

# Internationalization of Chinese Humanities and Social Sciences

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## Introduction

The landscape of global research has shifted drastically over the past decades. Rising powerhouses from East Asia are challenging the previously dominant positions of Anglo-European systems. China is one noticeable example. From 1991 to 2017, China's national R&D expenditure has increased approximately thirty-fold, from USD13 billion to USD445 billion (OECD 2020). In 1986–8, China shared 0.7 per cent of the world science and engineering publications. The predominant producers in that period were the United States (38.2 per cent worldwide share), UK (8.1 per cent) and Japan (7.1 per cent) (US National Science Foundation 2020). Since 2000, China's science and engineering publications have increased nearly ten-fold. China now shares 21 per cent of global science publications, ranking first globally in total number. Comparatively, the United States now shares 17 per cent of global science publications, followed by India (around 5 per cent), and Germany, Japan, UK with around 4 per cent worldwide share of science publications (US National Science Foundation 2020).

China's rise in global science was powered by its extensive internationalization of higher education and research, the depoliticization of science and the expansion of open networks in global science (Marginson 2018). Nonetheless, such global-national synergy (Marginson 2018) did not happen to the same extent in humanities and social sciences. Chinese humanities and social sciences research, while gradually demonstrating global visibility, is still not as noticeable as the sciences disciplines. Here 'Chinese humanities and social sciences research' refers to research hosted in mainland China, not that conducted in 'Greater China' or by Chinese diaspora researchers. The social sciences publications from

China only account for 1.04 per cent of its international publications, in contrast to the high-performing science disciplines such as engineering (25.47 per cent of its international publications) (US National Science Foundation 2020).

To internationalize humanities and social sciences research is more complex than science research. In China, higher education and research sit in a convergence of heterogeneous and at points conflicting influences: imperial governance style with its emphasis on stability and unity, Sinic tradition and particularly Confucianism, Marxism-Leninism and 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', Western cultures imported by colonization and diffused through globalization. In China, science and engineering research has been delinked from – although not completely – the epistemological, cultural, ideological and political tensions created by the swirl of different influences. However, humanities and social sciences research is so culturally embedded and ideologically attached, that it can hardly escape from the tensions between endogenous knowledge, national agenda, political correctness and Western imprints (Gao and Zheng 2018; Xu 2021b; Yang, Xie and Wen 2019).

Nonetheless, this does not mean Chinese academics, universities and government do not have the agency to shape their own agenda. Departing from this point, this chapter investigates tensions in the internationalization of Chinese humanities and social sciences through an exploration of the relationship between agency and context. It first synthesizes the theoretical underpinning of 'contextual agency' based on both Chinese and English scholarships, which testifies the viability of approaching epistemic diversity in research and the value of cross-cultural dialogues (Xu 2021a). The chapter then reports findings drawing on three sets of empirical data, including national policies, institutional policies as well as interviews with academics, senior university administrators and journal editors in China.

## A Framework of Contextual Agency

Discussions on 'agency' are widespread in philosophy, sociology, psychology, (political) economy and in educational studies. Each discipline approaches and articulates the concept slightly differently, but a common understanding of agency is *the capacity to take independent actions on one's free will*. Both individuals and the collective of individuals have agency. In the higher education and research context, this means students, students' families, academics, administrators, leadership, universities, industrial partners, local and national governments,

international organizations, the invisible global college of academics (Wagner 2009) as well as other agents all have the agency.

A long-standing debate about the concept of agency is its relationship with the structure. 'Structure' can also be understood as 'context', 'environment' and 'system', with nuances across the terms. The structure can be social, temporal, spatial, relational and material. There are, as will be elaborated later, two different ontological understandings of agents and structure: agents and structure as separated or agents and structure as holistic. Both strands of discussions are evident in Anglo-European discourses that are rooted in the Anglo-European ontologies of the world. Nonetheless, there are also discussions in the non-Anglo-European scholarship, which is often termed as 'Southern', 'alternative', 'subaltern' or 'other' knowledge. This chapter intentionally avoids those labels, as all terms are too simplistic and derived from the 'Northern' gaze, again re-asserting the 'Northern' supremacy in global knowledge. Such scholarships often stay in their discourse circle and are not fully acknowledged in a wider knowledge pool. In the global academic space dominated by Anglo-European cultures, some other cultures often become less visible.

