

## *Original Paper*

# China's Educational Reforms in a Global Context: Opportunities, Challenges, and Policy Responses

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines the interplay between globalisation and the development of China's education system, focusing on the influence of the World Bank's educational policies and investments. By exploring theoretical perspectives on globalisation, including transformationalism, this study analyses the evolution of China's educational reforms in response to global economic and policy shifts. The research investigates the World Bank's historical role in shaping educational practices in China, from higher education projects to basic and vocational education initiatives. Additionally, the paper discusses the dual impact of globalisation on China's education—highlighting the growth of marketised English education alongside efforts to promote the Chinese language and culture globally through institutions like Confucius Institutes. This paper underscores opportunities and challenges in aligning China's educational strategies with global standards while preserving cultural identity. The paper concludes with recommendations for balancing internationalisation with educational autonomy in the context of global interconnectedness.*

### ***Keywords***

*Globalisation, World Bank's educational policy, China's educational reform, Confucius Institutes, Marketised English education*

## **1. Introduction**

Since the end of the 20th century, whether in newspapers or on television, in business manuals or policy documents, we can always find the word “globalization”. Globalisation seems to become a buzzword for any study of contemporary social development. However, what is globalisation? Different institutions and scholars often have different theoretical perspectives. Under the influence of

the global economy, education has gradually commercialised. In the tendency of commercialised education, people have started to ask a series of questions: How can we protect children's right to education, promote education equity, and establish the same standard education system globally?

The World Bank, as a silent proxy of the global market (Ilon, 2002), is the largest education provider for developing countries (Zapp, 2017). In favour of globalisation, the World Bank has been actively involved in funding, advising and planning educational policies worldwide; meanwhile, it has been directing, lobbying, and monitoring different national governments to implement these rules. China is the largest developing country in the world and now has become the second-largest economy. Since 1980, the World Bank has funded China in various fields. Responding to global cooperation and competition, China is reforming its strategies by referring to the international education policies produced by the World Bank. The interplay of international education policies has also increasingly become essential to global education.

Therefore, I believe an effective way to understand the process of education globalisation is to review and analyse the World Bank's education policies and the development of China's education globalisation. This paper will first address my understanding of globalisation in education from a theoretical perspective. Then, this paper will try to analyse the adjustment of the World Bank's education policy. In the next section, this article will review the impact of investment in the World Bank on China's education policy. Besides, China's education in the development of globalisation opportunities and challenges. Finally, this paper will further summarise the relationship between globalisation and education.

## **2. Concept of Globalisation**

Globalisation should be a series of social development processes, not a single standard development model. To evaluate my view, we could apply the three theoretical perspectives of globalisation or the so-called three waves (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; Martell, 2007). In that case, my opinion on globalisation is much closer to transformationalism than the other two: hyperglobalism and scepticism.

Hyperglobalists believe that, under the influence of neoliberalism, the world is uniting a single market (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999), and international organisations are controlling the primary resources (Martell, 2007). The protectiveness of the virtual national boundaries is becoming more and more weak-facing, and the traditional national states are losing their sovereignty to the supranational institutions. On the one hand, there is a tendency for globalisation to homogenise the global culture, which might cause the citizens of different nations to lose their own unique cultural identities. When we began to promote global citizenship education, the globalisation of education seemed to take on the characteristics of a new colonisation, forcibly marketing the values and cultural products of the developed countries to the underdeveloped countries. On the other hand, however, the ongoing trade war between China and the United States and Britain's Brexit campaign has

demonstrated that such a so-called unified global economic market does not exist. If you compare these three views of globalisation to the spectrum, the hyperglobalism of globalisation is like the extreme left, with such a hyperbolic expression of globalisation.

If you look at the far-right end of the spectrum, it is the scepticism of globalisation. From the sceptics' perspective, they argue that economic globalisation is not unprecedented. Some researchers can trace globalisation back to modern history or even earlier. Freidman claims that there are 'three great eras of globalisation': The first era was from 1492 to 1800; The second era lasted from the 1800s to 1990s; The third era took place since 2000 (pp. 5-12) (Freidman, 2005). Another study by Scholte also claims three distinct stages of globalisation. However, the first one, from his view, took place between the 16th century and the 19th century. These researchers put the process of globalisation in a timeframe of Colonial history and capitalist progress (Scholte, 2005). From their perspectives to some extent, it shows that the prior forms of globalisation were mainly to build a centre to rule the world and take the people of the other part of the world into its governance range and then eventually benefit from it. However, the real goal of globalisation should be eliminating national boundaries and building a world of extensive cooperation. Therefore, they confuse the two completely different movements of globalisation and capitalist cosmopolitanism. Moreover, they also state that globalisation is an overestimated economic development status, which shows that concurrent trading is mainly happening among the dominant nations or some economic parties, such as the OECD countries. However, unlike the hyperglobalists, they acknowledge that sovereign states, not transnational institutions, are the pivotal force in determining the progress of globalisation (Martell, 2007).

