



# The Impact of Neoliberalism on Transnational Higher Education in China

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**Abstract:** Neoliberalism is a set of political, economic, cultural and social force. Its theory emphasizes efficiency and believes that efficiency can be best achieved in the “free market” with minimal government regulations. Transnational higher education (TNHE) development is an important impact that neoliberalism has on higher education in China. This article discusses some issues and problems that currently exist in TNHE by analyzing the context that helped the emergence and development of TNHE in China. The author’s thinking on how the TNHE in China should face the challenges in the process of globalization is also provided in the article.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, transnational higher education, China

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## 1. Introduction

Neoliberalism is a set of political, economic, cultural and social force. Its theory emphasizes efficiency and believes that efficiency can be best achieved in the “free market” with minimal government regulations. Neoliberalism first became dominant in the US and the UK in the 1980s. With the influence of globalization, it has soon become predominant in many societies. While the neoliberalism has emerged and developed in the western world, China has also gone through a series of economic reform followed the opening-up policy. Some neoliberal ideas and elements have affected China as the phenomenon of marketization and privatization can be found in Chinese medical system, education system, and so on. The emergence of transnational higher education (TNHE) can also be seen as an important impact that neoliberalism has on higher education in China. The TNHE here refers to postsecondary and tertiary education provided through the cooperation between Chinese and foreign institutions mainly to Chinese citizens in China. In this essay, the context that helped the emergence of TNHE in China will be given first, followed by a brief introduction of the development and the current situation of TNHE. Some related issues and problems will also be discussed. Finally, there will be some thinking on how the TNHE in China should face the challenges in the process of globalization.

## 2. Context

The emergence of TNHE in China can be seen as a result motivated by both domestic and global factors. Globally speaking, the economic integration brings most countries in the world to a net where they strongly connected. In the process of globalization, higher education has been pushed towards a greater international involvement. Domestically, China has experienced the transition from planned market to market economy since 1978. Reforms have been taken place in many areas including education in China. Aligning with the economic reforms, the education reform took place and close links have been connected between education and market <sup>[1]</sup>. The reforms have led education in China towards a market orientation and allowed higher governmental tolerance of neoliberal ideologies and practices. Influenced by the neoliberal thinking, Chinese government also felt urgent to improve the international competitiveness of Chinese higher education in the global world. Cooperating with foreign institutions and absorbing the quality resources seemed to be an effective way to develop Chinese own higher education in the eyes of the government <sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, with the global influence and domestic change, the TNHE has all conditions to establish and develop in China.

## 3. The development of transnational higher education in China

In 1978, China started to explore different forms of Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) activities. Since then, the TNHE programmes and institutions have emerged and have grown rapidly after China has become a member in the World Trade Organization in 2001 <sup>[1]</sup>. More and more regulations and announcements have been issued in the TNHE, which not only has provided reference to Chinese and foreign institutions, but also encouraged the

development of CFCRS in some ways. Up to 2018, the total number of CFCRS programmes is 1229. The distribution of the programmes in China is shown below.

