

Decolonizing Curricula in China: Policy Initiatives and Institutional Responses

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Abstract

In the field of global higher education, the decolonization of curricula has emerged as a critical issue. This paper focuses on the policies and measures implemented by the Chinese government in promoting curriculum decolonization and responses in various educational institutions. Drawing upon postcolonial theory and the concept of "epistemological diversity", it argues that although these initiatives have undoubtedly represented a positive step, their effective implementation requires a fundamental reconceptualization of the purpose and nature of higher education in China. The paper further emphasizes the tension between policy rhetoric and institutional reality, and puts forward a strong appeal: universities should be viewed from a brand-new perspective and regarded as an important space to epistemic plurality and social transformation.

Full paper

The discourse on decolonizing curricula has gained significant traction in the global higher education landscape, and many scholars and practitioners have critically analyzed the mechanism of the knowledge generation, dissemination and legalization within the academic environment (Andreotti, 2011; Santos, 2014). In the context of China, this discourse is particularly prominent because of its unique historical background and its current position as an important role in the international higher education arena. The paper aims to deeply explore the policy actions taken by China government to promote curriculum decolonization and its responses in various educational institutions. According to the postcolonial theory (Said, 1978) and the concept of "epistemological diversity" (Santos, 2014), the paper points out that the relevant measures of the China government are undoubtedly a valuable attempt to build a more inclusive and fair higher education system, but its effective implementation depends on deep rethinking and reconceptualization of the very purpose and nature of higher education.

In the past decade, policymakers in China have gradually realized the urgent need for the decolonization of higher education curricula, which is reflected in a series of policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, which explicitly call for the "localization" and "contextualization" of knowledge and encourage the development of "indigenous" scholarship (Ministry of Education, 2022). The logic behind these policies is to question the Western epistemologies in Chinese higher education, and to assert China's cultural and intellectual sovereignty. However, as Eichbaum et al. (2021) said, the translation of these policy imperatives will into concrete institutional practice is fraught with challenges. Many

universities in China still tend to give priority to western knowledge and pedagogical models in the pursuit of international recognition and promotion of competitiveness, resulting in local knowledge systems and ways of knowing often being ignored or even squeezed.

The tension between policy rhetoric and institutional reality reveals the fundamental dilemma faced by China's higher education system: how to balance the need for global integration with the imperative of local relevance? The notion of "decolonization" is sometimes understood narrowly and instrumentally as a means to strengthen China's soft power and global influence, which further deepens this dilemma (Lo and Pan, 2020). However, this one-sided understanding may simplify decolonization into a mere political tool, rather than a substantive epistemological and pedagogical project. As advocated by Tight (2022), the genuine decolonization of higher education requires a radical reflection on the very foundations of the university, including its relationship with the state, the market and the wider society.

Moreover, in the process of decolonizing curricula in China, the core of the matter is not simply to replace Western content with Chinese content, but to conduct a profound inquiry into the structures and assumptions behind the creation and transmission of knowledge. The question involves interrogating the ways in which certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others, and how this privileging is shaped by broader relations of power and inequality. It also entails recognizing the diversity and complexity of Chinese knowledge systems, and the need to create spaces for marginalized and subaltern voices to be heard. Wimpenny et al. (2021) emphasizes that achieving this goal requires a fundamental shift from a "monocultural" to an "intercultural" approach to education, one that values dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual learning. Therefore, China's higher education should abandon the traditional framework of single linear knowledge transmission, and integrate multicultural communication and collision into educational practice, thus ensuring the openness, inclusiveness and dynamics of knowledge production.

In conclusion, the decolonization of curricula in Chinese higher education is a complex and multifaceted process, which cannot be summarized only by a set of policy prescriptions or institutional strategies. It needs continuous deep intervention and critical thinking on the core essence of knowledge production and dissemination, and dares to challenge the entrenched power structure and hierarchical order. Although the policies and measures introduced by the China government represent a positive step towards the goal of decolonization, their effectiveness will ultimately depend on the ability of universities to cultivate a culture of critical inquiry, dialogue and reflexivity. This means a new vision of the role of the university, that is, seeing it as a space of epistemic plurality and a site of social transformation. Only in this way can China's higher education make solid progress on the road of decolonization, and then contribute to creating a more just and equitable global knowledge economy.

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