

Chinese Students' Dilemmas of Neoliberal Storm in Ivory Tower: A Top-down Reasoning and Bottom-up Solutions' Proposal

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Abstract—With rapidly developing globalization and modernization, Chinese university students' values and competencies have been discursively shaped in the prevailing neoliberal Ivory Tower. Also, influenced by Confucian values, Chinese university students regard higher education as the most significant chance of promoting their social class. Firstly, with the economic history approach, this study illustrates the cultural-acceptance process of neoliberalism in China. Secondly, with the top-down reasoning, this study critically analyses Chinese university students' dilemmas like heavy competitive pressure, weak socio-emotional skills, limited critical analysis and inadequate creativity in examination-oriented and teacher-centered higher education resulting from social stratification pressure of low socio-economic status families for social stratification, the World Class University movement, and broader political, economic contexts. Furthermore, in terms of "glonacal agency heuristic" (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), and a multi-level stakeholder analysis about the micro, meso, and macro-level educational challenges in the Chinese higher education system, this paper develops a bottom-up solutions' proposal about student-centered and self-learning constructivism strategy. Moreover, the proposed social-emotional skills and transversal competencies for Chinese university students involve critical thinking, self-efficacy, interpersonal, intrapersonal, cognitive, intercultural communicative competence, empathy, cosmopolitanism as global citizens, and a common identity. In conclusion, the proposed bottom-up solutions are as follows: (1) SDGs-based liberal arts curriculum for the public value construction; (2) student-centered pedagogy for Chinese students' autonomy formation; (3) civic-life engagement for "whole person" cultivation. This constructive proposal aims at facilitating students to overcome competitive status anxiety independently with inner motivation, global employability, and finally realize social mobility through transformative higher education.

I. INTRODUCTION

As Foucault illustrates, “power relations form the basis for the functioning of the State” (Foucault, 1980, p. 123). Global political and economic forces boost the emerging neoliberalism, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, competition and performance, which has kept taking the dominant place since the 1980s until today. Neoliberalism has changed the operations of Chinese universities and has begun to create a culture of competition, corporate managerialism, efficiency, and accountability in China’s higher education. Rather than blaming current challenges in higher education on neoliberalism, the problem is neoliberalism leading to an erosion of quality higher education for students.

The top-down reasoning process and bottom-up solutions’ proposal construction in this study are enlightened from the “glocal agency heuristic” (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), which emphasizes the simultaneous interplay of global, national, and local stakeholders and forces influenced by the dynamic relationship among governments, higher education institutions, and market pressure, etc.

Besides, from the economic-historical perspective, there is a need to analyze the long-term process of Chinese society’s and higher education institutions’ cultural acceptance of neoliberal values, and internalize neoliberalism as a mechanism in modern academia.

The prevalence of neoliberalism in modern Chinese universities can date back to the historical impact of Confucianism on East Asian educational traditions. According to Simon Marginson (2010), there are five main Confucian educational values are as follows:

(1) meritocracy is upheld through a rigorous system of tests; (2) strong nation-state shaping of structures, funding and priorities; (3) a tendency to universal tertiary participation, partly financed by growing levels of household funding of tuition, sustained by a private duty, grounded in Confucian values, to invest in education; (4) “one chance” national examinations that mediate social competition and university hierarchy and focus family commitments to education; (5) accelerated public investment in research and “world-class’ universities (Simon Marginson, 2010).

Moreover, in China’s modernization process, neoliberalism has started to accelerate permeating Chinese values since the Chinese reform and opening-up in 1978, which brought private business and market incentives to all sectors in China. Therefore, the neoliberal focus on efficiency, competition, performance and audit cultures are emphasized in examination-oriented Chinese higher education for human capital mobility.

II. THE MAIN PROBLEMS OF CHINESE STUDENTS

Though admitting the positive consequences of globalization on China’s universities, neoliberal market-led universities are increasingly becoming a national marketplace with the prevailing culture of measurement. Yang (2004) analyzed the possible adverse effects caused by the introduction of business or entrepreneurial practices and values into the higher education system, which may “pose a threat to intellectual virtues such as honesty, intellectual courtesy, indifference to the mere fashion in ideas, and a dedication to the regulative ideal of truth (Coady, 2000)” (Yang, 2004, p. 495).