As just argued, academics have the agency to shape the scholarship. This chapter thereby brings in discourses rooted in the Chinese tradition, synthesized with the Anglo-European discussion, to present a broader understanding of the contextual agency. In doing so, it joins the growing body of scholarship that calls for epistemic justice and aims to pluralize global knowledge (e.g. Chen 2010; Connell 2007; Santos 2014; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012).

## **Agents and Structure as Separated**

In the understanding of agents and structure as separate entities, the structure is external to the agents. In Anglo-European discourses, this externalization may be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition (Chen and Bu 2019): Adam and Eve exhibited free will, only resulting in the expulsion from Eden and the Fall. In the development of modern sciences, particularly in subjects like biology, nature is further examined as an external biophysical object to human beings. The dichotomy of human and nature in the material sense extends to the dualism of agents and structure in social terms, where social structure is closely linked with material and resources.

When agents and structure are separated, they are often perceived as confrontational. One approach views agents as having agency *but are conditioned*,

*embedded, framed and contextualized* by the structure. For instance, the concept of ‘bounded agency’ (Evans 2007: 92) ‘sees actors as having a past and imagined future possibilities, which guide and shape actions in the present’. The bounded agency is socially situated, ‘influenced but not determined by environments and emphasizing internalised frames of reference as well as external actions’ (93). In this understanding, the context provides resources, opportunities, but also creates demands, threats and constraints on agents. The level of agency sits on a continuum, which ranges from reacting to the context, to adapting to the environment and to modifying the context the agents are situated in (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). However, the context is omnipresent and remains the precondition.

Discussion on the bounded agency also appears in traditional Chinese philosophy. Confucian philosopher Mengzi asserted the role of self-cultivation, while emphasizing the essential influences of the context: ‘In years of good harvest, young men are mostly lazy; in years of famine, young men are mostly violent. Not they were born with different characters, it is what drowns their heart and mind that leads to this consequence.’<sup>1</sup> The Chinese idioms *mou shi zai ren, cheng shi zai tian* (谋事在人, 成事在天, ‘Man proposes, God disposes’) and *ting tian you ming* (听天由命, ‘follow heaven[’s mandate] and resign to the fate’) express the similar sentiments. Note that both phrases emphasize *tian* (天) as the ultimate context. Although *tian* is translated as ‘Heaven’ or ‘God’ here, it is not a Christian or solely religious concept. The use of these terms in translation is due to a lack of equivalent concepts in English.

*Tian* (天) is an important concept in Chinese tradition with different layers of meanings. It is spatial, temporal and immaterial (Chen and Bu 2019; Zhao 2016). In the spatial and material sense, it means the sky, nature, the non-human world and the universe (e.g. *tian xia*, 天下, ‘all under the sky or heaven’). In the temporal sense, it is associated with the rhythm of the world (e.g. *tian shi*, 天时, ‘season, time, and timeliness’). In the immaterial sense, it can refer to the almighty power that rules the world, or the ritual controller of one’s destiny (e.g. *tian ming*, 天命, ‘God’s will’), or the emperor’s mandate in imperial times (e.g. *tian zi*, 天子, literal translation as ‘God’s son’, which refers to the ‘emperor’). In Chinese tradition, *tian* is the ultimate and overarching ‘context’ for human agents, which will appear again in the discussion that follows.

<sup>1</sup> 富岁子弟多赖, 凶岁子弟多暴, 非天之降才尔殊也, 其所以陷溺其心者然也。(Fu sui zi di duo lan, xiong sui zi di duo bao, fei tian zhi jiang cai er shu ye, qi suo yi xian ni qi xin zhe ran ye.)