In the spectrum of globalisation, my view should fit into the middle part. I agree with Held, McGrew et al., who state in their article that globalisation is a dynamic and fluctuating development process that will last for a long time (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999). This process encompasses the entire social spectrum, including economy, culture and policy. Globalisation is a new starting point for the history of humankind and is reshaping modern society within the new world order (Giddens, 2002). International organisations contribute to the process of globalisation and have the significance of guiding the direction. However, sovereign states ultimately determine the speed and model of their globalising process. Therefore, when I study the relationship between globalisation and education, I would use the term globalisation of education. I am not trying to promote a single model of global education, but to observe and analyse the international process of different countries and their social systems, how to integrate and promote their development, and finally find out the current developing trend of globalisation of education.

### **3. The World Bank and Globalisation of Education**

The globalisation of education has become a robust economic trend in globalisation. The internationalisation of human resources supports the globalisation of the economy, so it is necessary to cultivate more international talents with a global vision. The demand for the talent market is driving the

development of education towards internationalisation. In recent years, to obtain more talents with worldwide competitiveness and put their countries in a favourable position in the global competition, countries have taken education as an industry to manage, one after another process of economic reform of education. The World Bank promotes the globalisation of education in many ways, such as creating international education standards and forming a shared educational philosophy.

### *3.1 World Bank's Historical Background*

The World Bank was established in 1944 and now boasts over 10,000 staff worldwide (World Bank, 2020). It has launched educational programmes in more than 80 countries with an investment of approximately \$16 billion (World Bank, 2019). With its strong lending capacity, capacity for knowledge production, and transnational political influence, the World Bank has become a crucial player in the process of globalisation. Throughout various periods, the World Bank has generally aided in promoting balanced educational development across different countries and regions, fostering various technical talents, and implementing international educational concepts and institutional frameworks innovation.

Between 1962 and 1980, the World Bank established many technical and vocational training programmes rather than educational policies in scientific research, the Arts or the Humanities. It also invested in many educational projects in the school's infrastructure, such as the library. Because, at that time, the World Bank believed that the economic benefits of these facilities far outweighed those of above-peer academic activities (Heyneman, 2005). Since the 80s of the 20th century, the World Bank's investment focus has shifted from poverty reduction to focus on cost-effectiveness, market liberalisation, and privatisation of public services. Therefore, the World Bank changed its education policy agenda. It started to focus on 'basic education with broad participation' in alleviating debt crises in low-income and middle-income countries (p. 11) (Mundy & Verger, 2015).

Since the 1990s, the competition in the global human resource market and the knowledge economy has become increasingly fierce. In 1996, the World Bank developed a new strategy, 'knowledge bank', positioning the World Bank as a creator of knowledge rather than an implementor (Zapp, 2017). This strategy provided part of the educational knowledge products needed for global education development and enabled the World Bank to transform itself successfully in the face of external challenges and the wave of the knowledge economy. Since then, the World Bank has become the most consistent educational development strategy and information institution. In the first decade of the 21st century, the World Bank was actively involved in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2014) and advocated the concept of 'Education for All' by focusing on universal primary education and gender equality in school education (World Bank, 2014).

### *3.2 The 'Learning for All' Strategy*

To accelerate the process of its globalisation education goals, in April 2011, the World Bank established its education strategy 2020: 'Learning for All: Investing in People's Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development' (World Bank, 2011). This 2020 strategy suggests that education should shift from

‘Education for All’ to ‘Learning for All’. The emphasis on education shifted from access to learning opportunities and began to centre on the quality of education within and beyond schooling. It aims to enhance the commitment to quality and equity of educational outcomes by prioritising education at all levels, focusing on early childhood education. At present, the World Bank is still actively implementing this education policy.

