Discuss ‘Context’ Matters in Comparative and International Research in Education with Reference to the Dilemmas of Policy Transfer

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Abstract. This study shows that ‘context matters’ in comparative and international research in education, with specific reference to policy transfer in relation to contemporary Chinese higher education. It draws upon both the potential benefits and the possible dilemmas, which arise from the use of foreign systems within the context of the reformed open-door China. The fundamental purpose of this study is to address the questions about whether the western higher education system is suited to the context in China and how context matters in practice in China and to what extent context matters in international transfer of educational practice.

Introduction

The outline of the paper is as follows: Section 1 provides a review of the literature concerned with the international transfer of education policy, practice and theory. In Section 2 the history of higher education development in China is described from its beginning to the present reform followed by the case study of the Chinese higher education system and its construction during the period from 1980s to now. The case study describes the societal, economical, political, cultural and historical contexts in China and provides detailed analysis of the content of the higher education system transformation. Section 3 offers the conclusion of the study, relating the case-study findings and evidence drawn from the literature. The implications of the findings of the study are also discussed.

Literature Review

The Theoretical and Historical Background to the Study---A Review of the International Literature

There is a long history about the education system being transferred between different nations. Over several centuries, great progress was made in the field of comparative education. In the early 19th century, Marc-Antoine Jullien’s proposal claimed that the government should provide statistical information concerning different facets of their education systems (Julien 1817) in order to ‘deduce true principles and determined routes so that education would be transformed into an almost positive science’ (cited Fraser 1964:20 in Michael and Keith 2003 P. 13). Later Mathew Arnold proposed that educationists would ‘borrow from foreign systems......aspects which would benefit their own’ (Holmes, 1977, P. 83 cited in Christopher M.1997.P.9). In 1900, Michael Salder developed Arnold’s idea emphasizing: ‘The practical value of studying in a fight spirit and with scholarly accuracy, the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and to understand our own’(Sadler, in Higginson,1979’P.50). About the current debates of the ‘globalization’ of education, many practices have been made to transplant educational’ ideas…institutional models and…practices from one country to another’ (Raggatt, 1983,P.1 cited in Christopher M.1997,P.9). The 20th century saw a ‘period of unprecedented educational borrowing’ (Crossley1984, P. 74). From Jullien to Mathew Arnold to Michael Salder and later twentieth century leaders in the field, the principal intention of comparativists has been to
help explain the comparisons with conditions ‘elsewhere’. (Ochs & Phillips.2002.PP.325-326).

Not only are the explicit major purposes explained and analyzed in the comparative education field, much attention is also paid to ‘what is done and how’. Sadler made a more clear explanation: In the studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. A national system of Education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties and ‘of battles long ago’. It has in it some of the secret workings of national life. (Higginson, 1979, P. 49)

Above all, the context of policy transfer must be addressed in both the importing country and the exporting country and the suitability of transfer.

A Case Study--International Transfer

History of Higher Education and Its Development in China of Chinese Higher Education System since 1980s

Education in China, especially the higher education has a long history of its own development and also a shorter history of influence from western countries.

Its own development evolved over three or four thousand years until the 1800s. The examination system (keju) and the academies (shuyuan) were the two main forms of higher education. The following stage is the period of the formation and development of modern higher education. By the 19th century China had become ‘rich meat’ for the western powers and later Japan as well. It is probably the fact that China’s higher education development was a mixture of independent development and semi-colonial effects. After the First Opium War in 1840 until 1921, there were 16 foreign universities, only six run by the state. (Gu Mingyuan, 2003). The first modern institution, Beiyang University, was founded in 1895, in Tianjin. In 1922, the system of ‘6334’ was adopted, (6 years for primary school, 3 years for junior, 3 years for senior and 4 years for university). It is a symbol that Chinese higher education began to imitate America. In universities, the credit schema and the schema to include optional and compulsory subjects were adopted in order to encourage and train students’ personality liberty and consciousness of competition. In addition, the French higher education system was popular in China, but because it didn't adapt to the situation of Chinese politics and culture the pilot of the university borough system had to be can celled within two years. In a word, the development of higher education during this period was very slow within the semi-feudalistic and semi-colonial society. Nevertheless, Chinese higher education was continuing to learn from the West and to take on many of its ideas. With the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese higher education system broke off relations with the Western World and simply adapted the Soviet model. The period from 1949 to 1960 is usually called the ‘Higher Education Transformation’, involving the reorganization of universities and disciplines, the revision of curriculum, etc. This kind of model continued in China until 1990s. In the most recent period, China has again looked towards the West for ideas about higher educational development.

