Exploring the Role of Higher Education in the Formation of Civic Engagement in Contemporary China

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OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

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1. Research Rationale and the Chinese Context

2. Existing literature on the role of HE in civic engagement and social attitudes;

Gaps in our knowledge on China

3. Data collection, methodology, ethical issues

4. Preliminary Findings and Concluding remarks

1. Research Rationale

Expansion of HE and public/private goods

Global expansion of recruitments to HE and Mass higher education systems (Marginson, 2016)

- ❖ **Public good:**
  - ◇ Benefit national economies-High-value, high-skilled, knowledge-based sectors – national competitiveness (Brown et al., 2010);
  - ◇ Social outcomes: social cohesion, trust and tolerance (McMahon, 2009; Putnam, 2000)
- ❖ **Private benefits**
- ◇ Economic benefits (the wage premium/the private rate of return) are generally positively related to the levels of education:
- ◇ Tertiary educated adults-1.5 times as much on average as those with only upper secondary level qualifications (OECD, 2013)
- ◇ Employment opportunities (Liu et al., 2016)

Research Rationale continued...

Expansion of HE and the levels of inequality

❖ While the expansion of HE seen as a democratising process, some argue that differentiated mass HE may even be contributing to greater inequality (Carnoy 2011).

   ◇ At the societal level, inequality in income and wealth (Piketty 2013; Esping-Andersen 2005)

   ◇ In HE, hierarchies (institutions and fields)-pronounced (Liu et al. 2016; Shavit et al. 2007)➔the increasing differentiation in the labour market outcomes (Green and Zhu 2010; Reimer et al. 2008).

inequality and Social Outcomes

◇ Extreme levels of inequality➔a major challenge to social cohesion (Green et al., 2006, 2011);

◇ Also associated with negative social outcomes such as public health and well-being, social trust, political engagement, social mobility and crime (Pickett and Wilkinson 2010)

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China represents a case that illustrates attributes of both trends

The expansion of HE as all-embracing public good

- ⬦ the massive recruitment, the production of graduates in sciences and engineering, the project of world-class (double first- class) universities, the civil servants (Liu, 2016; Marginson, 2016a; Brown et al., 2010; Carnoy et al., 2013).

- ⬦ the expansion opportunities➔ meritocratic selection➔ an attractive pathway of upward social mobility, particularly for working class and peasant families (Liu 2016).

The levels of inequality

- ⬦ The deeper structural adjustments in the late 1990s➔ further privatisation and decollectivitisation, a further withdrawal of state welfare provision (Ding et al. 2009; Berik et al. 2007);

- ⬦ Main consequence➔ rising inequality in employment, income, and wealth in access to opportunity structures between different social groups, between different regions and between men and women (Liu 2017; Dong and An 2015; Goodman 2014).

Research Objectives

The Role of the State: the role of universities as strongholds of Socialist ideology
- ✧ Top-down citizenship;
- ✧ and political participation and engagement through socialisation (Wang, 2016).

? On the role of higher education
- ✧ in shaping young people's sense of citizenship, particularly in regard to civic engagement;

2.Conceptual Framework 1 -Civic engagement

Conceptualising civic engagement

Ehrlich (2000): both political and non-political activities and behaviors to improve the quality of living in a community by those who are 'working to make a difference' and 'developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference' (vi).

- ✧ First cluster: the relationships between education and civic behaviour such as political engagement and civic activities (Doyle and Skinner 2017; Green and Janmatt, 2016)
- ✧ Second cluster: on the implications of education on non-behavioural sets of knowledge and skills (Marginson, 2011; McMahon, 2009) ;
- ✧ Third subset: a wide range of civic and social outcomes of education such as trust, tolerance, low crime rates and healthy lifestyles, (Putnam, 2000)

The Chinese Context 1-Civic engagement

The role of the state in shaping citizenship and identity through formal and informal channels of civic education

- ❖ Informal Education: 'quality' citizenship (Murphy, 2014;2004)
- ❖ Formal education, prior scholarship-curricular contents and reforms (Leung, 2006; Li, 2005):
- ✧ Responds to shifting state priorities in ideology and in and social and geopolitical circumstances;
- ✧ New addition- traditional Chinese values beginning in 2001 (Li, 2009)
- ✧ A hybrid of political ideology and civic values beginning in 2007 with a new core course entitled 'Moral Cultivation and Law' (Tan, 2013) ;
- ✧ CE in HE seems to follow the State's top-down approach to instil the concept of socially and politically appropriate citizenship –to prioritise the codes of conduct and to regulate university students' behaviour, thus producing obedient and law-abiding citizens (Zhang, 2016).

Gaps in existing research-Civic Engagement

The majority of studies still focus on civic engagement through political activities and participation.

- ♦ Li's empirical: civic activities among university students are often politically motivated, such as organised patriotic demonstrations (2009);
- ♦ Zhang's recent survey in Beijing: students are passive participants in political activities the constraints from the curricula and rigid ideology education (2016).
- ♦ Further reflected in Wang's recent study (2016): political participation and socialization in HE do not make a significant impact on graduates' political attitudes compared to non-graduates
- ♦ Gaps: Little about the civic and social dimension; a lack of adequate knowledge about civic behaviour, such as voluntary activities or participation in non-profit organisations.