The number of years spent in a classroom suggests that if a country’s scores in the PISA or TIMSS tests increase by one standard deviation, then this country stands a considerable chance of experiencing a two per cent increase in its annual GDP per capita (p. 3) (World Bank, 2011). Therefore, we can infer that enhancing the knowledge and skills of a country’s workforce will contribute to the improvement of its economic growth rate. The World Bank advocates a ‘learning for all’ strategy as essential for a country’s long-term economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The 2019 World Development Report called on governments to take positive steps to help students acquire the literacy and skills they need for future jobs to better cope with the opportunities and challenges brought about by changes in work (World Bank, 2019). This report pointed out that the essence of the changing nature of work was that the uncertainty of information technology’s continuous and integrated development led to the rapid growth and upgrading of future work prospects. Technological development and change have led to changes in work, affecting the labour market and employment opportunities. This report set the stage for the World Bank’s education policy for the next decade.

Throughout all its policies, the World Bank’s participation in the globalisation of education has changed. From being an observer of education policy in the 1980s, an explorer of education investment in the 1990s, a participant in global policy planning in the early 2000s, and a set out to build global education systems from the last decade to the present, just as Mundy and Verger state, the World Bank’s education policy agenda has become broader and more complex (Mundy & Verger, 2015).

#### **4. China’s Education Towards Globalisation**

China has actively participated in and promoted economic globalisation. Since the implementation of China’s Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, China has formulated a series of policies in the following 40 years, especially in the field of education, such as the strategy of developing the country through science and education (Ke Jiao Xing Guo), and the strategy of developing the country through human resource (Ren Cai Qiang Guo), and the strategy of ‘Go Global’ (Zou Chu Qu). China’s education is oriented to the world and integrated into the process of globalisation. In the globalised international environment, China’s education is also facing a new round of opportunities and challenges. With the continuous and rapid development of China’s economy and the influx of foreign investment, the demand for high-quality talents with a global vision will continue to rise, China’s education will continue to be market-oriented, and the degree of opening to the outside world will continue to expand, and eventually become the shaper of global education.

#### 4.1 World Bank's Education Projects in China

Since China's government restored the legal seat of the World Bank in May 1980, it has actively utilised the loans of the World Bank to implement a series of educational development projects, including Higher Education projects, Vocational and Technical Education Projects, Basic Education Development Projects, as well as Textbook Development, Teacher Training and Teacher Education Development projects (Tao, 2007). From 1981 to the present, with the support of World Bank loans, as shown in Table 1, China has organised and implemented 28 World Bank-funded education project investments with approximately \$2.7 billion at all levels of education (World Bank, 2019). From the perspective of the time distribution of China's use of World Bank loans, I think there are mainly three key directions: higher education stage (1980-1989), basic education stage (1990-2003), and vocational education stage (2003-present). Interestingly, we find out that, according to this time frame, the use of World Bank loans in China often seemed out of step with the World Bank's education policies.

**Table 1. Education Projects Supported by the World Bank in China**

Year	Project Name	Commitment Amount (in million USD)	Status
1981	University Development Project	200	Closed
1982	Agricultural Education Project (01) and Research Project (01)	75.4	Closed
1983	Polytechnic and Television University Project	85	Closed
1984	Agricultural Education Project (02)	68.8	Closed
1985	University Development Project (02)	145	Closed
1986	Provincial University Project	120	Closed
1987	Gansu Provincial Development Project - Agriculture, Education, and Industrial Diversification Components	170.5	Closed
1988	Teacher Training Project	50	Closed
1989	Textbook Development Project	57	Closed
1990	Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) Project	50	Closed
1991	Key Studies Development Project	131.2	Closed
1992	Education Development in Poor Provinces Project	130	Closed
1993	Effective Teaching Services Project	100	Closed
1994	Basic Education in Poor and Minority Areas Project	100	Closed
1995	Southwest Poverty Reduction Project	247.5	Closed
1996	Third Basic Education	100	Closed
1996	Vocational Education Reform Project	30	Closed
1997	Basic Education Project (04)	85	Closed
1999	Higher Education Reform	70	Closed
2003	Basic Education in Western Areas Project	100	Closed
2009	Guangdong Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project	20	Closed
2010	Liaoning and Shandong Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project	40	Closed
2012	Yunnan Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project	50	Closed
2013	China: Guangdong Social Security Integration and Rural Worker Training	80	Active
2015	Xinjiang Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project	50	Active
2016	Yunnan Early Childhood Education Innovation Project (YECEIP)	50	Active
2017	China: Gansu Technical and Vocational Education and Training Project	120	Active
2017	China: Guangdong Compulsory Education Project	120	Active