Another approach views agents as having agency *despite the condition, embeddedness, framing and contextualization* in the context. This approach understands agents as in the context, but able to transcend the constraints. In this understanding, the capability of agents is important, as capability is ‘a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various life-styles)’ (Sen 1999a: 75). The idea that humans can control, surpass or overcome the context is not unique in occidental tradition; similar ideas can also be found in the Chinese tradition, in phrases like *ren ding sheng tian* (人定胜天, ‘humans can triumph the heaven’). Agency can be asserted via self-cultivation for self-transformation. For instance, Chinese philosopher Xunzi argued for a division between *tian* and *ren* (人, ‘human’). He perceived human nature as evil by default. However, he thought humans can exert moral agency, as their mind/heart (*xin*, 心) can control the inborn human nature and decide the actions of a person: ‘The mind/heart is the ruler of the body and master of its spirit. It gives commands but it is not subject to any command’ (Xunzi, 21.9, translation cited from Jiang 2012: 101).

### Agents and Context as Holistic

Agents and context can also be considered integral to each other. The Chinese concept *tian ren he yi* (天人合一, ‘the unity of heaven and humanity’) is an important concept here. It connotes a holistic anthropocosmic vision, that ‘human beings are an integral part of the cosmos, which is characterised as consanguinity with heaven, earth, and myriad other aspects of nature’ (Chen and Bu 2019: 1131). Although the idea of *tian ren he yi* can be interpreted as the coexistence of human and nature, its connotation is broader than the environmentalist appeal (Gao 1995). The dichotomy between agents and structure diminishes through the lens of *tian ren he yi*, as the whole world and human society are perceived as an organic and all-inclusive entity. There are various expressions about *tian ren he yi* in Chinese tradition, famously represented by Daoist Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi thinks that everything material and immaterial, including human agents, nature, environment and all creatures, coexist as one entity.<sup>2</sup> In this harmonious entity, agents and context work together in a balanced and mutually enriching way. ‘Neither heaven nor the human defeats each other’ (天与人不相胜也, *tian yu ren bu xiang sheng ye*),

<sup>2</sup> 天地与我并生，万物与我为一。(Tian di yu wo bing sheng, wan wu yu wo wei yi.)

said Zhuangzi. Chinese philosopher Qian Mu (1990) concluded in his final piece that the philosophy of ‘*tian ren he yi*’ is the biggest contribution Chinese culture brings to humankind.

In the Anglo-European discourses, one cluster of arguments emphasizes the transferability, interconnectivity and interdependency between agents and structure, an idea similar but not exactly equivalent to *tian ren he yi*. For instance, in Anthony Giddens’ (1984) cycle of structuration, agents and structure interact and transform each other, forming a continuous loop of changes enabled by the reflexive monitoring of agents. Coleman (1994) argued that the macro (structure) changes could interact with the micro (agents) and could in turn lead to agents’ revolution of the structure. In those discourses, agents and structure are not completely separated and are attributed with equal significance, yet they do not form a holistic entity as in the idea of *tian ren he yi*.

### **Contextual Agency in Higher Education and a ‘Glonacal’ Framework**

Among the different understandings of agents and structure, this chapter adopts a holistic view that agency and structure can coexist within the same entity – a *tian ren he yi* approach. It posits that agency needs to be understood as *contextual* (in relation to context) and not isolated; while at the same time, agency is not necessarily *contextualized* (embedded in the context). To operationalize this perspective in analysing higher education, this chapter builds on the ‘glonacal’ (global-national-local) agency heuristic (Marginson and Rhoades 2002), which also highlights agency as contextual but not fully contextualized.

