First Belt and Road Physical Education Forum, in Croatia. PC: Andrea Braun Střelcová.

Growing Up and Going Global

Chinese Universities in the Belt and Road Initiative

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This essay looks at the recent phenomenon of Chinese universities 'going global' through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). By examining the colonial origins of Chinese universities and contextualising the ongoing tension between the global and local dimensions of China's higher education system, the author argues that Chinese universities 'going global' is part of their process of 'growing up', and discusses how this phenomenon interacts with the BRI in CEE, as well as with a wider recalibration of the European Union's relationship with China.

In the spring of 2019, while working in administration for a Czech university, I attended a conference titled 'First Belt and Road Physical Education Forum' in Croatia. Organised jointly by local and Chinese universities, its objective was to explore opportunities in sport science alongside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. What struck me as I arrived at the event, which took place downtown in a large five-star business hotel, were the enormous flags of Croatia, the United States, and the European Union at the entrance. I made my way to the large, buzzing conference room and found a free seat just in time for the Chinese keynote presentation on the selection of contestants for the 2022

Winter Olympics. In a show of Chinese innovative prowess, the speaker lauded the predictive power of biomarkers to assess the athletes' 'probability of success, performance potential, and possibility of injury' for an increased medal count in the upcoming Beijing games. Consequently, two dozen university representatives, mainly from CEE countries and China, pitched their international programs, exchanges, and scholarships, in an almost speed-dating–like manner. At the end of the day, the organisers launched the China–Europe Belt and Road Cooperation Centre in Physical Education by unveiling a trophy in the shape of a golden soccer ball.

In the pre-pandemic days, attending such events was not unusual for university administrators. Gradually, these events ushered in a plethora of new 'Belt and Road centres' started by Chinese universities. Of particular interest to me was the centre set up under the auspices of a Chinese–Croatian partnership at an event that involved mostly universities from post-communist Europe. It demonstrated new trends and characteristics of Chinese universities 'going global'. In this essay, I offer my perspectives on the internationalisation of Chinese higher education both as a researcher and as a practitioner, with a special focus on the BRI in CEE. First, I place the international dimension of several Chinese universities in a historical context. Then, considering the evolving balance between the global and the local in Chinese higher education, I argue that Chinese universities 'going global' is part of their process of 'growing up'. Finally, I discuss how this phenomenon interacts with the implementation of the BRI in CEE, as well as the wider trend within the European Union of recalibrating its relationship with China.

International Origins of Chinese Higher Education

The modern university is a European invention. Higher education institutions across the globe operate on principles derived from the original model, first put forward by universities in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In China, modern education was based on international foundations (Yang et al. 2019). During the late Qing Dynasty, elements of foreign education systems were adopted as a pragmatic means to strengthen China. Acquiring Western knowledge was encouraged as long as the 'Chinese essence' remained as the cultural core—a philosophy also known as 'Chinese essence, Western application' (中体西用), which remains a central concept in Chinese education to this day, despite its inherent tensions (Cai 2012). In the late days of the empire, new institutions began to flourish and replaced the traditional places of higher learning for scholar-officials, such as the national academy (国子监) (Hayhoe 1996). The new learning bodies were often sponsored by foreign governments or religious societies since actors from Britain, Japan, Germany, France, and the United States carried out humanitarian, educational, or medical assistance, with the ultimate objective to spread political influence and Christianity (Hayhoe 1996: 39).

The Imperial University of Peking was born in such circumstances, in 1898. One of its many Western missionaries-teachers, William A.P. Parsons, also became the university's first head (Hao 2013). In 1917, Cai Yuanpei became the first chancellor of the institution under its new name, Peking University (PKU). Having just returned from Germany, Cai was strongly inspired by what is today Humboldt University, which connected teaching with research, and focused on academic freedom and internal autonomy. He introduced democratic governance and attracted a diverse group of staff (or 'world-class talents', as one would say today). By so doing, he transformed PKU into one of the most influential institutions in China, academically, culturally, and socially.