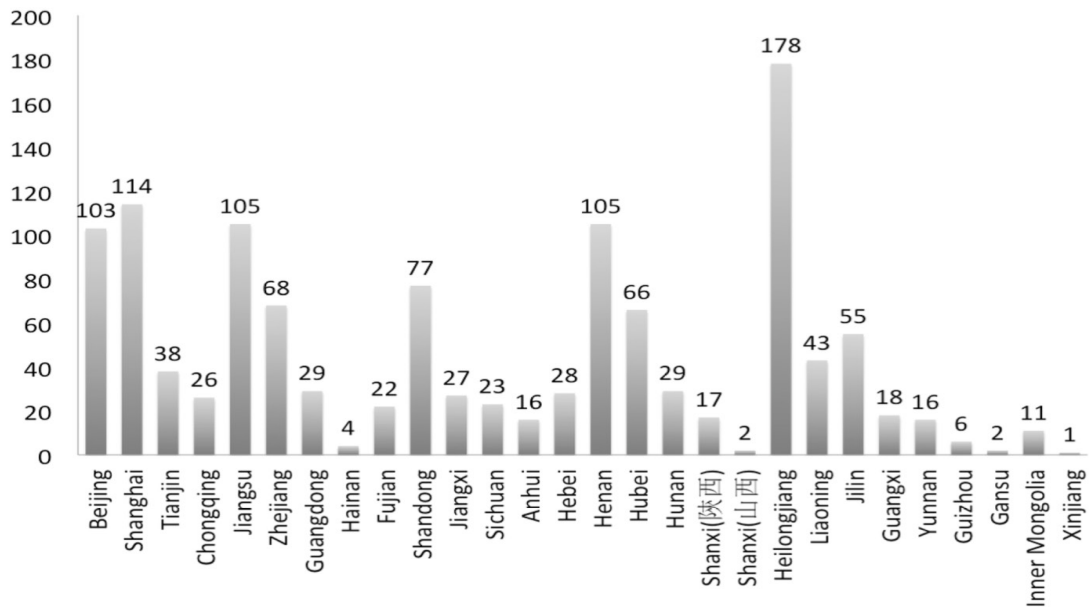


Figure 1. The distribution of CFCRS programmes in China

As for CFCRS institutions, the number as reached 93 in 2018, according to the official website. The distribution of institutions is shown below.

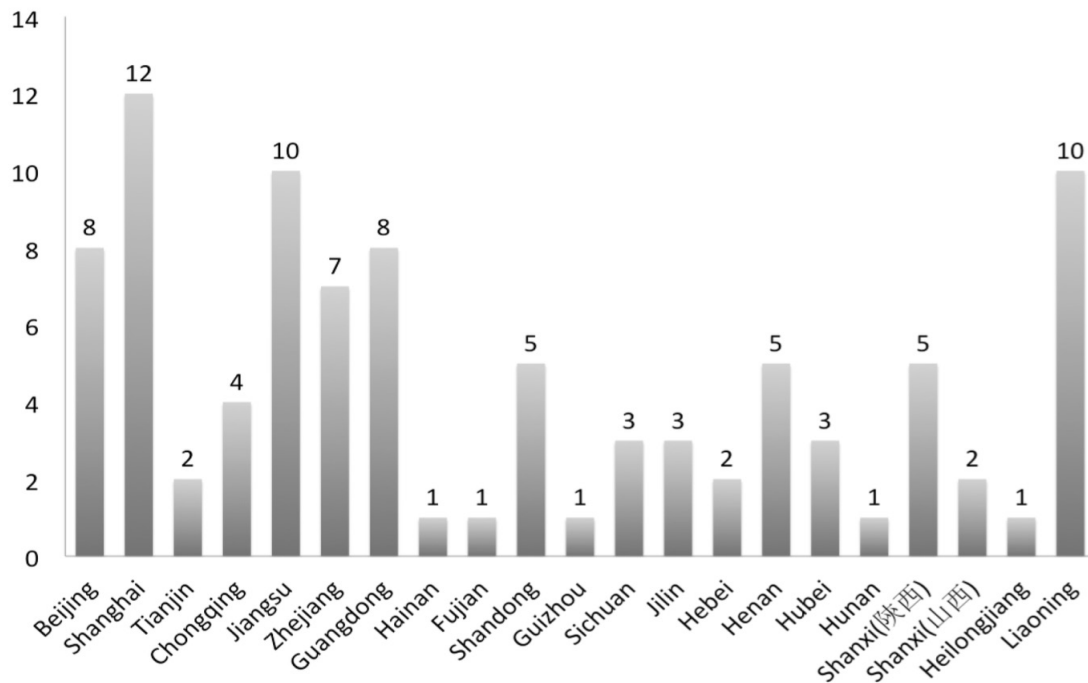


Figure 2. The geographic distribution of CFCRS institution in China

It is obvious that the development of TNHE is not balanced in China. Regions where economic is more developed have relatively more CFCRS programmes and institutions. The more advanced development of TNHE in those regions indicates that the TNHE is a form of neoliberal practice, which is strongly influenced by how neoliberalism has been carried out in the regions.

In terms of the overseas partnership institutions, it is found that the foreign institutions in CFCRS are from 33 countries, which are mainly developed countries by the year of 2018. Institutions from the UK and the US account for the biggest part in CFCRS. The graph below has shown the exact times of cooperation in all CFCRS in 2018, as well as the origins of cooperative institutions.

