

Abstract

China's achievement in, and approach to, internationalizing its higher education depends greatly on its cultural traits. Historically, Chinese culture has long excelled in incorporating elements from outside its borders, but has fallen relatively behind in reaching out to others. Such a disposition has left deep marks on the ways in which Chinese higher education interacts with the rest of the world.

China's Internationalization of Higher Education: The Barrier Within

Rui Yang

The internationalization of higher education is centered on internationalism. It is, however, often misperceived as emulating the experience of the West in a global context of Western dominance. Such an understanding is theoretically inaccurate and practically infeasible. As part of the much wider interplay between civilizations, the internationalization of higher education has to be like a two-way traffic flow of culture. Within this process, universities have a unique role to play, both as a product and as a producer. Every member of the human community needs to be good at both learning from others and reaching out to the world.

A Good Story Told Poorly

Historically, China has been doing extremely well in the former, that is learning from the other, but has fallen much behind in the latter, that is reaching out to the world. Although home to one of the world's oldest continuous cultures, China has not been successful at

sharing its stories. Chinese culture has not blossomed in many parts of the world. China is still not beloved abroad, at least not to the extent that it wishes. China is not perceived as appealing, despite its long and rich history. Chinese culture and its symbols do not hold a powerful allure for many other nations. Even with its remarkable recent developments, there has not been an explosion of Chinese cultural exports in the world.

This blemish is especially visible in the operation of Confucius Institutes, which are accused of being a conduit for Beijing to spread propaganda under the guise of teaching, of interfering with free speech on campuses, and even of spying on students. While the accusations and the skepticism are often unduly based on cultural prejudice, there are also issues on the Chinese side of the debate, due mainly to barriers within the culture.

Chinese visitors to Western universities often share a familiar experience that except for those who specialize in China studies, very few members on campus understand the Chinese culture. This contrasts sharply with the wide knowledge of the West in Chinese universities. China's falling behind the West in economic and technological development over the past two centuries is not a sufficient explanation. There are more fundamental reasons.

China's Inward-Looking Cultural Trait

During its long dynastic past, Chinese culture heavily influenced neighboring societies. Yet, the Chinese expressed little interest in other cultures. Buddhism was introduced into China from India over two millennia ago. According to the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* by the Liang dynasty scholar-monk Shi Huijiao (497–554 CE), the move was originally made by Indian monks. Some Chinese monks and believers later went on pilgrimages to India. Yet, components of Chinese culture such as Confucianism and Daoism did not travel to India with them.

Based on the *Book of Tang*, *Dao De Jing* was once translated into Sanskrit. However, according to Peking University Professor Ji Xianlin, whether or not it was introduced into India remains to be proved. Even though it was translated into Sanskrit, it did not have any influence on Indian culture, and cannot be found anywhere in India today. During the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–906 CE) dynasties, while many Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese, few Chinese classics were translated into Sanskrit and spread in India.

Historically, since the second century, monks from India and Central Asia frequently went to China. Some even spent the rest of their lives there. In contrast, Chinese pilgrims did not start traveling to India and Central Asia until the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE), and their number was much smaller. Furthermore, the only purpose for the Chinese to travel abroad was Buddhist scriptures. None of them attempted to bring Chinese culture to India.

From the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese monks and students traveled to China to study Buddhism and Confucian classics. They also learned Chinese music, dance, architecture, and cooking. They went back with many Chinese books covering a wide range of topics, including literature, history, and biographies. In comparison, during the same period, the Chinese showed little passion for the indigenous cultural traditions of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Since the early nineteenth century, tens of thousands of young Chinese have gone to the West to study, while Western universities have been established in China to disseminate ideological and religious values into Chinese society. By the late nineteenth century, China's natural, human, and social sciences had all been patterned after Western experience. Until today, China's cultural mix has not been rebalanced. China has not been able to build a value and knowledge system that can effectively serve its social and cultural demands. Over the period, Chinese culture was introduced into Europe through Western missionaries—not by the Chinese. Throughout the process, China has been proactively learning from the West, while rarely disseminating its own values and culture abroad.

A Mismatch between Taking In and Reaching Out

Through the times, China has always been taking in other cultures, while not spreading its own abroad. This happened both when China was powerful, such as during the Han and Tang dynasties, and weak, as during the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912). As a result,

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except for a handful Sinologists, most Westerners have an extremely limited familiarity with the people and society of China. To most, Chinese culture means little more than things like raising the red lantern and dragon boat racing.

Internationalization is necessarily about a give-and-take relationship between world cultures. While in line with the times, the much-desired mutual understanding of, and respect for, others have rarely been demonstrated in the interplay of civilizations. When encountering other peoples, nations have shown differing attitudes and features, which have shaped the processes and outcomes of their internationalization, and are further complicated by the attitudes and features of those with whom they are interacting, in a global geopolitical asymmetry.

For millennia, Chinese culture has shown its extraordinary ability to incorporate elements from outside. Surprisingly, it has been reluctant to spread itself beyond its borders. In this regard, its widely recognized sophistication does not help much. Rather, it leads to Sino-centrism, which has shifted drastically from a feeling of arrogance to that of inferiority after repeated defeats during modern times. Both feelings, however, are signs of the same inward-looking nature of the culture—confined to its own comfort zone, without forging ahead. China's past—imperial or otherwise—strongly shapes its views of the world, of itself, and of its place in the world. It is time for Chinese policy and intellectual elites to engage in deep introspection on this historical matter.

For long in history, the Chinese have waited for others to come and pay tribute to their culture, and have travelled across the oceans to seek truth and knowledge from the West since the nineteenth century. In the present era of unprecedented human connectivity, and based on a rising Chinese power, the leadership wants to project Chinese influence globally. Yet, the inward-looking cultural trait manifests itself thoroughly at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels, with performance falling behind expectations. The inefficacy of the Confucius Institutes is just one example. In their pursuit for genuine internationalization, members of the Chinese higher education system badly need to readjust their cultural mentality. ▲