China’s Higher Education Reforms: Hong Kong and Macau SARs Case of China’s HE Students Abroad

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Abstract
This article tries to explain that in 1980-1990 China announced reforms to improve Higher Education. The question then was whether American branches could be effectively grafted on a Soviet tree planted in a Chinese garden (Pepper, S. 1990. China's Education Reform. Berkeley). We will try to demonstrate that in 2023 that China succeeded in implanting Western HE successfully in its education system. Why so many Chinese students study in the United States. In 2003 only 57,717 HE international students studied in China. During the 2020-21 school year, 317,299 Chinese nationals enrolled in US institutions, represented about a third of all international students studying in the USA. For these Chinese students—mostly in maths, computer science and engineering—the most important was to get an “American degree” (SCMP 15.11.2022). An important question in 2021-2022 is the worst recession since the Great Depression caused by the pandemic Covid-19 which perturbed also education and the number of Chinese students studying in America. Chinese students in the US, in particular, found themselves vulnerable. The USA, Australia, and the UK are the most popular destinations, receiving 33 percent of China’s HE international students. In the first six months of 2022, the US issued 31,055 F-1 visas to Chinese nationals, down from 64,261 for the same period in 2019, consequently the number of Chinese HE students going abroad is at present falling sharply. A main reason is China’s economy which appears to slow down in 2022.

Keywords
Challenges, HE Reforms, HK, Mainland HE

1. Mainland China Reforms and Challenges in HE: Students in China and Chinese students in the USA

According to Andrews, Stephen Pearl (1854), discoveries in Chinese, the first Chinese graduated in Yale was named Yung Wing (1828-1912), a Cantonese who studied first in Canton. However, the extraordinary recent progresses of China’s higher education (HE) were done after between 1990 and 2020 during the reforms and started under the presidency of Deng Xiaoping. Western countries, in particular the United States and UK are attracting Chinese HE students. The reason to study in the United States is complex and not simply for academics. It could be less costly nowadays than in China. To study the test Tofel exam of English is certainly easier than many Chinese ways to study in Chinese uni-
iversities with in particular tough competition to join the 200 top universities in China. Sometimes, it could be the wish of the parents who are wishing to push their children and have a more open mind to consider the United States. 56 percent male against 44 percent female want to study in the USA. But it does not mean that the interviewed accept the fact that generally speaking believes that the Chinese universities are better must more difficult to join. Northeast America and in particular New York State attract Chinese students (Chao, 2017, p. 266). There are more and more international students coming to China, but Covid-19 between 2019 and 2022 reduced considerably this of international students.

![Figure 1. Number of International Students Studying in China.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Increase or decrease</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>207,555</td>
<td>10.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>54,453</td>
<td>15.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>34,882</td>
<td>7.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>27,052</td>
<td>30.41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. International students in China and their origin**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2021/22</td>
<td>290,086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td>317,299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>372,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018/19</td>
<td>369,548</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HE students in the USA. The University of Southern California has one of the highest numbers of Chinese international students in the country. It is also one of the most expensive universities in the United States.

What are the most prominent challenges facing higher education? There is a spectacular rise of higher education in all its contemporary forms in East Asia (Ka Ho Mok, 2016). For Chinese researchers, international research collaborations appear to serve “two purposes, as a platform to introduce nationally active researchers into the global system, and as a space to integrate social realities and theoretical frameworks based in different contexts”. Additionally, the social relations in the China-UK collaboration in this study seem to be equal and respectful rather than dominant and dependent. Chinese researchers absorb much knowledge from the UK in theoretical analysis and publication advice but remain self-sustained and autonomous in other aspects of international collaboration activities (Yu Kevin, 2022). The extraordinary progresses of China’s higher education (HE) were done after between 1990 and 2020 during the
reforms and started under the presidency of Deng Xiaoping. Western countries, in particular the United States is the
attracted Chinese HE students. An interesting question about the Chinese students in America is what was their expec-
tation when they reached the USA for the first time.

For Sheng Zhong: (ChatGPT)

I guess they are surprised to see: (1) suburban areas, instead of downtown areas, are (kind of) dominant in the Amer-
ican life; (2) infrastructures appear older than in Hollywood movies; (3) the food tastes so different from the so called
Western food sold in China; (4) public transportation is nearly missing, so that you have to buy a car; (5) textbooks are
very expensive; (6) movie tickets and cars are very inexpensive; (7) essentially anything you used in China, you can
find it in the States.