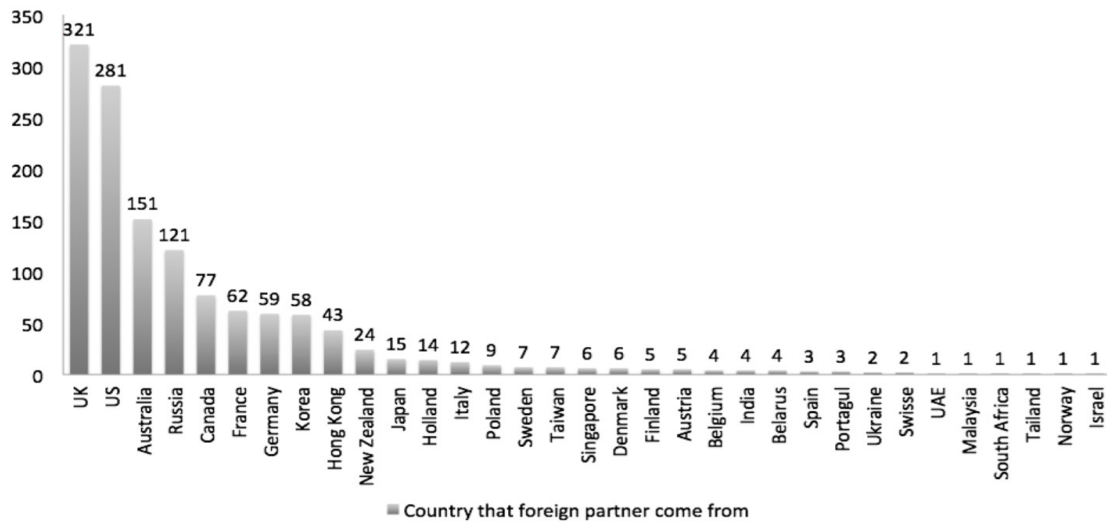


Figure 3. Countries of origin of cooperative institutions

Most foreign partners are from economic developed countries, in which one institution may cooperate on the same project with several Chinese schools. There are 42 foreign partners, only 9 of which are ranked in top 500 in the world, have cooperated with more than 5 Chinese institutions on the same programme in 2015<sup>[3]</sup>.

In terms of the levels of education, according to the data from 2007, 68% of CFCRS institutions and programmes were in the level of undergraduate education, 31% were in master education and only 1% were in doctoral education. Among all, 90% of the CFCRS institutions and programmes provide degree and/or certification from Chinese institutions, but less than 70% of them provide certificate from foreign institutions. As for the disciplinary distribution, business, management, IT and engineering are the most popular ones. Two tables below show the disciplinary distribution in the levels of undergraduate and master education in 2016<sup>[4]</sup>.

Table 1. Most popular filed of study in undergraduate education

	Discipline	No. of Programme	No. of student entrolled
1	Computer Science and Technology	48	3942
2	Mechanical Engineering and Automation	42	3925
3	Accounting	35	3678
4	Electrical Ecinomics and Its Automation	30	2795
5	International Economics and Trad	35	2675
6	Finance	22	2205
7	Business Administration	25	2165
8	Civil engineering	19	1960
9	Nursing	19	1910
10	Electronic Information Engineering	19	1620

**Table 2. Most popular filed of study in master education**

	Discipline	No. of Programme	No. of student entrolled
1	Business Administration	27	2600
2	Executive Master of Business Administration	12	845
3	Project Management	6	535
4	Hospital Management	2	280
5	Business Management	4	260
6	Software Engineering	4	240
7	International Economics and Trade	1	240
8	Computer Science and Technology	3	235
9	Science	2	225
10	Education	4	220

On the one hand, the subjects favoured in CFCRS indicated the needs of Chinese market. On the other hand, the repetition in programme design shows the problem of duplication in CFCRS.

All in all, the development of TNHE in China helped to solve the problem of resource scarcity in higher education to some extent. It also enhances the communication and cooperation between China and the rest of the world. It provides a new approach to cultivate talents that are needed in the market by bringing in quality education resources overseas. The transnational cooperation also helps to improve the competitiveness of Chinese institutions in the world.