The ‘glonacal’ (Marginson and Rhoades 2002) understanding of higher education moved beyond the organizational theory model. The latter positions universities as strategic actors but passively *embedded* in multilayered and multidimensional spaces (e.g. Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Ma and Cai 2021). In the ‘glonacal’ agency heuristic, agency simultaneously exists in global, national and local scales. Agents and the structure are also interchangeable – the national, for instance, can be both the agent and the context to influence the institutional and individual. Scales are not mutually exclusive. Relations between scales are open to multiple intersections, and the direction of interactions do not confine to a hierarchical order of global-national-local (Marginson 2021; Marginson and Rhoades 2002).

Building on the ‘glonacal’ perspective, this chapter views higher education and research as encompassing global, regional, national, institutional and individual scales. The regional scale is added to reflect the importance of regional cooperation, which is in ‘global’ but not entirely global. The local scale is separated as institutional and individual, for the purpose of examining their interactions in a clearer sense. Agency is embodied in different agents at each of these scales: namely, the internationally influential science structure (e.g. citation indices and publishing industry), autonomous academic communities and transnational organizations or research groups at the global scale; regional collaboration platforms or initiatives at the regional scale; national policy and funding structure at the national scale; universities and research institutions at the institutional scale; academics and research students at the individual scale.

Zooming into the examination on Chinese humanities and social sciences, this chapter focuses on the global, national, institutional and individual scales. ‘Regional’ is left out as no regional framework in (East) Asia is hugely impactful to China (see Chapter 1 of this book). If examining Southeast Asian or European contexts where regional cooperation is influential, or African or Latin American contexts where a common regional identity is strong, it will be essential to include the ‘regional’ scale.

## Methodology

This chapter draws on data collected for a larger-scale study on the impacts of incentivizing international publications in Chinese humanities and social sciences (Xu 2018), and a subsequent analysis of the national policy trajectory of internationalizing humanities and social sciences (Xu 2021b). The analysis for this chapter is based on three data sets: seventy-five interviews with academics, editors and senior university administrators in China; 172 university policy documents; and a corpus of national policy documents published between the 1960s and 2020.

Interviews were conducted at six case universities selected from the ‘985’ and ‘211’ programmes. The ‘985’ and ‘211’ programmes were national world-class university (WCU) initiatives between the 1990s and 2010s in China, which included a selected number of top-performing research-intensive universities. Three case universities were formerly ‘985’ universities (currently ‘Double First-Class Universities’) and three ‘211’ universities (currently

'Universities with Double First-Class Disciplines'). Three were humanities and social sciences-oriented and three stronger in science disciplines. The universities are located in northern China (labelled as Uni-NA and Uni-NB), eastern China (Uni-EA and Uni-EB), western China (Uni-W) and central China (Uni-C).

Humanities and social sciences academic interviewees were selected through a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy, aiming for variation and balance across their disciplines, institutional affiliations, career stages, leadership roles, international experiences and publication records. Interviewees also included six senior administrators with policy-making experiences on humanities and social sciences research at each case university, and four Chinese editors from journals indexed by Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI). Interviews were conducted in Chinese and during September 2016 and May 2017. Seventy-one interviews were audio-recorded; note-taking was used for the other four, all upon participants' consent. The research was approved by the author's university's ethics committee and was conducted with full ethical considerations.

Institutional incentive documents were first collected via online search in the official websites of each '985' and '211' universities between March and May 2016. An additional twenty-three incentive documents were collected during fieldwork in China between September 2016 and May 2017. National policy documents were collected between 2015 and 2020 from the websites or archival databases of national government offices in China. Policy documents also included high-profile speeches of China's national leaders, which were documented on governmental websites, in books or covered by the Xinhua News Agency, the official state-run press agency of China. The collected national policies were published between the 1960s and 2020.

Interview transcripts and policy documents were analysed with NVivo. All analysis started from open coding to generate major themes, and then moved to clustering, comparing and finally building connections and categorizations (Saldaña 2013). This chapter quotes Chinese phrases that were used by interviewees or appeared in policies that are important. Chinese phrases are either translated or cited in the pinyin form, supplemented with Chinese characters and English translations. The translation was validated with the back-translation strategy, with references to English-medium government websites, press releases and academic publications.