Above all, obviously, China has a long record both of indigenous higher education development and international educational transfer. China’s modern higher education history illustrates some of the problems encountered when foreign educational models are copied.

Contexts of the Case Study—International Transfer of Chinese Higher Education System since 1980s

Local Contexts

Political History. China has a history of more than five thousand years with many dynasties. The last imperial dynasty was overthrown in 1911 by Sun Yat Sen and the Nationalist Party. In turn, the Communist Party defeated the Nationalist Party in the war in 1949 under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The implementation of the new programme was highly centralized. Mao died in 1976.
Deng Xiaoping, who came to power in 1978, was responsible for China’s open-door policy, which gradually increased interaction between China and other counties. In 1992, introduced the notion of a ‘socialist market economy’.

**Cultural History.** Political histories are always connected with cultures. The traditional system was state-run and highly competitive. Traditional veneration for learning and career aspirations were the motivational ingredients. Physical labour and natural science were disdained. Western and Japanese influences affected the educational system during the early 20th century, when the examination system was abolished and the mass-system was introduced instead of the traditional elitist one. Even today, however, the Confucian heritage can easily be detected in Chinese educational practice.

**Economic History.** Before 1949, when New China was founded, agriculture and handicrafts were the basis of the economy. These were feudal, individual and underdeveloped, and accounted for 90 percent, while Chinese capitalists had controlled modern industry, which was 10 percent of the economy. (Lofstedt 1980. P.69). During the dark Cultural Revolution, the development of the economy was halted. Since Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1979, there has been a new climate in China. His open-door policy contributed to the renaissance of the economy and eventually the ‘socialist market economy’ was introduced in 1992. The rapid development of the economy has attracted more and more foreign companies to invest in China, especially after she joined the WTO.

**Global Contexts**

With the rapid development of science and technology, the world economy is moving into knowledge-based economy from industrial-based economy. Cultural interaction and cooperation between nations are progressing faster than any other time before.

**The Current Changes in Chinese Higher Education**

Since China adopted its open-door policy approximately 25 years ago, many significant reforms to China’s system of higher education are now in place. Some aspects of the changes of Chinese higher education are listed here.

**Sending and Receiving Students Aboard.** During the last 25 years, from 1978 to 2003, China has sent 702,000 students abroad for study to more than 100 countries, in fact China sends more students than any other country to study aboard. On the other hand, China has received more than 85,800 foreign students from 1600 counties and has employed 50,000 foreign teachers and experts. Now there are 172,800 students coming back to China after they have finished their studies abroad to serve the country in various positions. (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2003 and 2004a). This alleviates the tension between the increasing development of the country’s economy and integration into the world economy, requiring more trained people with all kinds of advanced knowledge.

**University Merger.** As China joined the WTO at the turn of the 21st century, higher education has integrated more than ever before into global education. At the anniversary celebration of Beijing University, Jiang Zemin pointed out that to realize modernization, China needed to build some high level world-class universities. In order to achieve this goal, China merged some universities, reorganized curricula, as well as decentralizing administration. University mergers took place all over the country. From 1996 to 2000, 387 colleges and universities were combined into 212, according to official statistics. (Xin-ran Duan. 2003. P. 3) With the administration reform of the country, the administrative system of higher education has been readjusted, changed from a highly centralized form into a decentralized one. Provincial and local governments are responsible for most of the universities.

After the university mergers, the curriculum was changed into broader disciplines from the old narrow single one. It now includes arts, Science, medicine, industry, agriculture, engineering, management etc. that promotes mutual permeation between the different disciplines and improves the ability of teaching and the scientific research of the comprehensive universities.

**Expansion of the Higher Education.** As a developing country, China has experienced significant economic growth during the last 25 years as the country has sought “to make up for lost time”. However, one of the serious obstacles to enhance and sustain the country’s economic growth is a shortage of educated personnel. To provide highly trained talent for the knowledge-based society and also meet the strong demand for higher education from the one-child families, China is
expanding higher education, including extending enrollment, relaxing conditions of admission as well as building a multi-level system. Currently, China has shaped this multi-level system, which consists of a 3-year college course without degree, a 4-year undergraduate course, 2 or a 3-year postgraduate course, and a 3-year doctorate. The huge numbers below show that expansion. In 2004, the number of college student was 20 million. (People’s Daily. 2004.) Obviously, Chinese higher education is experiencing movement into western style mass education from its old Soviet model of elite education.

