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**HOW ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PRESSURES ARE RE-SHAPING
CHINA'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**
A Neo-Nationalism and University Brief*

November 2023

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China's higher-education system has been shaped in recent years by a trio of factors: the Covid-19 pandemic, the ambitions of Chinese leader Xi Jinping to make his country into an innovation superpower that is loyal to the Communist Party, and western alarm about those ambitions. But a fourth development, the slowing of China's formerly super-charged economy, could play a more prominent role going forward.

COVID-19

The initial cases of Covid-19 were reported in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019. It was the first country to impose lockdowns and among the last to lift restrictive border measures, in January 2023. The government response in China was also more stringent and far reaching than in many other places: Neighborhoods, districts, and even entire cities were cordoned off, individuals were tested and tracked, and those exposed to the coronavirus were ordered into mass public quarantines. Because of the heightened risks of congregate settings, Chinese universities were initially (and periodically, as cases fluctuated) shut down and studies moved online. When they reopened, it was with tight controls, such as extensive testing, student confinement to campus, and limitations on visits by outsiders.

The severity and duration of China's Covid controls, particularly for foreign travelers, served to isolate Chinese universities during the pandemic. Before Covid, China, long the largest sender of its young people to study in other countries, had sought to become a destination for international students. It had risen to third worldwide, attracting 450,000 students to its universities, many from developing countries elsewhere in Asia and Africa¹. But these students were unable to return to China to resume their studies, as were non-Chinese students attending elite joint-venture universities, run in partnership with prominent western institutions like Duke and New York Universities and the University of Nottingham. In the end, it would be about three years in which China universities were cut off from outside students, and it remains to be seen when foreign enrollments fully rebound.

* Selected contributors to the book Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, Autocrats, and the Future of Higher Education (Johns Hopkins University Press, [Open Access via Project Muse](#)) were asked to provide brief updates to their cases studies.

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For research, the picture was more mixed. A study by a pair of researchers at the University of Arizona found that collaboration between Chinese and American scientists actually spiked in the first months of the pandemic, although there have been other factors affecting cross-border research.²

Covid dampened academic mobility worldwide, of course. Likewise, the public-health crisis also had political fallout for governments globally, with leaders of all political bents coming in for criticism for their handling of the outbreak, including lengthy quarantines, lack of preparation, and unequal access to medicines, treatments, and, eventually, vaccines.

But the authoritarian nature of China's government, as well as the initial epicenter of the outbreak in the country, meant that Covid presented special challenges to Xi Jinping's leadership. As a result, the government sought to maintain tight control over the populace, including on campuses. That included funding ideological studies by college researchers promoting how Marxism, the Communist Party, and the "great Chinese spirit" helped fight Covid.³

As the third anniversary of the outbreak approached, however, visible strains over the country's "zero Covid" policy began to emerge. And some of the first signs of unrest appeared on campuses. Students at Nanjing Technological University protested after the campus was locked down for a single reported case. At Tsinghua University demonstrators pushed back against rules that prevented students from leaving campus except for medical emergencies. As protests began to grow more common, university leaders sent students home to try to minimize activism⁴.

The zero-Covid protests marked some of the most widespread public dissent China had seen in decades. They also spread overseas, particularly among Chinese students at foreign universities.

But the demonstrations ended almost as quickly as they began, after the government announced it would lift its stringent pandemic rules. An outstanding question is whether the momentary explosion of dissent will have any sort of legacy, especially on campus.

An Inward Focus

Meanwhile, Xi began an unprecedented third term in March 2023. Education, and in particular, nurturing scientific and technological talent, remains central to his vision of China as an 21st-century superpower. In a speech to the Politburo soon after beginning his new term, Xi called education a "strategic precursor" to building a modern China and said universities must "[aim] at the frontiers of the world's science and technology and major national strategic needs."⁵

The government has also pushed for more interdisciplinary studies and research and for an analysis of China's talent development trends and gaps, in order to make more strategic investments.

"Higher education remains a super high priority for the regime," Denis Simon, a former executive vice chancellor at Duke's campus in Kunshan and a longtime expert on Chinese science and technology, said in an interview⁶. "They want to educate high-end talent to meet the needs of the innovation economy."

Xi's emphasis on the primacy of the innovation economy makes it difficult to separate China's investment in education from its nationalist ambitions.

Part of that effort has included attempts to attract back more Chinese scientists who were educated and built their academic careers abroad, through so-called talent programs. It has recently had some successes, among them Xie Xiaoliang, a biophysical chemist and former professor at Harvard University,

whose discoveries have been important in the hunt for DNA mutations that lead to cancer and other genetic diseases⁷. The returning scientists could have ripple effects on what happens in the classroom, Simon said. “You’re going to have to have degrees of freedom to have the pedagogy work.”