## Dynamics of Internationalizing Humanities and Social Sciences in China

### Global Scale

Global humanities and social sciences are open and expanding spaces, but the rate of international collaborations is growing at a slower rate and smaller scale as compared to sciences (Larivière, Gingras and Archambault 2006). This is due to the single-author publishing habits in humanities and social sciences, and to various linguistic, cultural, epistemological, structural challenges in humanities and social sciences international collaborations (Weidemann 2010). Notably, Western ideas and cultures were diffused worldwide through the Anglo-European dominated neoliberal globalization as a continuing form of globally cultural (neo)colonization. Although global research is increasingly diversified, epistemic diversity is accompanied by epistemic inequity and injustice, particularly in the humanities and social sciences (Xu 2021a). Despite a growing number of humanities and social sciences publications from non-dominating systems, the global space is largely dominated by the hegemonic power of Anglo-European (*Northern* or *Western* in other terms) systems (Connell 2007).

For instance, the ‘English imperialism’ (Phillipson 1992) persists in global academia. It is more problematic in humanities and social sciences for English to become the lingua franca than in sciences. As humanities and social sciences research is deeply entangled with language and discourses, English dominance leads to the hegemony of Anglophone knowledge – after all, ‘language use is closely connected to the rhythms of power’ (Held et al. 1999: 346).

Chinese language, despite being spoken by the largest population in the world as the first language, does not feature in international journals, indices and communication spaces. This means that to register and communicate knowledge rooted in Chinese humanities and social sciences, Chinese academics, institutions and government need to express, deliver and communicate in English. Such a process of ‘English-cization’, often unduly perceived as equivalent to ‘internationalization’, shows many pitfalls. To name a few: the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the original Chinese ideas, epistemic injustice towards knowers from China due to their English language proficiency or their identity of being Chinese, and the appropriation of Chinese knowledge towards Anglophone frameworks – an example in this chapter, is the unideal translation of Chinese *tian* as *God* or *Heaven*, which as explained earlier, does

not capture its original meaning and undesirably introduces Western religious connotation with the concept.

System wise, the globally influential universities, research centres, publishers, citation indices, editors and scholarly associations are still dominated by Anglo-European systems. The WCU movements took roots in Anglo-European criteria, which not only recycles the unequal hierarchy in global research, but also reinforces the prioritization of science and engineering outputs, rather than humanities and social sciences research (Marginson and Xu 2021). Across interview participants from the six case universities, many observed that humanities and social sciences research is not equally valued as science disciplines, both at their institutions and in Chinese higher education.

Furthermore, in global humanities and social sciences, the research agenda, paradigms, theories and the temporalities of knowledge remain largely shaped by Anglo-European culture and reality, resulting in devastating risks of epistemicide (Alatas 2003; Santos 2014). Knowledge produced by agents from disadvantaged groups risks being wronged, marginalized, ignored or exploited (Dübgen 2020; Santos 2014). The disadvantaged groups are not limited by a single identity, such as nationality; there is a plurality of disadvantages. To name a few, non-white scholars in Anglo-European systems and outside, female scholars, scholars working with endogenous knowledge not widely acknowledged.

As each individual has plural identities (Sen 1999b, 2006); one could face double, triple or even multiple discriminations. For example, a 'Chinese' identity is multilayered, which can be related to Chinese (including the Greater China) nationality, ethnicity, ancestry, family, birth place, diaspora status or ideologies and cultures (Xu 2021a). In global academia, being a 'Chinese' humanities and social sciences academic could trigger possible discriminations based on one's nationality (China, non-Anglo-European); ethnicity or race (Chinese or Asian, non-white); assumed language (Chinese, non-English); assumed religious belief (non-Christianity); assumed ideological and political stance (communism, not capitalist); assumed knowledge (Chinese, non-Anglo-European); or assumed research agenda and paradigm (Chinese reality and tradition, not Anglo-European ones). In the current study, a few interviewees reported discriminatory experiences in international academia. Some experiences were related to the language use, demonstrated by a (self-) perceived deficiency because of their English capability. Some were related to their research agenda and paradigm, which were rejected by international (Western if known) peer reviewers or

