Higher Education Development and Student Mobility During Crises: From a Comparative and Historical Perspective

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Introduction
While the ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has caused a global crisis, it is necessary for various sections including the highly internationalized higher education system to re-predict their respective development trends. As been proposed by Popper (1957), “the influence of a prediction upon the predicted event (i.e., the ‘Oedipus effect’)” can hardly be avoided (p. 11). Researchers in social sciences therefore should adopt a cautious attitude and choose an appropriate methodology while proposing their anticipations during social crises. It seems obvious that conducting historical analysis and making comparisons among similar situations (in both modern and premodern history) often help to understand existing challenges. According to the history, higher education has never been an ivory tower isolated from social crises. Major historical events may have significant influence toward the development of higher education and the overall tendency of student mobility, and which may be quite different from or even contrary to the predictions proposed based on the so-called “common sense.” Therefore, although the construction of meta-narratives may illustrate macro-level tendencies, Popper’s (1957) argument of practicing.
“piecemeal social engineering” is also necessary to be emphasized for the sake of revealing the complexity of history. In a word, I hope that this commentary will not be labeled as either “pro-naturalistic” or “anti-naturalistic.”

**Premodern history of higher education development and cross-border student mobility during crises**

Using a common language Latin and educating students coming from around Europe and beyond, medieval universities can be regarded, to some extent, as highly internationalized institutions established and developed based on cross-border student mobility (Altbach, 1985). It seems quite natural to make such an argument that global/regional crises such as the Black Death may greatly hinder the development of medieval universities. However, based on quantitative historical data, Courtenay (1980) argued that “the Black Death had only a slight effect on the Oxford University population” in 1348 and 1349 (p. 703), “either for those in residence or for those who replaced them in the next student generation” (p. 705). Several possible explanations were proposed, including the university age group (15–35) which “was more resistant to disease,” relatively good diet and living conditions (p. 703), as well as “the high death rate among the parish clergy” and the increase of “sudden and unexpected inheritance” which may stimulate the recovery of student population (Courtenay, 1980, p. 713). “In this crisis [...] Oxford may have accepted those less qualified than in earlier years,” and “a university training [...] lived on in the social aspirations of many families who before 1348 could not afford the luxury of higher education” (Courtenay, 1980, p. 713).

Wu and Yan (2019) proposed a three-stage typology to describe and analyze the evolution of the “cosmopolitan” nature of institutions of higher learning: (1) the “religious cosmopolitanism” dominated by missionary impulse in the premodern world, (2) the “knowledge cosmopolitanism” dominated by the development of science and technology in the modern world, and (3) the “digital cosmopolitanism” dominated by emerging information technologies. Similar to the attractiveness of the theological education (and, of course, the improvement in living condition and social status) which stimulated the development and self-recovery of medieval universities, the premodern cross-border student mobility in the Far Eastern world was often associated with the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist temples such as Nalanda in ancient subcontinent became highly internationalized institutions of higher learning in the seventh-century C.E. In addition to Mahayana Buddhist texts, arts [silpasthanavidya], diagnostic medicine [cikitsavidya], epistemology [heuvidya], and metaphysics [adhyatmavidya] were also taught in Nalanda “university,” and which attracted learners from different countries, including the Chinese monks Xuanzang and Yijing (Pinkney, 2015). It seems worth noting that Chinese monks faced three macro-level challenges during that era: the intricacies of international relations in Central Asia that the Silk Road passed through, the
dangerous voyage along the Maritime Silk Road (different from Xuanzang who traveled by land, Yijing spent eight months at sea), and the government restrictions on Chinese people going abroad.

**Modern history of higher education development and cross-border student mobility during crises**

It seems that the premodern history of higher education development and student mobility during national/regional crises reveals the considerable self-recovery capability of universities. However, while making comparison among recurring issues, the consequences of modernity and globalization should not be ignored (and of course, the modernity itself is now intrinsically experiencing the process of globalization; Giddens, 1990). More advanced transportation and a much flatter world structure accelerate the internationalization process of higher education, and which also makes it possible for the virus to spread quickly around the world. Moreover, in the age of globalization, there are much more potential factors that may cause global/regional social crises. Harari (2018) proposed in his *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* that human beings are now facing new challenges caused by global warming, big data algorithms, and terrorism, and “when the old stories have collapsed, no new story has emerged so far to replace them.” Therefore, although the nature of medieval universities still more or less influences the current higher education, while anticipating the future trend of cross-border student mobility, it seems more appropriate to use the premodern history as a supplement, rather than evidence for proving that history repeats itself.

