its human resources and higher education, promoting its culture through Confucius Institutes, fostering an understanding of China, strengthening bilateral ties with foreign countries, and building higher education as a prestigious national resource. The spectrum of its internationalisation is diverse, ranging from student exchanges and partnerships to the establishment of its educational institutions’ stand-alone presences overseas. Not surprisingly, however, China’s internationalisation is limited to activities and programmes that do not pose a threat to the communist regime, which is why the internationalisation elements of “ethos” and “process” are not applicable in China’s case, barring sporadic examples. Instead, barricades have been put up to prevent the influence of liberal political ideas, while ideological indoctrination has been increased in the social sciences and humanities. As such, the dual characteristics of internationalisation and ideological regimentation characterise China’s higher education policies and practices. It is an open question as to what extent state-led and state-controlled research in social sciences, which curbs alternative viewpoints, can be effective in achieving credibility and rigour as standards of best practice in research. How sustainably can the Chinese leadership maintain control of higher education while engaging in foreign collaboration? This question becomes pertinent especially in view of such developments as the Chinese Education Ministry’s decision to place party units in foreign joint ventures, as noted earlier, and the cancellation by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands of the plan to open a branch campus in China because of “principled concerns about academic freedom” as well as practical issues (Redden 2018).

China’s journey to internationalising its higher education can be thought of as the bloom of the bud in the company of the thorn. From the communist regime’s point of view, it is politically exigent to continue with the controls—tightening them when desirable—while adroitly managing and fostering internationalisation. While pursuing this double-sided strategy, China also fuels its ambition to achieve milestones in its global leadership in education. As Cheng Baosheng (2017), the education minister, is quoted in the Straits Times, “I hope that China will have a bigger say in educational affairs globally and make contributions to the development of the world’s education using China’s own experiences and wisdom.”

NOTES
1 Total enrolment in higher education as a percentage of the population in the age group of 18–23 years.
3 While a section of society in China has praised the provision of military training in infusing discipline in the young students, another section has questioned its practical outcome and the hardness of the training. See Evans (2013).

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