editors as they were not ‘Western’ enough. Some involved racial discrimination, when a Chinese interviewee reported that international faculty (from Western countries) at their institution enjoyed more privileges. Other factors, although not directly linked with a ‘Chinese’ identity, further constitutes the possibility of multiple discrimination. Factors identified in the study include discipline (some more prioritized than others), gender (female academics more disadvantaged than males), educational background (Western education more valued than others), work experiences (previous experiences in Western countries preferred than others) and career stage (early-career academics are more disadvantaged than the seniors).

In general, global academia does not constitute the most favourable context for the development of Chinese humanities and social sciences. However, since agents from China are integral parts of global academia, their agency is not restrained by the global academia. The following sections will further explain the dynamics with the global as well as across national, local and individual scales.

## **National Scale**

At the national scale, humanities and social sciences research in China are conditioned by the dual influence of traditional roots and ‘Western’ imprints (see the discussion of the ‘West’ in Chapter 1 of the book). The roots of Chinese humanities and social sciences knowledge can be traced back to as far as Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE, including the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period) (Yang, Xie and Wen 2019). Chinese philosophical, political, social and literary traditions originated then, and these were continuously shaped by thoughts like Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Buddhism (Tu 1999). But in contemporary China, the institutionalization of humanities and social sciences subjects bears Western imprints. Western ideology, cultures and sociopolitical ideas have been introduced to China through colonization, modernization and internationalization of Chinese humanities and social sciences (Yang, Xie and Wen 2019). As noted, ‘the indigenous Chinese traditions have never become a dominant force in modern times, notwithstanding incessant clamours for the indigenisation of the Chinese knowledge system’ (Liu 2018: 242).

The Chinese government has been exerting its collective agency to push back against the worldwide neoliberal capitalism agenda as well as the recycling of global hegemonic power into national space. The agency exerted at the national scale closely interacts with agents at global, institutional and individual scales.

In general, humanities and social sciences research has been getting increasing policy attention and funding allocation in China. The government has also been encouraging Chinese universities and academics to ‘go out’ (*zou chu qu*, 走出去) to broaden their international influence (e.g. National Planning Committee of Philosophy and Social Sciences 2006). Such an approach challenges the hegemony of Anglo-European systems noted earlier; though as the examination of national policies demonstrates, the policies oscillate between internationalization and endogenization. Endogenization is constantly highlighted in national policies, for example, by reminding universities and academics of the ‘Chinalization’ of humanities and social sciences (e.g. Ministry of Education 2011). As summarized in Xu (2021b), the ‘Chinalization’ of humanities and social sciences has triple connotations: epistemically, to respect and inherit the historical, cultural and philosophical roots of Chinese traditions; ideologically, to uphold Marxism with Chinese characteristics; and practically, to set agendas grounded in Chinese reality and bring about impacts in contemporary China. The interlinked connotations add indigenous cultural awareness, political sensitivity and pragmatic orientations to Chinese humanities and social sciences research, which makes it impossible to be fully Westernized in its internationalization process.

For global academia, China at the national scale has also proposed the sense of responsibility for humankind and advocated the development of humanities and social sciences with ‘the care for humankind’ (*guan huai ren lei*, 关怀人类) (Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party 2017). This concept corresponds to previous policy discourses like ‘harmonious world’ (*he xie shi jie*, 和谐世界) and ‘building a community with a shared future for humankind’ (*gou jian ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*, 构建人类命运共同体). The proposed ‘community with a shared future for humankind’ goes beyond the dichotomy between China and ‘the other’. It also moves away from a hegemonic and zero-sum imagination of the world system, and an orientation based on nation-states, to a broader cosmopolitan understanding of ‘all under heaven as one family’ (*tian xia yi jia*, 天下一家).