In the 1980s, the World Bank invested in projects in China, mainly in higher education and teacher development. Some research claims that the World Bank was completely ignoring basic education in China, to some extent endorsing the basic education system of the Chinese government at that time and ignoring the status of inequality of basic education in China (Wang & Bergquist, 2003). I agree that, since the late 1980s, the unbalanced development of basic education in China has gradually emerged, and the social dissatisfaction with basic education has become increasingly severe. It has resulted in a growing gap between cities and rural areas, among the east, central and western regions. However, if we look back at China's educational development history since 1978, China has prioritised efficiency. In 1977, China's national college entrance examination (Gao Kao) had just returned, and China's higher education stage talents appeared to be in serious shortage. Therefore, China wanted education reform to start with higher education, not basic education. On the other hand, China was not ready to open up its basic education to foreign investments.

In the 1990s, China set its educational development goals: making nine-year compulsory education universal and generally eliminating illiteracy among young and middle-aged people. At the same time, China also formulated policies to promote the development of basic education in poor areas, such as western areas of China. As a result, it was since the 1990s that China began to use the World Bank's loans to improve its basic education in less developed areas such as the western region of China. The first project that addressed the fundamental education issue in China was the 'Basic Education in Poor and Minority Areas Project' launched in 1994 (World Bank, 2000).

With the rapid development of China's economy since the beginning of the 21st century, China has gradually achieved free compulsory education. Educational equity has gained new development in China.

In China, only five active educational projects recently remained, primarily focusing on vocational training in the country's western regions. In January 2019, China commenced its vocational training reform. According to the statistical reports on the website of China's Ministry of Education, the total number of secondary vocational training institutions was 7,850, which included only one Sino-foreign cooperative secondary school in Shanghai (Ministry of Education in China, 2019). Interestingly, the World Bank's investments in China appear to be a bellwether for the reform of the education system, which has been implemented in key areas. The investments from the World Bank, in general, have alleviated the shortage of China's total investment in education, promoted the popularisation and balanced development of compulsory education, strengthened the construction of the education system and education plans, and enhanced the overall level of education and human resources in China.

#### *4.2 Marketised English Education in China*

Under the influence of globalisation, English has become an international language. The degree of mastery of English determines the degree of participation in globalisation. Due to the need for economic development, the total demand for English talent in China has increased sharply since the 1980s, which makes English learning more and more popular. Many universities have set up foreign

language departments and English-related majors, such as foreign trade, business, science and technology, interpretation and international law. The number of English schools in society has also gradually increased, and many foreign English training institutions have begun to pour in. The variety of English books in the market has also been greatly enriched and diversified. These developments indicate that English education in China has entered the era of global marketisation.

It is important to note that English education and English testing are closely intertwined in China. From primary school through to secondary school, progressing to university and including postgraduate and doctoral stages, students must pass English examinations at various levels, including middle school English, the college entrance examination English, College English Band 4 and Band 6, and other assessment tests. Currently, with the introduction of IELTS and other international English tests, alongside various levels of English translation assessments, English testing has become an integral component of English education in China. Taking IELTS as an example, more and more students are willing to undertake international English tests as proof of their English proficiency and ability as part of their global competence. According to a report by the British Council in 2018, IELTS candidates with an overall score of 6.0 or above accounted for half of the total, and their English proficiency has improved over the past five years. Currently, IELTS candidates aged 19-22 remain the mainstream group in mainland China, yet those under 18 have surpassed the 23-25 age group as the second largest demographic.

With the overemphasis on English ability and the blind worship of English culture, Chinese students begin to spend less time learning their mother tongue and mother tongue culture. People start to worry about Chinese students' love for mother tongue culture to decrease. According to studies, the worrying situation of Chinese cultural aphasia has become apparent among Chinese college students, especially English majors (Xiao, Xiao, Li, & Song, 2010; Zhi-hua, 2013). On the one hand, scholars believe that the curriculum about Chinese culture and how to conduct cultural exchange in Chinese and English is seriously inadequate, especially for English majors (Yanjiu & Jianghua, 2016), which are primarily courses on English culture and literature, leading to aphasia in cross-cultural communication. On the other hand, the sources from which Chinese students can obtain English materials on Chinese culture are too narrow, mainly from textbooks, teachers' classroom supplements, and extracurricular materials. Other systematic introductions of Chinese culture in English materials, in the school library, and newspapers are rare (Ling & Li-li, 2013). Therefore, how to keep Chinese college students from losing pride in their mother tongue and how to play a role in promoting Chinese culture to go global has been a hot topic discussed by Chinese scholars in recent years.