#### 4. Issues of concern

Many problems and issues are exposed during the rapid development of TNHE in China over the past decades. One of the most crucial issues is the contradiction in purposes of Chinese institutions and their foreign partners in the TNHE cooperation. For Chinese government and institutions, the goal for establishing and developing TNHE is to acquire quality education resource from overseas, and to develop their own higher education. Thus, higher education institutions, including CFCRS institutions must be the undertakings benefit public interests<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, making profit from TNHE is not allowed. Unfortunately, the foreign institutions have a different view towards education in this neoliberal era. Especially in higher education, universities are in the business of providing education service to students, who are actually the consumers<sup>[6]</sup>. The foreign institutions regard China as a big market where they can export education as a product<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, although many TNHE institutions claim that they are not profit-making business, they still want economic return on their investment. This contradiction in purposes further leads to many problems, such as the lowered quality of TNHE, the disequilibrium of discipline and geographical distributions in CFCRS.

The second noteworthy issue is about cultural appropriateness, which considers the problem of imbalance between global and local knowledge in TNHE course content and curriculum<sup>[2]</sup>. In many TNHE programmes and institutions, only values and practices from exporter institution count. Local knowledge and context, on the other hand, are largely neglected. Many curricula are used without tailored for Chinese context, which is leading TNHE to cultural imposition instead of adoption<sup>[8]</sup>. Moreover, students' background and ability are overlooked by not only the foreign partners, but local institutions as well. Many CFCRS institutions even do not examine language competency when recruiting students. They also do not provide help for students who are weak at English after the start of the programme. As a result, many students feel frustrated in their study, and perform very poor academically because of the language barrier.

The last issue of concern in TNHE is the contradiction between market mechanism and Chinese government's control. Transnational education is regarded as a market, in which liberalisation of trading in educational service cross border. It normally changes and adjusts based on the supplies and consumers in the market. However, the government control is very strong in China. Their attempt of taking advantage of the characteristics of market but remaining strong control at the same time seems to be wonderful, but in fact, it is very hard to operate<sup>[9]</sup>. The government strictly regulate TNHE through controlling both its "intake" -- registering and licensing CFCRS institutions, and its "result" -- types and levels of academic degrees<sup>[10]</sup>. However, the intervention in between is very much lacked<sup>[2]</sup>, which may cause two major problems. First, the regulation issued by central government may not be applicable in every context, using one guideline to regulate the whole country is not efficient. Second, the quality assurance of TNHE is problematic as the misconduct of government's policy in some institutions cannot be detected and so the quality assurance is only undertaking by institutions and their cooperators.

## 5. Thought bubble: neoliberalism and TNHE in China

With the development of TNHE in China, the impact of neoliberalism in Chinese higher education would be strengthened, as there will be more cooperation with foreign institutions in the future. However, it is hard to make a judgement whether the enhancement of neoliberalism is beneficial or harmful in Chinese context. Privatization and marketization of education seem to be against public interests. Encouraging these neoliberal ideas would eventually increase the economic inequality. On the other hand, the neoliberalism has its own uniqueness in China. It actually improves the efficiency in institutions and increases the mobilization of educational resources. The flexibility in admission of TNHE institutions breaks the sole status of gaokao in some degree and provides more alternatives to cultivate talents in China. The question is how the government, as well as higher education institutions should do to make use of neoliberal strategies to overcome the issues mentioned in the previous section.

To improve TNHE in China is a long process, during which three things are worth noting. First, it is very important to look at western knowledge and ideas critically. Improving the teaching and researching in universities are more important than seeking blindly for partnership with foreign institutions. Second, the government should give up the idea that one regulation can be suitable for all contexts. The fixed rules can be reduced, but the intervention for quality assurance needs to be enhanced. Third, it is very important to address local knowledge and local identity in transnational education. Local context should earn more respect from local people in the process of globalization.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper discusses the impact of neoliberalism on TNHE in China by first analysing the global and domestic contexts of the emergence of TNHE, then briefly introducing the development of CFCS and its current situation. After that, some issues of concern are raised based on the status quo. Finally, there are some thinking generated by the author. All in all, the development of TNHE in China has just started, more effort needs to be put from the sides of government, higher education institutions, as well as the society.

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