There are challenges concerning China’s HE which exhibits a need for better regulation as well as more academic
qualifications and teaching experience. How many Chinese Students in the USA in September 2023? The main reasons
to study abroad are enriched experience, meet a diverse range of people, language skills, future employment prospects,
avoid entrance exam in China for HE, influenced by their friends, better environment, or requested by parents (Cheng ,
2018).

2. Hong Kong Academic Research: Education Reform and in Particular HE Mainlandization

There are 22 higher education institutions in Hong Kong with local degree-awarding power. These institutions offer a
wide array of high quality programs from sub-degree to doctoral levels. More and more HE students from the Mainland
come to Hong Kong. The number of students from mainland China applying to Hong Kong universities has risen to an
all-time high at the same time as the numbers applying to universities in the United States and Australia have dropped,
according to recently released figures. English level of mainland China students applying in HK is much better than the
years before.

The HKAR Government encourages academic research in the higher education sector. It provides research funding to
the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities annually. The UGC-funded universities receive recurring
funding through block grants and earmarked research grants approved by the Research Grant Council (RGC), on a
competitive basis. For details of the various funding schemes administered by RGC, https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/rcg/.
The Research Endowment Fund (REF) was established in 2009 with an original endowment of HK$18 billion. In June 2019, the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council approved the proposed
injection of $20 billion into the REF to substantially increase and provide sustainable research funding to the higher
education sector with a view to fostering the scientific research ecosystem in Hong Kong.

What is the most prominent challenge facing the education in Hong Kong SAR?

Mainlandization of HKSAR means in particular the education reform which started in June 2020. At present, in 2023,
the mainlandization education reform in the HKSAR was implemented in the last three year is a basis of mainlandiz-
tion of the education system in Hong Kong which will continue to be implemented at least 2047. “Hong Kong affairs
have firmly believed in the necessity of changing the education system of the HKSAR to an ideological direction” (Lo ,
2022). The question at present is “to see whether the political project in education of the PRC—in HK—will be suc-
cessful in the long run” (Yu Kevin, 2022, p. 192).

2.1 Migration of Students out of Hong Kong

A total of 89,200 citizens left HKSAR from mid-2020 to mid-2021. It was unclear how many students and teachers
were among these roughly 90,000 immigrants (The Standard 12 August 2021). The student enrolment in day schools by
level from 2002 to 2020 declined over time, especially after 2019. It must be noted that primary school students tended
to increase in the period from 2005 to 2012, when the Donald Tsang administration was characterized by social stability
and economic prosperity. Students enrolling in primary schools dropped by 12,636 (1,707 at the secondary level). “The
figures showed a significant decline in student population” (Lo, 2022, p. 165). Amid the 2022 emigration wave, the
Chief Executive John Lee said that he was considering measures to boost Hong Kong’s low birth rate, adding that while
people were leaving the city, “the worst has passed” (Chan, 2023).

In 1996, 97.9% enrolling in HK universities were local and only 1.26 were from the mainland. In 2020, however,
79.7 were local and 14.1 percent were from the mainland. However, HE students from Taiwan, the UK, Australia,
Canada and the United States also come to the HKSAR’s universities. So, under these circumstances teachers and stu-
dents are adapted to the new nationalistic contents of the education in Hong Kong (ibid. 169, 173, 176). This increase of
HE mainland students was confirmed by the author himself in December 2022, and shows more “patriotic” and nationa-
istic education “in the long run” in Hong Kong’s HE Education. Other foreign HE influencing China: The UK has been
one of the three major social science powers in education after World War II along with the US and France which did not influence education in China in the 20th century (Archer, 1991). The UK produced around 10 percent citations and 15 percent of world’s most highly cited papers with only 4.1 percent of the world’s researchers in social sciences (Yu Kevin, 2022).

3. China’s HE students abroad and particularly in the USA: Evolution with Covid-19 role 2020-2022, Macau short mention of Higher Education

The USA (with 976,853 Chinese international students), Australia with more than 141,000 Chinese student enrolments in Australia in June 2022, with approximately 116,700 enrolled in the higher education sector (Statista 3 January 2023). The motivation of these students is important. Motivations of overseas education related to conditions in China and abroad. In addition, older students and those in MA programs are more strongly influenced by a need to experience different cultures; younger students and those in MSc programs are more strongly driven by academics-related factors (Wu, 2014).

In 2019, before the severe deterioration in China-Australia ties, international education contributed A$40 billion (US$29 billion) to Australian economy. But the number of Chinese students in Australia is declining. According to data provided by the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment in Canberra, there were 166,319 Chinese students in Australia in January-September 2021, dropping nearly 13 percent year-on-year. Chinese students in Australia were 190,926 in 2020 and 211,965 in 2019. The UK is the most popular destination, receiving one third of international students (Global Times, June 21, 2022).