#### *4.3 The Promotion of Chinese Language and Culture*

With the development of China's economy, people of all countries are increasingly enthusiastic about learning Chinese. A better understanding of Chinese language and culture can help the world to understand China more accurately and objectively. The Confucius Institutes and classrooms are taking the leading role in promoting education. At the end of 2019, there were 550 Confucius Institutes and



1,172 Confucius Classrooms in 162 countries and regions, and more than 4,000 universities offered Chinese language programs and courses. About 45,000 Chinese language schools and training institutions offer Chinese language education (Chinese International Education Foundation, 2024).

Many people wonder why Confucius institutes can be established so quickly in many parts of the world. The Confucius Institutes are non-profit and established between Chinese-foreign cooperative education institutions. On the one hand, the establishment of Confucius institutes is the result of China's development the country through human resources (Ren Cai Qiang Guo) and 'Go Global' (Zou Chu Qu). Confucius Institutes have played a significant role in helping Chinese universities attract talent from across the globe through the Confucius Institute scholarships, new Sinology programmes, and other forms of scholarships or initiatives. These universities are better positioned to grasp the current developments in overseas education, which somewhat accelerates the internationalisation of higher education in China.

Conversely, with the rapid development of China's economy, an increasing number of countries and international organisations believe that proficiency in the Chinese language plays a more significant role in nurturing the international competitiveness of talent. The OECD explains that part of global competence is the ability 'to understand and appreciate the perspectives and world views of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures' (OECD, 2018). The Confucius Institutes provide a new way for countries to train their talents in these capabilities. So, they are widely accepted all over the world. Moreover, according to the Chinese education official website, on October 14, 2019, China has set up a pilot international school in Brazil and Canada and will try to build more international schools based on the existing sunny schools (schools based abroad provide Chinese language education to the children of Chinese government and state-owned companies officers) or the Confucius institutes in the future (Ministry of Education in China, 2019). Overall, I believe the Confucius Institutes have become a crucial platform for people-to-people communication through learning the Chinese language and culture and understanding contemporary China. The Confucius institutes/classrooms are leading the promotion of the Chinese language and culture and have significantly contributed to the development of multi-culture and the construction of a harmonious world.

## 5. Conclusion

In my view, globalisation is a holistic phenomenon that has developed with advances in media and communication technology, the emergence of supranational institutions, finance and products, the interdependence of services, the escalation of global issues, new features of international culture, and the rise of neoliberal policies. To comprehend and evaluate the relationship between globalisation and education, it is crucial to recognise that contemporary education is part of the globalisation process. The education policies of international institutions influence the direction of educational globalisation and the formulation of educational policies in various countries, particularly in terms of the format,

content, and methodology of future talent development. However, all countries' governments should be responsible for maintaining complete autonomy and decision-making power over their educational development models. By reviewing and analysing the education policies and reform practices of the World Bank and China, we know that the World Bank is becoming increasingly enthusiastic about and involved in the globalisation of education. China has made full use of this development opportunity to continuously improve the overall educational level of its own country and eventually become a builder of education globalisation.

However, the development process of China's education globalisation remains fraught with pros and cons, opportunities and challenges. As the marketisation of education progresses, China actively promotes English language learning through various resources, and the international competitiveness of Chinese talent continues to improve; however, there is also the unfortunate issue of a cultural disconnect with the native language. China actively promotes the Chinese language and culture to gain better development prospects and deepen cultural exchanges with other countries. Confucius Institutes have played a significant role in this process.

In conclusion, contemporary education is not solely a product of globalisation but also a partner. Globalisation fosters the evolution of education to consistently align with the principles of economic growth and fulfil the demands of the global labour market. Education has become increasingly autonomous and focused on equity. It has given rise to new technologies for globalisation, nurtured talent, and facilitated positive exchanges and mutual cultural learning among countries at all levels.

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