Another significant educator of the era was Ma Xiangbo, who was also Cai's mentor. The French-educated Jesuit was instrumental in creating another prestigious educational institution, Fudan University. Unlike Cai, Ma was convinced that the French model best suited China's needs (Hayhoe 1996: 44). Due to a leadership conflict, Ma resigned from his post as the president of Aurora (震旦大學), a French univer-

sity in Shanghai (Hayhoe and Lu 1996). He then proceeded to start a new university, with the name of Fudan (复旦), alluding to the revival of Aurora. Hinting at a new dawn, he wanted Fudan to become a liberal place integrating both Western and Chinese thought systems.

Around the same time, in another part of Shanghai, Tongji University was established by the German Government and doctors in 1907. Its name phonetically corresponding to '*deutsche*' in the Shanghai dialect, the project was supported not only by the Chinese and German states, but also by the German private sector and professional associations. Despite the cultural mission, it was hardly devoid of politics in an atmosphere in which 'supposedly pure science, both on [the] German and Chinese side, was integrated into the political framework ... in the guise of culture and science transfer' (Dinçkal and Mares 2012). Tongji was therefore also considered a 'cultural invasion' (Eckart 1989: 143) despite the purported humanitarian, public health, and educational reasons for its founding. Today, Tongji stands as one of the most internationalised Chinese institutions, with several Sino-foreign institutes on its Shanghai campus, and it remains a significant channel especially for Sino-German academic cooperation.

Dancing in a Cage

Let's fast forward to the 2020s, more than seven decades after the establishment of the People's Republic. China has now developed one of the most robust higher education systems in the world. According to the classic sociological theory of education, access to higher education in a particular age cohort in society undergoes a gradual transition from an 'elite' to a 'mass' stage, and eventually becomes 'universal' (Trow 1973). Since 1978, China has leaped from the first to the second phase and is now at the third, universal stage. Education is no longer for the privileged elite; the number of students in bachelor, master, or doctoral programs has grown tremendously. Chinese institutions 'produce' 50,000 doctoral graduates a year (Huang 2019), and this pipeline also fuels the country's scientific ambitions as the world's second-biggest spender on research and development (R&D) (OECD 2020).

In China , higher education institutions have been under strong state regulation, both with regards to their domestic and international affairs. After 1978, and especially since the 1990s, the Chinese Government has incentivised universities to grow international networks, student and staff mobility, exchanges, research cooperation, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, projects, and joint research and education institutes, both inside China and beyond its shores (Wu and Zha 2018). A few Chinese institutions are now recognised as 'world-class', getting ahead in the worldwide university classifications such as the 2022 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings (Times Higher Education 2021). PKU, Tsinghua, and others now gauge themselves against their global counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore. Such an impressive rise undoubtedly is significantly reshaping the global higher education landscape.

In many ways, the expansion of higher education in China reflects the sector's *global* developments. In the twenty-first century, successful universities are expected to contribute to national economic growth by building a knowledge-based society. Consequently, their relationships with the private sector, the government, and civil society have profoundly changed. In line with the sector's marketisation or 'academic capitalism', universities increasingly adopt a management style similar to that of private corporations (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). Their public funding is never sufficient, so they are constantly hard-pressed to raise money from other sources. Universities to some extent replicate each other's behaviour, in a mixture of both cooperation and competition for students, staff, funding, or positions in global rankings. All these stimulate an increase in non-academic staff in academia: administrators, managers, and coordinators. Along with these changes, internationalisation—a process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the purpose, function, and delivery of higher education (Knight 2008)—has emerged as another global phenomenon.