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Social Trust and Civic Engagement in China

❖ Under-researched and under-theorised;

❖ Cultural characteristics of trust: the persistent core value of familism (Li and Liang 2002).

❖ The trust and loyalty-the family members: unexamined and unquestioned (Pye 1999) and sometimes irrational-dictates patterns of people's behavior and choices (Fukuyama 1995; Pye 1999);

✧ The high level of particularized trust -quasi kinship networks such as membership from the same village (Huhe 2014);

✧ A high level of trust-the national government and the Party state, which is consistent with political Confucianism and its moral loyalty to and solidarity with the State (Li 2016; Wu and Wilkes, 2017).

✧ The radius or the circle of trust -cover two ends of the pillar– the individual family/kinship and the Party State- a missing middle?

Research Design and Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with young people from the birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999

➤ Ethical Approval (No. LRS-16/17-4360) by King's Research Ethics in February 2017;

➤ We posted a research recruitment advertisement in Chinese via several social media outlets.

➤ A total number of 68 respondents selected randomly from different types of universities and fields of study;

➤ The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one and two and a half hours on average.

➤ All of the interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the respondents,

➤ All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese; interview data were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent, transcribed in Chinese, and analysed in English.

➤ The students' identities and institutions were anonymized, and pseudonyms were coded instead.

The socioeconomic and demographic details of the 68 interviewees (birth cohorts between 1993 and 1999)

	Key Universities (**16**) and % in total	Non-key Universities (**52**) and % in total	% Total number **68**
Socioeconomic Status			
Urban	11 (16.2%)	25 (36.8%)	36 (53%)
Rural	5 (7.3)	27 (39.7)	32 (47 %)
Gender			
Male	7 (10.29%)	26 (38.2%)	33 (48.49%)
Female	9 (13.24 %)	26 (38.2%)	35 (51.44%)
Fields of Study			
STEMS	8 (11.8%)	28(41.1%)	36 (52.9%)
Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences	8 (11.8%)	24(35.3%)	32 (47.1%)

3. Findings-Civic Engagement

Encountering Civic Activities

❖ The majority of interviewees- no regular contact with public associations;

❖ For those involved in social activities, the majority based on individual self-interests, including leisure, sports or the activities related to their study;

❖ For the majority of respondents, political activities-the most normalized pattern of civic engagement, ranging from the local Party/Youth League recruitment and events, to voluntarily promoting national products whilst boycotting foreign products, to writing online petitions for patriotic purposes.

❖ Interview sample 1

Civic engagement-findings 2

Voluntary engagement in associations that transcend individuals' interests and hobbies:

Just over ten per cent of the respondents (8 out of 68) - charitable and volunteering activities, although not on a regular basis

✧the Free Medical Service Association;
✧the One-Tree-For-Life Team;

✧Interview Samples 2,3,

Civic Engagement and familist networks

✧ The majority of the narratives suggest that the particularized trust developed from the extended familistic networks-extended kinship shared by the same surname, the same home town, the same province, or even the same school– became the rationale for socialisations and engagement:

✧ a pattern of networks connecting students from the same town with shared interests and solidarity, which resembled the quasi-patrilineal socialisations that prioritizes social relationships based on geographical origin (Interview Sample 4).

Trust at/ Engagement with the intermediate communities at university

✧ The majority of the interviewees expressed a high level of trust in their personal tutors, lecturers and professors. Academics seemed to be highly valued and respected in the university communities (Interview 5);

✧ Yet the same level of trust and respect could not be traced in the narratives about the university's administrative bureaucrats (Interview 6)

Civic Engagement-Discussion

A fragile and inconsistent pattern of involvement linking themselves to the society and the state;

- ◇ to validate their vague sense of citizenship by re-affirming their patriotism and Party loyalty, or by imagining participation through politically charged petitions and sanctions.
- ◇ a small number-a sense of moral obligations and public responsibilities through charity work.
- ◇ However, the competition (HE+ employment) prevented from engaging on a regular basis.
- ◇ the competitive university culture -allow expressive individualism to thrive while undermining the collective consciousness of the public good and social issues.

Trust-Discussion

◇ On the one hand, Confucianism and its related moral obligations determine the unexamined loyalty and trust in the State among university students;

◇ On the other hand, Confucianism does not provide a cultural tool to develop trust among non-familist communities. There was an evident mismatch between the enduring Confucian model of trust in the State and distrust in the communities based on non-familist unions;

◇ Furthermore, the ideology of meritocracy seems to transcend the boundaries of kinship and provides an alternative cultural tool to reconcile the mismatch of trust with those beyond familist communities.

Concluding remarks

✧ The unexamined loyalty and trust in the Party State suggests a persistent ideology of Confucianism and its related moral obligations.

✧ On the one hand, persistent Confucianism related norms and values continue to shape young people's trust and patterns of civic engagement.

✧ On the other hand, utilitarian and expressive individualism is fueled by the competitive culture in contemporary universities.

The hybrid of neoliberal individualism and Confucianism seems to be the perfect match to reconcile the absence of civic traditions and to validate civic consciousness among university students.

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