The Emergence of Private Universities. In 1982, China encouraged social organizations and individuals to build private education. Until the end of 2003, there are about 1279 private institutions in China. (Ministry of Education, PRC, 2004b). For example, in Xicuan and Shanxanxi provinces, 71,000 student are studying in 74 private colleges and universities. (Xin-ran Duan. 2003) With the rapid growth of market economy, more and more enterprises and individuals begin to invest in that for economic profit.

Implications

Above all, since the 1980, China has made some serious changes in its higher education system. The degree of progress as an American scholar said: “I doubt that many American universities could have reopened after something as pervasive as the Culture Revolution and have advanced as quickly as Chinese institutions have done.” (Mohrman, 2003, 3, p. 96). However, it is clear that some issues and challenges accompanying the great reform between policy and practice.

Tension between Further Expansion and Maintenance of Quality. After the expansion of higher education, many more students enter colleges and universities, resulting in the shortage of teachers, resources, libraries, teaching equipment, accommodation etc. In addition, lower conditions of admission also influence the quality of graduates. Some students with lower scores could enter the universities as long as they pay extra tuition fees in some areas. So the need to maintain the quality of universities and colleges is a powerful argument in keeping control of the expansion.

Tension between Expansion of Enrollment and Inappropriate Job Placement. From the view of the traditional culture in China, Confucian educational thought has deeply influenced people’s respect for education. Learning is for a good job and stable future, as well as getting higher status in society. With more and more graduates in the labour market, it is a fact that graduates who are keen to work are unemployed. How to estimate the relationship between the universities and colleges and job placements is a new challenge.

Tension Between the University Merger and Effectiveness of Management. After the university merger, many issues emerged in practice. The distance between the reorganized universities led to significantly increased daily expenditure, more administrative levels, increase in financial management and decrease in management effectiveness. In addition, some universities were reluctant to merge, but were required to do so by the government. This situation also results in problems concerning teaching benefits, relocation of resources etc. which greatly influence the effectiveness of management.

Conclusion from the Case Study

In retrospect, from the history of the contemporary higher educational system, it is clear that China was influenced by the international system. Uncritically learning, borrowing and implanting foreign academic patterns to make our own better led to confusion, contradiction, conflict and much failure. Facing the reality; the reform of higher education in China, the new higher education policy reflects China’s social, historical, cultural, and political contexts, on which the western model is based, to some extent. Chinese people benefit from this advanced model. However, issues, challenges and conflicts also accompany the ‘successful’ reform’ and these will be obstacles in the pathway of achieving the goals of the reform. So the “transfer” of education policies and practice must be approached carefully. It is seldom possible to borrow an institutional or even a specific policy from abroad successfully without considerable modification and adaptation. (Altbach, 1998, p. 83)

Conclusions

The findings of the case study are related to the international literature ---context matters. The modern higher education in China initiated at the end of the 19th Century, and has been
characterized by involvement in the foreign systems. We can see German, French, British, American as well as Japanese education systems through the Chinese higher education system. In the current reform of Chinese higher education, western academic model and practice was transferred to the higher educational system of developing China. This was partly due to the outside elements of the foundation of foreign schools in China during the Opium Wars, which made China open the door to the world. Also the desire from inside China to ‘learn experience from others’ led to the development of our own. Many efforts have been made to follow the western pattern in the present educational reform. It is concerned principally with the decentralized administrative system, mass education, liberal arts and science, multi-level and private universities etc. As Xinyuan Duan (2003, p.8) said, ‘that of an educator with experience in the Chinese and the western educational System—the changes in China are positive and important’ But in the diverse direction, Mohrman (2003, p.95) stated, ‘it is social that the higher education scene in China is very fluid right now, the sense of urgency are being undertaken—the construction of new university cities, for example—and what looks to me like a somewhat haphazard array of changes without a lay-range plan.’

The analysis of the case study—higher educational policy reveals that the western education system works in western countries, but it is hard to say that such an academic model is quite adapted to the aims and goals of the Reform in China, in the long term. If the higher education reform in China can be changed to be appropriate to contexts, reforms will have achieved a great deal. So China will have to make progress in solving the major dilemmas, to some extent due to the uncritical international transfer of higher education policy and practice, and will have generated the reform based on the understanding of its own country.

Altbach (1998, pp. 83-84) gave a detailed saying about why context is important: “understanding the context both of comparisons and of the ‘world system’ in which contemporary universities exit is crucial if Third World nations are to make effective decisions regarding higher education policy.’

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