Each global trend develops its local subspecies, and the balance between the global and the local is particularly delicate in China. Since a strong state regulation has always been a feature of higher education, Chinese universities 'dance in a cage' to strike a balance between the national policies and institutional autonomy (Yang et al. 2007). They are adopting Western elements but imbuing them with local features: the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the more traditional (Confucian-scholarly) logic. Yet, universities function also in the global academic field, which is a semi-autonomous, self-referencing system with its own norms set by the standards of the academic profession (Marginson 2021). As such, they are deeply infused by international practices in terms of their organisational divisions (into schools, institutes, and departments) and performance indicators (such as research excellence, funding track record, or publication output). As a result, China's higher education is rigidly controlled by the Party-State, while coexisting with the sector's international underpinnings (Huang 2019). The universities' double governance structure means it is not the university president, but the Party committee and the secretary, who preside over political affairs, and the CCP is firmly nested within the university's administration (Huang 2017). This characteristic, although shared with former and contemporary communist countries, is easily overlooked by foreign researchers and administrators. They rarely meet CCP officials when visiting a Chinese university, and seldom are briefed on university management in China.

The more recent phenomenon of Chinese universities 'going global' is an extension of these developments. China—in particular, its top-tier universities, concentrated in several Chinese cities—has become a significant node in the global flow of people and knowledge. This happens in an environment in which the domestic ideological control over higher education is increasing—a trend that is likely to continue with Xi Jinping at the helm. Therefore, Western countries ask questions regarding the potential ethical, political, or national security implications of their China-related academic partnerships. The European Union is taking steps to limit areas of research cooperation between European and Chinese institutes, after it labelled China 'a strategic partner and a systemic rival' back in 2019. European policymakers have emphasised the need for research and educational exchanges, but also acknowledged the difficulties arising from the clash of interests and values between China and Europe. Given the link between Chinese science and its national objectives, articulated in key policy documents such as the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan, the unease is most tangible in cutting-edge science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) fields such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing, but also in social sciences. Naturally, each European country has a different perception of the level of risk when working with China, and their capacities to deal with such risk also vary. For example, the German Ministry of Education and Research has stressed the need to build 'China competencies' and earmarked funding to support domestic China expertise. But the smaller, less wealthy countries in CEE often do not have the necessary resources—human or financial—to do the same.

'Serving the BRI'

Using Jeremy Garlick's (2019: 159) conceptualisation of the BRI as 'an ideational as well as material construct within which an increasingly complex network of institutional practices take[s] shape and intersect[s]', let us take a glimpse at the BRI's implications for universities in the CEE. China perceives CEE under the BRI framework as a homogeneous group of post-communist countries that are trying to catch up with the West (Garlick 2019). Unlike some countries in the West, where universities have been catering to incoming Chinese students for decades and have established entire adjacent industries, CEE universities were latecomers, overlooking (and overlooked by) China in higher education. After all, they have been scarcely visible in the global university rankings; located in small countries or linguistic regions of marginal interest to China, they do not possess as much economic or cultural capital as their Western counterparts. Therefore, they only began to be considered as

interesting to engage with for Chinese universities relatively recently, and the rollout of the BRI has played an important role in the process.

Chinese higher education has used the BRI to promote international cooperation in the sector and vice versa (d'Hooghe 2021). In fact, Chinese universities are expected to *serve* the BRI proactively (Gao 2020: 21). New proposals are encouraged by government policies, such as the Chinese Ministry of Education's BRI 2016 'Action Plan' (Ministry of Education 2016). The financing of BRI projects—including research and higher education centres—is tied to China's political agenda and guided by the country's geopolitical aspirations rather than serious research questions (van der Wende et al. 2020: 29).

