The Future of China and the Chinese Language in Global Higher Education

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Abstract

There has been much debate about the emergence of Chinese universities on the world stage and the potential role of the Chinese language as a global scientific medium. I argue that while China's top universities have done well in rankings, there are structural and other impediments to their taking global leadership. Further, English is sufficiently dominant as the global medium of science that Chinese has no possibility of serving as a key global academic language.

The Chinese language will play a modest but noticeable role in the future of global higher education. An interesting discussion has recently emerged among several Western scholars on this topic, see Hans de Wit, "Will English or Mandarin Dominate International HE?" in *University World News* (January 5, 2022), and Rosemary Salomone, "China and the Geopolitics of Language in Africa," *University World News*, December 11, 2021. Both have made the Chinese language an issue and express skepticism about the Chinese language replacing English. This is interesting because the Chinese government has no plan to declare an initiative to push Chinese as the international academic language of science. In fact, China has launched its own international academic and scientific journals in English with the intention, over the long run, to make them internationally competitive. According to *Nature*, the government is spending over CNY 200 million (USD 29 million) each year to help improve the caliber of about 280 journals, most of which publish in English. On top of that, the accessibility of increasingly accurate translations of scientific literature from Chinese to English has made research cooperation easier, with the promise of an acceleration of quantum driven artificial intelligence in future decades.

Although Chinese will not replace English anytime soon as the global scientific language, some of the top Chinese universities are world-class and increasingly influential. China's unprecedented investment of approximately USD 182 billion in several world-class university initiatives during recent decades has yielded impressive results, increased China's position in the global rankings, and attracted world-class scientists. China has the world's largest academic system in terms of student numbers. It has also attracted (pre-COVID-19) 500,000 international students to its universities, most to study the Chinese language, but with an increasing number registering for degree programs. No country has matched China's rate of increase in producing patents and scientific publications. Seven of China's 200 or so top research universities are now in the top 100 of the *Times Higher Education* rankings. Indeed, its upward trajectory in such a short time is unprecedented. If China's economy continues to steam ahead, with a significant investment of resources in science and technology as well as in the higher education systems of selected countries as part of its "Belt and Road" initiative, its global influence will continue to expand.

This would not constitute firm evidence that Chinese universities will displace the top 10 global universities any time soon. There are still significant obstacles to be addressed. As was pointed out by Altbach in "Chinese Higher Education: 'Glass Ceiling' and 'Feet of Clay'" (*International Higher Education* # 86), these issues are worth considering. Among them are high levels of bureaucracy, low levels of institutional autonomy, direct control exerted by political authorities in the internal management and intellectual life of universities, and access to information, especially in the humanities and social sciences. These are obstacles that the world's top ten universities would refuse to accept. The unprecedented expansion of the higher education system and the sudden onset of the "publish or perish" pressure has led to hyperplagiarism and weak protection of intellectual property. But these are easily fixed in comparison to the other obstacles.

China's academic progress has some similarities to the rapid rise of German universities in the nineteenth century and of American universities in the first half of the twentieth century. In both cases, German and then English became influential in scientific publication, but national languages continued to predominate. This occurred when

academic systems were still small and the number of scientific journals was modest. By the twenty-first century, over 71 of 79 million articles (90 percent) indexed in the Web of Science are in English, with a similar proportion in the other major citation indices. For the same reason, degree programs in English are in high demand. All of this helps to explain the more pragmatic approach taken by China in the current academic English-rules-based order. The English language can be an inconvenience, but it is not a major obstacle to China's scientific progress. At the same time, like all academic powers, language remains a linchpin of national pride and academic leaders recognize that international engagement should not be to the detriment of the national language.

Language Realities

Numbers tell part of the story. Chinese has the largest number of native speakers—918 million, much larger than the native speakers of English at 379 million (Spanish is in second place for native speakers with 460 million). English is the most widely spoken language with 1,132 billion as compared with Chinese at 1,117 billion. Further, English has official status in 55 sovereign states, most as former colonies of the British Empire. English is the *lingua franca* in six influential industrialized powers. It has an official status in six Asian countries, with Singapore making it the main language. Further, there has been a dramatic expansion of English language degree programs in non-Anglophone countries. A recent Studyportals study noted 27,874 English-taught programs outside the main four English-speaking countries, with numbers increasing significantly in recent years.

The International Visibility of Chinese

Currently, Chinese has little visibility internationally as a language of teaching outside of China or as an internationally used medium for scientific publication or communication. While the number of internationally cited publications by Chinese authors has significantly increased—as has the number of Chinese patents, their international visibility is limited. Of the top 100 universities ranked by *Times Higher Education*, 64 are English medium, seven are Chinese medium, and 29 use other languages (among the 29 are several where English is a key language—such as ETH Zurich and several Dutch universities). There are also five universities in the top 100 in "greater China" (Hong Kong and Singapore) that use English. Of the four branch campuses sponsored by Chinese universities, all use English as the predominant medium of instruction.

Chinese will increasingly be taught in universities around the world, in the same way that French or Spanish are widely taught languages—but with greater emphasis because of the growing global impact of China.

China has made a major investment, estimated at USD 10 billion annually, in government-sponsored Confucius Institutes (CIs). In 2019, there were more than 530 CIs on six continents, offering Chinese language and culture programs. The Chinese ministry of education estimated that 100 million people were studying Chinese worldwide, many in CI programs. However, there has been considerable controversy concerning the CIs, and many have been closed.

Future Prospects

Chinese will increasingly be taught in universities around the world, in the same way that French or Spanish are widely taught languages—but with greater emphasis because of the growing global impact of China. Thus, as a language spoken by a major economy and by a globally competitive higher education system, Chinese will continue to gain in importance. However, scientific publication, collaboration, and global academic discourse will remain mainly in English. ◢

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