Except in the USA there are Chinese students who consistently shown their interest in studying in the United Kingdom and Australia despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19, this trend will continue to grow as Britain has become the top study destination for Chinese students. At the end of 31 June 2020, 31,400 new students from China had submitted applications to enter HE in the UK this autumn, a surge of 29 percent. Nicolas Chu, founder of Sinorbis—a company that helps UK higher-learning institutions in China—said that by 2030 the increase will be 7 percent of undergraduate Chinese students. "It is in part due to the UK’s increasing popularity as a study destination" (China Daily, September 19, 2022). The number of Chinese declined in 2021-2022 in particular following the Covid 19 epidemics and the diminution of visas given to students. Later is seems that the USA liked legitimate Chinese students and scholars going to America to study.

However, in autumn 2022 the number of Chinese students in the USA declined by 45 percent (Wan, 2022). ‘This is a major loss of revenue’, but it is also a global talent depleted. According to Nuwer (2023), the graduating class of 2025 for China’s international curriculum schools, which prepare high-schoolers for study abroad, is currently 42% larger than the graduating class of 2021.

The United States issued 4,853 student visas to Chinese nationals due to COVID-19 restrictions—a huge drop from 106,005 visas issued in 2019. However, the number of students from mainland China studying abroad has been increasing year by year, peaking at 710,000 in 2019 (including the 372,532) in Table 1 for the United States.

Enrolment numbers for the years 2020 and 2021 include international students studying offshore due to COVID-19 travel restrictions preventing (Australian Department of Education, Prisms; Data.Gov.Hk; Uk Home Office; Us Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs entry into Australia).

Rachel Nuer (2023) found that for example “Jane Tian had completed her undergraduate and master’s degrees at Shandong University in Jinan, China, she was ready for a change. I was bored with the teaching style in mainland China”, she says. Tian, who wanted to specialize in sociology, thought that gaining “an international perspective” would give her an edge in finding a job in China.

But in 2023, it is not possible to be sure that more HE students of China will study overseas. However, in Hong Kong, the number of students wanting to study in Great Britain is certainly growing and this change of attitude of Hong Kong concerns the residents rich enough. In 1999, when HK entered a period of forty year of “one country two systems”.

To try to avoid too many Hongkongese to leave HKSAR during then 2022 emigration wave, the HK Chief Executive John Lee said that he was considering measures to boost Hong Kong’s low birth rate, adding that while people were leaving the city, “the worst has passed” (Chan, 2023).

3.1 Macau SAR’s Education

For Macau, last February 2023, Gloria Pun, a third-year student in both the Honours College and the Faculty of Law, travelled to Portugal to join an exchange program at the University of Coimbra, the country’s oldest university with more than 700 years of history. ‘The law courses were taught in Portuguese’, says Pun. ‘My teacher would not slow
down the pace of the lecture to accommodate for the Chinese students in class. After class, I usually returned to my
dormitory to read and review the content for the next lecture”. A certain number of Chinese Macau residents like Macau
and so I believe that after graduation in Portugal, more than in HKSAR more Chinese of Macau will return home in
Macau.

![Figure 2. Gloria Pun from Macau studying in Coimbra University, Portugal.](image)

However, a diminution of confidence in China’s foreign policy which try to support Putin; may reduce the number of
Chinese students going to America to study in particular if less visa are given to Chinese students wanting to study in
America. It means also that the war in Ukraine may play a certain role in the relationship with the United States.

4. Conclusion

The mainlandization in 2021 means that patriotic education is imposed in HKSAR. It influences secondary and high-
er education.

In the PRC China HE is remarkably successful and well organized. Exchange with many countries and in particular
the United States and UK are successful to develop education (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Chinese students attend the graduation ceremony at the Columbia University in New York in May 2019. (Photo Xinhua)](image)

Abbreviations

HE: Higher Education  
HKSAR: Hong Kong Special Administrative Region  
PRC: People’s Republic
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(The) Standard 12 August 2021 “almost 90,000 citizens leaving the city in a year”.


Chan Irene. (2023). Over 27,000 Hong Kong students left city’s schools last year amid emigration wave.


Lo, Sonny. The Faculty of Economics of Portugal’s University of Coimbra and City University of Macau signed a partnership for the creation of a diploma for Joint Advanced Studies in International Economic Relations.