Simon said Chinese authorities are still open to pursuing international academic partnerships, but their interests may be narrowing. Whereas before they struck deals with foreign universities like Duke to build liberal-arts colleges or comprehensive institutions, officials are now likely to focus on collaborative efforts that help build its STEM capacity, along the lines of a partnership with Israel’s Technion University to run a technological and research institute in the southern province of Guangdong.

But Xi has also said that Chinese higher education must be successful on its own terms, calling for universities to be “world class with Chinese characteristics.” (Harvard scholar William C. Kirby has questioned this idea, noting that one of the hallmarks of the leading, modern university, including those in China, is its part in an international system⁸.) Several prominent Chinese universities have withdrawn from global rankings, saying they need to focus on “educational autonomy.”⁹ In addition, China reduced the weighting of English in its nationwide college entrance exam.

At the same time, the government has said it plans to evaluate universities on an “ideological index,” part of an ongoing effort to impose greater Communist Party control on the day-to-day operations of universities. That includes requiring universities’ in-house party committees to “exercise comprehensive leadership” over teaching, research, and administration, and mandating a minimum number of party members among the faculty¹⁰.

Xi’s government is also seeking to codify patriotic, or ideological, education into law and to expand it to include Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Chinese people residing overseas, and the internet. While patriotic education has long been a tool of Chinese authorities, the formalization and expansion of its scope is new, analysts with the Council on Foreign Relations said¹¹. “It indicates what the Chinese Communist Party feels are its biggest vulnerabilities for the future control of China: the youth, cyberspace, and Chinese communities beyond the mainland.”

While the patriotic-education law focuses on Chinese citizens, the environment has also become more restrictive for foreign researchers. Once-innocuous topics of inquiry, like trade policy or migration, have become politicized, and outside academics said they have become more cautious about projects that could bring unwanted scrutiny to Chinese colleagues or interview subjects¹².

As of summer 2023, many international scholars of China are only now beginning to return to the country after Covid rules lifted. But the restrictive policy has also extended abroad, as China has limited foreign access to a number of important academic and scholarly databases, making it increasingly difficult for outsiders to access current data about the country¹³. A new counter-espionage law, which took effect in July 2023, could also complicate research because its wider scope could potentially characterize as sensitive information with national-security implications activities that would otherwise be considered areas of legitimate research.

Tensions Around International Academic Collaboration

Still, viewing developments in Chinese higher education solely through the lens of actions taken by the Chinese government paints an incomplete picture. For example, an analysis of scientific papers in the database PubMed found that papers published jointly by American and Chinese researchers have declined 2 percent since 2018, while citation rates have fallen 7 percent¹⁴. Separate research has tracked an uptick in the number of American-trained scientists of Chinese descent who are leaving the United States for

Chinese universities, with the number of researchers who dropped their American academic or corporate affiliation in 2021 jumping 23 percent from the prior year¹⁵.

Both trends likely reflect U.S. government policy toward academic collaboration with China, most notably the China Initiative, the federal probe into academic and economic espionage. Although the Biden administration ended the inquiry, which was begun under President Trump, in February 2022, it continues to have repercussions, with many scientists of Chinese descent questioning whether their international work will lead them to be regarded with suspicion¹⁶. Although much of the bellicosity toward China is associated with Trump, bipartisan skepticism of academic collaboration with China and fears of Chinese influence on American campus continues, with Congress considering additional legislation to increase oversight of such partnerships and to restrict donations and contracts from Chinese sources.

Such efforts come from the American side, of course. But it is difficult to decouple these actions from a discussion of Chinese nationalism and higher education because they are rooted in fears about the steps the Chinese government may be willing to take to achieve scientific advancement and innovation supremacy, including poaching scientific expertise. “The modern battleground now includes college, university campuses, and our students’ young minds,” a top Republican on the U.S. House education committee warned during a recent hearing on foreign influence¹⁷.

An Uncertain Economic Picture

Lastly, an element worth watching for its potential impact on Chinese academe is what appears to be an economic contraction and worsening unemployment in the country. Although the world’s second-largest economy grew faster than expected in the third quarter of 2023, many economists remain concerned about its slow post-pandemic recovery and the government’s willingness to undertake serious economic reforms.

The downturn has already had two practical effects on the higher-education system: It has led to new efforts to improve scientific and technological training at the vocational level¹⁸. There was a real “mismatch” between the skills that are in demand and the preparation young Chinese were receiving, said Simon, the science and technology expert.

A drop in government funding could also lead Chinese universities to raise tuition, many for the first time in decades. At some institutions, student fees could climb as much as 54 percent¹⁹.

But the biggest wildcard when it comes to the economy is its disproportionate impact on young Chinese. Unemployment rates for those under 24 years old are at an all-time high, with more than one in five recent college graduates out of work. And some estimates put the jobless rate much higher.

Already, some students are embracing the so-called lying-flat movement, which rejects societal pressures for achievement and productivity. The government will be keeping a close eye on how the worsening youth unemployment crisis affects campuses. If it sparks more vocal dissent, that could lead to an additional tightening of controls on higher education.

ENDNOTES

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