What Vangeli (2018: 679) observed as 'ritualistic repetition' of narratives such as win–win cooperation and common destiny, which, over time, have been 'internalised as legitimate principles' in China–CEE think tank cooperation, I witnessed unfolding in higher education. As a university administrator, I suddenly saw cooperation increasing rapidly from a base of next to zero. Various new initiatives were proposed by the Chinese universities themselves, containing phrases such as 'Belt and Road' and 'Silk Road'. Such words became common additions to the names of new university alliances, partnerships, scholarships schemes, cooperative centres, master's degrees, as well as language or area studies programs. Ten years ago, two Czech-language undergraduate programs existed in China; in 2019, there were nine (Zídková 2019). These programs were established to provide training for several hundred students in Czech studies every year. I was thankful for all initiatives that increased the knowledge about my home country in China. Nonetheless, I could see that our Chinese partner universities were answering a political call rather than a genuine societal need, and I wondered whether creating new degrees tailored to top-down incentives would be enough to ensure the programs' quality and sustainability.

In the CEE countries themselves, the public response to the emerging presence of China has ranged from enthusiasm to angst. The recent proposal by Fudan University to open a branch

Promotional poster of Tongji University. PC: Andrea Braun Střelcová.

in Budapest—the first Chinese offshore campus in Europe—presents us with a clear instance of this clash. On the one hand, the idea was strongly supported by the Hungarian Government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a hallmark of Chinese–Hungarian strategic partnerships, highlighting the project's potential educational and financial benefits. On the other hand, the idea of a Chinese university (albeit one of the most liberal ones) setting up in the country triggered a negative response on other parts of the political spectrum, as well as much of the public. The criticism went in two main directions. First, concerns were raised about the project's transparency and the feasibility of its financing model. Second, anxieties emerged about the potential influence of the CCP. As of

October 2021, the liberal Mayor of Budapest, a city of 1.8 million, including 30,000 Chinese, triggered a request for a referendum on the project, delaying further implementation.

Symbiosis of the BRI and Higher Education

Chinese universities have used the BRI to expand their international exposure, including to places previously less travelled, such as the CEE countries. It has been a mutually beneficial relationship since the Chinese state is expecting its higher education institutions to contribute to the BRI's geopolitical objectives. In the West, the development has generated concerns since it is evident that even in noble causes such as education, a complex set of other interests is involved. The unease is justified also in light of China's overall political trend, which is becoming increasingly inward-looking. Amid the heightened political tensions, the European Union and member countries such as Germany are recalibrating their positions on cooperation with Chinese universities. At the same time, however, they also stress the need for such cooperation, especially in areas of global concern such as climate change, and emphasise the urgency of increasing general knowledge about China, without which managing a more reciprocal relationship with the country will not be possible.

Based on my observations in Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, this process has its peculiarities in CEE. The CEE countries—at least those who are members of the European Union—respond to what is happening in Europe and in China from a different position than their Western European counterparts. Unlike the latter, the former's education and research budgets are smaller, as is the volume of their exchanges with China; most CEE universities have not worked with China for decades. Therefore, for them, the BRI is a window of opportunity to create links to China and develop experience of teaching Chinese students and working with Chinese universities.

Given China's impressive growth in higher education and research, the country's universities will continue to expand their footprints in the world. Any assessment of the BRI's implications for higher education can so far be only preliminary, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to constrain development in this area. However, even if concerns about the risks of working with Chinese institutions are valid, to limit such exchange is hardly the right answer to move forward. Higher education as a field is built on international exchange and the flow of people, knowledge, and ideas. Universities exemplify some of the most globalised institutions in the world and, in this way, Chinese institutions going global is a natural next step in their development. Still, it is wise to keep in mind that their international activities are, primarily, aimed at strengthening their own capacity and advancing China's interests. Higher education is embedded in national frameworks and, once it travels abroad, it can also become an instrument of foreign policy. This is evident in the colonial heritage of some of the first Chinese universities. It is still true today, when those same universities—now confident and affluent—go out from China into the world, under the auspices of the BRI. ■

The author would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr Gaoming Zheng (Tongji University) and Dr Su Yun Woo (University of Zurich) who provided inspiring advice, as well as thank the CHERN (EU-funded 'China in Europe Research Network') for their support.

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 6, Issue 2, 2021*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2021 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.06.02.2021.19