## Institutional Scale

Chinese universities are influenced by the global landscape and national policies, but exercise their agency in various degrees. In the current study, university policies and interviews with senior administrators demonstrated

a clear strategic alignment to the global WCU narratives. For instance, the senior administrator at Uni-W explained: 'We initiated our incentives for humanities and social sciences international publications because we would like to enhance our performance in the ranking of ESI (Essential Science Indicators) and to improve our impacts.' Universities also manifested influences from national policies, where the policy rhetoric on 'going out' appeared repetitively in institutional documents and in fifteen participants' interviews (including senior university administrators). Universities' policies and interviews with senior administrators also demonstrated a close focus on the national funding schemes and their growing emphasis on humanities and social sciences research. Across universities, a certain level of policy borrowing also happened, which was confirmed by senior administrators that they would 'learn from' institutions of similar type when formulating policies.

Institutions, however, were not completely bounded *in* the structure. They showcased different kinds of autonomy to internationalize humanities and social sciences research, working *with* or *beyond* the context. Some universities utilized the funding sources to formulate supportive schemes for the development of humanities and social sciences at their institution. Within each university, different departments also had room for institutional agenda-setting and decision-making. As the senior administrator at Uni-C explained, their university-level policy acted as a 'signal', just like the role national policies are playing for universities, but departments can formulate their own policies based on their own orientations. For instance, the analysis of institutional policy documents revealed a large proportion of universities were actively promoting growth in the number of international publications. Against this backdrop, a few departmental leaders interviewed articulated clear rejections to the quantity-oriented approach, and they highlighted that in research evaluations their departments valued research with good academic quality, strong impacts and genuine contributions to knowledge. Some departments also took the leadership role in establishing and hosting new international journals, and extending international partnerships not only with Western institutions, but with partners sharing similar research and strategic interests. A department at Uni-W had long-term collaborative relationships with Central Asian universities, particularly on issues related to the Silk Road. This was again a sign of national policy's influence (noticeably the national Belt and Road Initiative), but the partnership started before the national policy and showcased bottom-up autonomous features.

## Individual Scale

Chinese humanities and social sciences academics (and research students, though they were not interviewed in the current study) are situated in a convergence of influences from the global, national and institutional scales.

In addition to the global influences noted in the earlier section, Chinese academics reported perceiving the national policies, funding structure and institutional evaluative policies (particularly career-related ones) as 'the conductor's baton' (*zhi hui bang*, 指挥棒), guiding and influencing their research and career. But this does not mean academic freedom was denied. Academics could tango with the agenda, particularly when that could lead to a win-win situation. For instance, academics were generally positive about the rising policy attention and funding support for humanities and social sciences research, which provided more resources for their research. In line with the national policy, a large proportion of academics highlighted the importance of international communications and 'going out', while voicing the need to balance it with local contribution and endogenous knowledge. In relation to scholarship, Chinese humanities and social sciences academics rejected the 'self-colonization' (Dang 2005: 68) of Chinese humanities and social sciences. This idea of balancing international and national-local was a consensus among both the academics and national policies, though less so across institutional policies which were more performatively oriented.

But not everyone is following the agenda set by the wider context. Among the twenty-eight academics not in favour of the incentive schemes, half of them had taken an 'adaptive' stance to reconcile or compromise with the policy orientation, while the other half reported a resistant stance. They rejected following the institutional agenda. Some academics stated that despite larger monetary and career-related benefits associated with international publications, they preferred to publish in top domestic journals. Their goals were to gain domestic reputation, generate impacts in the local community and demonstrate their influence in domestic academia. Nine academics reported taking actions to make changes to the institutional policies.