Besides, the Chinese examination-oriented system lacking passion for intellectual inquiry leads university students to prefer the teacher-centered teaching model rather than the student-centered model. which hinders creating an environment that encourages “academic freedom, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity” (Salmi & Albatch, 2011). For Chinese university students, examination pressure leads to “unnecessary tensions” that “distorted academic culture and harmed academic commitment,” which brings about a lack of passion for intellectual inquiry are well documented in many studies (Li et al., 2013; Yi, 2011).

Thus, “competitiveness” and “efficiency” in exams and assessments have established the “normal” roles of Chinese universities and regulated the teaching contents and pedagogies.

III. TOP-DOWN REASONING: NEOLIBERAL CLIMATE IN ACADEMIA

Considering neoliberalism in the Chinese higher education system as a structural challenge, this part analyses the neoliberal climate in Chinese academia with a top-down reasoning method.

As shown in Figure 1, students’ problems are influenced by upper institutions and broader social contexts. Just as Springer (2012) writes, “neoliberalism is neither a ‘top-down’ nor ‘bottom-up’ phenomena, but rather a circuitous process of socio-spatial transformation” (p. 133).

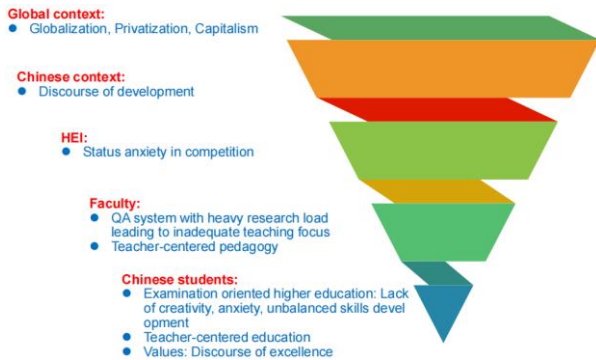


Fig. 1: Top-down Reasoning, Source: Author

Firstly, on the social-context dimension, the “mentality of the modern society” is the shift in the moral and philosophical worldviews and values held by the entire society (O’Malley, 1996), so neoliberalism has fostered an “entrepreneurial” culture at Chinese universities. Chinese higher education is expected to serve this economic plan rather than produce any “non-utilitarian” knowledge. This market-driven ideology powerfully shapes Chinese imaginaries regarding what higher education is for and what the university is expected to deliver. Besides, there are limited chances of upward social mobility for low socio-economic status families in China, and it is a common phenomenon that these families may regard higher education as the only chance for upward mobility, so the parents hope their children could think that well-paid majors are prior to the majors that their children are the most interested in, and the most significant aim of accepting higher education is to get competitive skills of earning a living after graduation, which shows a discourse of development to some degree.

Furthermore, on the institutional dimension, with an overwhelming Quality Assurance system under global status anxiety among higher education institutions, the Chinese plan of building World-class Universities places research in a much higher position than teaching. Besides, faculty struggle between meeting the traditional expectations of educators (as self-sacrificing teachers and role models) and addressing the requirements prescribed in the education policies and shaped by the market-driven ideology (in which they are redefined as education service providers and are also expected to become efficient and competitive knowledge producers for universities’ ranking).

IV. BOTTOM-UP SOLUTIONS’ PROPOSAL: STUDENT-CENTERED CONSTRUCTIVISM

As Figure 2. and 3. show, this bottom-up solution enhances students' autonomy while giving full play to the

guiding role of teachers to face neoliberal academia collaboratively with an innovative strategy, and realize the aim of forming the right values in citizens’ cultivation.

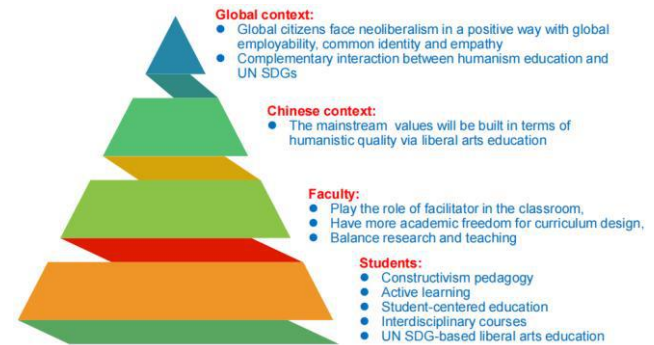


Fig. 2: Bottom-up Solutions, Source: Author

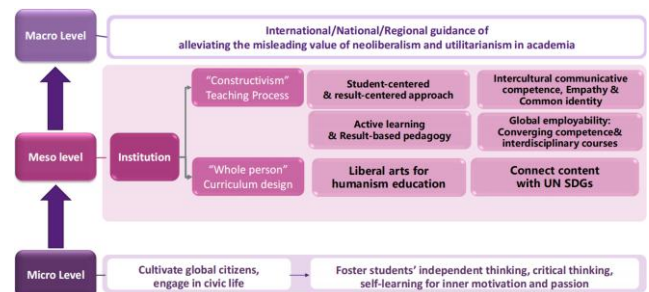


Fig. 3: Constructivism of Bottom-up Solutions on the Three Levels, Source: Author