Over 100 years ago, the 1918 influenza pandemic (the so-called “Spanish flu”) killed between 20 and 50 million people worldwide, and which can be regarded as the deadliest epidemics in modern history. The flu pandemic caused high mortality of young adults (which “may be due to an overactive immune response”) and seriously hit university campuses in North America (Cozens, 2020; Gagnon, et al., 2013, p. 2). For instance, although the campus of the University of North Carolina (UNC) was quarantined in October 1918 due to the flu, the University President Edward Kidder Graham fell ill (Cozens, 2020). “As was typical for those infected during this second wave, he developed pneumonia as a secondary infection and died in less than a week” (Cozens, 2020, para. 6). “Marvin Stacy assumed leadership of the University [. . . and] three months later, however, Stacy also became infected with the flu, and died of pneumonia like his predecessor” (Cozens, 2020, para. 8). According to the university archives, “over 500 UNC students had been treated in the infirmary and seven had died as a result of complications with the illness” (Cozens, 2020, para. 10). In terms of Chinese students, comparing with the domestic political situation, the influenza pandemic might be a less influential factor. According to the statistics from 1918 to 1925, the number of students sent by the Chinese government to Western countries increased from 24 in 1918 to 106 in 1919, and thereafter reached 205 in 1920 (Wu, 2009). The number reached a record high of 1,033 in 1935 before the Sino-Japanese War (Wu, 2009).
As mentioned, terrorism is a major global challenge in the 21st century. The September 11 attacks (9/11) in 2001 caused huge panic in the U.S. society, and which caused the U.S. government to reduce visa issuance for a period of time (inducing both F-1 student visa and J-1 visa for visiting scholars). The U.S. “exercised tighter supervision and control over foreign students and [...] which brought reproaches from many foreign students” (Li, 2003, para. 6). “The U.S. share of globally mobile students dropped from 28 percent in 2001 to 24 percent in 2017” (Zong & Batalova, 2018, para. 1). However, “the overall number of international students more than doubled in the same period” (Zong & Batalova, 2018, para. 1). The growth of Chinese students in the U.S. slowed down for a while, and, thereafter, the number has started to grow rapidly again. The Chinese students “have accounted for about two-thirds of the increase in total international student enrollments in the U.S. since 2003 (two years after the terrorist attacks) [to 2013–14]” (Chao et al., 2017, p. 258). Based on a quantitative analysis among survey data, Chao et al. (2017) argued that nonacademic reasons such as “cultural aspects and desires to gain a non-Chinese world perspective emerge [...] are primary motives for [Chinese students to] study in the U.S.” (Chao et al., 2017, p. 266). “This may be due to the understanding and realization by the Chinese of a global economy” and “could also be considered to be consistent with attitudes of all affluent middle classes who have moved beyond daily sustenance and have achieved long term security” (Chao et al., 2017, p. 266). It seems obvious that such long-term factors can hardly be changed due to a sudden crisis. Moreover, presently, the State of New York is still the second most popular destination for international students in the U.S., and New York University in the City of New York “has been the leading host university for international students” since 2013 (Zong & Batalova, 2018, para. 16).

**Discussion and conclusion**

According to the modern and premodern history of higher education development and cross-border student mobility during crises including disease pandemic and terrorist attacks, and/or under the negative influence of domestic and/or foreign policy factors, the considerable self-recovery capability of institutions of higher learning and the persistent motivation of student/learner mobility can hardly be ignored. This may be partly due to the medieval nature of the university/higher education (e.g., the “religious cosmopolitanism,” or a certain kind of belief or vision similar to religions, dominated by a sense of mission similar to the missionary impulse). Considering the consequences of modernity and new challenges in the era of globalization, discussions among recurring issues in the modern history may be more convincing. Although they also should not be regarded as persuasive evidence for proving that history repeats itself, it seems appropriate to make such a conclusion that a single sudden crisis can hardly bring fundamental changes to the overall trend of student mobility. In terms of China, as mentioned, long-term factors (including academic and
nonacademic reasons) which have driven the rapid increase in the number of Chinese students studying abroad can hardly be changed in a short period of time due to a sudden crisis. Middle-class families will still be willing to invest in their children’s education abroad. Moreover, from a long-run perspective, it seems appropriate to anticipate that China’s status as a receiving country will not be fundamentally changed by either unexpected crises or short-term incentive policies for similar reasons.

Author’s note
The present forum deals with the coronavirus crisis, cross-border student mobility, and choices for Chinese students.

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