Academics also reported challenging and reshaping the Anglo-European-dominated global academia, with a sense of responsibility for being a member of the global community. They actively contributed to international journals, not only by writing for them but also as reviewers and editors. For instance, one academic in English studies was an editor of a prominent international journal. She said she would never judge if an article was written by native English speakers or not and make decisions based on their language proficiency – as a

non-native English speaker, she often felt '*offended*' when seeing native speakers expressing their 'sense of superiority', in review comments like 'as far as I can tell, the paper was written by a *non-native speaker* – please find a *native speaker* to *polish* the language.'<sup>3</sup> Articles and knowledge should be judged based on their originality and contributions, not the language, said the academic. Participants also reported the increasingly active roles Chinese humanities and social sciences academics were playing in international scholarly associations and international collaborations with Western and non-Western academics. Some perceived the invisibility of Chinese humanities and social sciences not as a fixed situation and suggested a developing and forward-looking mindset. They thought that as there was still room and gaps in the global knowledge pool, there would then be opportunities and responsibilities to make more contributions with Chinese knowledge and language.

## Conclusion

This chapter unpacks the dynamics of contextual agency at the global, national, institutional and individual scales. As the analysis shows, the internationalization of Chinese humanities and social sciences is not influenced by a single set of factors (such as the national 'going out' strategy) or determined by a single group of agents (such as by universities alone). The global academia, Chinese government, universities, humanities and social sciences academics and editors all play a role in the process. All agents navigate through various contextual conditions and act as contexts to others. The global, national, institutional and individual contexts can be restricting, enabling or restrictively enabling (or the other way around, similar to the idea of a double-edged sword). The same factors can be restricting to some agents, while enabling to others. However, agents work not only *within* the context, but also *with* and *beyond* the context. The un-separable and inter-transferable features of agents and the context point to the possibility to understand Chinese humanities and social sciences research in a more nuanced way.

The perspective of contextual agency also points to new understandings of institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom, particularly in the

<sup>3</sup> Phrases quoted in italics here were expressed in English by the interviewee.

Chinese context. The autonomy and freedom in Chinese higher education and research do not correspond exactly with Western notions. Government, universities and individuals are not necessarily antagonistic towards each other. The institutional autonomy and individual academic freedom lie in not only the power against and freedom from structural constraints, but also the power and freedom to work with and through the context. This may be of interest to future research.

Tensions in the internationalization process, as revealed in this chapter, showcase the intrinsically ‘in-between’ dilemma of Chinese humanities and social sciences research (Xu 2021b): it swings between internationalization and endogenization, global connection and national agenda, international knowledge and endogenous cultures, epistemological openness and ideological vigilance. The oscillations are ever evolving and never ending. As this study reveals, in national policies, institutional strategies and individuals’ activities, finding a balance in-between is a recurring and important theme to all agents. Being in-between may appear chaotic, but it is not being in limbo. Rather than being ‘either-or’ or ‘neither-nor’, the in-betweenness is a ‘both-and’ space that rejects dualistic perceptions. It then creates possibilities and hybridity – just like Schrödinger’s cat that is both alive and dead, and like the ‘*zhong yong*’ (中庸, ‘the Golden Mean’) philosophy in Chinese tradition where being in-between is most desirable.

The in-betweenness explains the ambivalence and some seemingly self-conflicting dilemmas, such as why Chinese humanities and social sciences can appear both open and closed, both free and restricted. Existing scholarships on Chinese humanities and social sciences research have depicted tensions in its development and internationalization (e.g. Gao and Zheng 2018; Hayhoe 1993; Liu 2018; Yang et al. 2019), but the in-betweenness as a whole had not been fully grasped. The paradoxical positioning may seem problematic to research grounded in non-Chinese (often Anglo-European) perspectives, or to those used to a ‘black-or-white’ binary thinking mode. Nonetheless, it offers a nuanced framework to comprehend the complexity of Chinese higher education and research, and it proves that local reality and subtlety can be examined from local perspectives and explained with local discourses, rather than appropriated to Anglo-European frameworks. Together with the attempt to diversify the understandings of ‘contextual agency’ by engaging with Chinese and English scholarships, the concept of ‘in-betweenness’ again highlights the importance of endogenous epistemologies and the value of pluralized knowledge.



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