Therefore, in detail, this research proposes three solutions to the neoliberal crisis in Chinese universities as follows:

1) SDGs- based Liberal Arts Curriculum for the Public Value Construction

The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) make a new angle to inform the transformation of liberal arts education in the university. Specific SDGs resonate at a relatively deep level with the values of liberal arts education, like ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Since Chinese universities focus on sciences subjects with the utilitarian aims of national development, it is necessary to apply the SDGs to frame and synergize a liberal arts curriculum. (UN 2015), This will not only cultivate students’ social and emotional skills like humanism and common identity in intercultural communication but will also enhance students’ global employability with transferable skills based on interdisciplinary curriculums.

For example, the education of liberal arts is closely related to the study of literature. In the way of encouraging

students to combine reading and writing activities to bring out the best nutritional elements from books and put them in writing, students can refine their emotions and thoughts gradually. Thus, through learning a language, they can find the beauty of the world, feel happiness in life, and reflect the positive values to generate inner passions.

Above all, those specific SDGs may enrich a liberal arts curriculum, while an enriched liberal arts education will, in turn, engage universities with the SDGs in a holistic manner. Therefore, liberal arts education is well-positioned to steer our society in refocusing its priorities towards maintaining resilience, sustainability, and socio-ecology (Anatoly et al., 2021).

2) Student-centered Pedagogy for Chinese Students' Autonomy Formation

For facilitating Chinese university students' creativity, independent and critical thinking, appropriate cognitive pedagogy for transformation accounts. Different from traditional teacher-centered lectures in Chinese universities for rote memorization, active and interactive learning that takes place via a student-centered teaching method involves activities that develop a new learning environment and interactive education that will enable students to use every skill; integration of speaking, listening, reading, thinking, and writing in class and encourage students with positive psychology for inner motivation to participate in activities and solve problems by self-learning, research-learning and authentic practices, such as Problem Based Learning, Project-Based Learning, and Case-Based Learning activities. In this circumstance, students are more likely to enhance their transversal competencies of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive skills, social-emotional skills, self-discipline, high self-efficacy, and the spirit of inquiry.

3) Civic-Life Engagement for "Whole Person" Cultivation

For Chinese students, studying with the utilitarian aim for self-development is a mainstream value. However, a significant task of higher education institutions should be helping students understand society's problems and recognize the ethical issues they will face (Kerr, 2001). But knowledge is not enough by itself. Teachers have to encourage students to cultivate a quality of empathy for the problems of society and those who suffer from them (Heaney, 2012). Just like John Donne's poem "No Man Is an Island", especially in a post-pandemic era, Chinese universities are ought to be a common good of the international community. Chinese university students have to develop a commitment to ethical and civic principles and engage actively in civic life, or even embrace cosmopolitanism with intercultural contributions as global

citizens so that Chinese universities could build an ecology in academia with mutual efforts from all levels in the higher education system.

V. CONCLUSION

This study analyses the features, dilemma, and impact of economic-model neoliberalism on the mainstream educational values, students' behavior, academic professionals' responsibilities, and obligations in Chinese higher education, which is increasingly becoming a systemically constructed web with a modern mentality. With a "glonacal agency heuristic" perspective, taking the global, local, and national social circumstances of market forces, higher education institutions' policies, and national governments' development needs into consideration, this study has firstly proposed the top-down reasoning for the economic-historical causes of neoliberalism in Chinese higher education in academia, and analyses the main problems of neoliberal crisis among Chinese university students' development. Then the author develops a multi-level bottom-up solutions' proposal on the basis of student-centered constructivism involving multiple stakeholders in the Chinese higher education system, which is embedded with an international comparative education perspective for applying postmodern western main-stream pedagogy to innovation in Chinese higher education, and combined with the social environment of Chinese universities. The research could facilitate organizational and structural changes like outcome-oriented and student-centered learning to tackle status anxiety and examination-oriented Chinese higher education mechanisms influenced by neoliberal trends, in order to optimize Chinese higher education policies and systems.

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