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Transnational Higher Education – a Perspective from China*

Introduction

‘Transnational education’ is generally defined as education ‘in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based’ (UNESCO/Council of Europe 2000). ‘Transnational higher education’ (TNHE), if regarded as a part of postsecondary and tertiary education and training, may take on the numerous forms listed below (GATE 1999).

- *Branch Campuses*: campuses set up by an institution in another country to provide its educational or training programs to foreign students.
- *Franchises*: an institution (A) approves an institution (B) in another country to provide one or more of A’s programs to students in B’s country.
- *Articulation*: the systematic recognition by an institution (A) of specified study at an institution (B) in another country as partial credit towards a program at institution A.
- *Twinning*: agreements between institutions in different countries to offer joint programs.
- *Corporate Programs*: many large corporations offer programs for academic credit from institutions, often involving crediting across national borders.
- *Online Learning and Distance Education Programs*: those distance education programs that are delivered – through satellites, computers, correspondence, or other technological means – across national boundaries.
- *Study Abroad*: a student from institution (A) travels to take courses and live for a fixed period of time at institution (B) which is located in a different country.

Since the mid-1980s, in particular during the latter half of the 1990s, numerous forms of TNHE (expressed as *Zhongwai Hezuo Banxue* in Chinese, meaning co-operation between China and foreign partners in the operation or management of higher education institutions) emerged. These have developed rapidly, motivated by various factors such as economic reform, the transition from a planned economy to a market economy, and especially the influence of economic globalization and challenges from the World Trade Organization (WTO) to be discussed below in detail.

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At present, two types of THNE institutions or programs in cooperation with foreign countries can be identified in China: those with authority to award foreign degrees; and those permitted to provide only non-degree programs, issuing foreign diplomas and certificates. Apart from TNHE provided for local Chinese students, in recent years some leading Chinese higher education institutions have also made efforts in exporting their cross-border education services and now provide TNHE in foreign countries. In this paper, the author is particularly concerned with the institutions and programs established in cooperation with foreign partners with authority to award foreign degrees or degrees of Hong Kong universities in China; the paper focuses on analysis of national policy, rationales, and growth as well as on the major characteristics of these institutions and programs. There are a number of reasons for concentrating on these aspects. Granting authority to the TNHE institutions and programs to confer foreign degrees is a totally new practice in modern China following the implementation of the open-door policy and economic reform. The birth and growth of these institutions and programs directly reflects changes in national legislation and policy on internationalization and clearly indicates how far China has opened its higher education market to the World. The Chinese government has regarded institutions and programs in TNHE as an increasingly important and efficient way to expand higher education, a means for enhancing academic quality and standards, and a mechanism for facilitating the internationalization of Chinese higher education.

National legislation and policy

As early as the 1980s, efforts were being made by several leading universities in China to provide various training courses and programs on economics, international law, and foreign languages in cooperation with U.S. universities. Typical examples include training programs on economics and law for university staff in the People's University of China and Fudan University conducted in cooperation with the U.S (Jiao Guozheng, 1998). However, at a policy level, although there were no issues of legislation or documentation concerning transnational education at the time, foreign institutions, organizations or individuals were not allowed to recruit private students in China without permission from the State Education Commission (SEC, renamed as the Ministry of Education in 1998, MOE) and Ministry of Public Security (the SEC, August 21, 1987). Temporarily from 1990 to 1994, after the Students' Movement occurred in 1989, even joint programs for training staff members were forbidden.

By the beginning of the 1990s, many Chinese higher education institutions were beginning to undertake various joint programs in cooperation with foreign partners. A need to regulate and monitor these activities through national legislation and policy was recognized. The most important

national legislation that affected the emergence and development of TNHE in China is the “Education Act of the People’s Republic of China”, issued in 1995. In the “Act”, exchange or cooperative education with foreign partners is encouraged by the State. However,

“Any scheme must maintain the principles of independence and autonomy, of equality and mutual profit, as well as of mutual respect. All arrangements must conform to Chinese law and do no damage to national sovereignty, security and social public interest” (Chapter 8, Provision 67).

Based on the “Act” of 1995, two documents concerning transnational education were issued by the SEC in 1995 and became fundamental policies in regulating the development of TNHE in China.

The first document is the “Contemporary Regulation on Operation of Higher Education Institutions in Cooperation with Foreign Partners” issued by the SEC on January 26, 1995. The “Regulation” consists of five chapters: General Principles, Establishment, Operation, Supervision, and Attachments. The term ‘*Zhongwai Hezuo Banxue*’ (used as an equivalent to transnational education in this paper), is defined as occurring when

“Those foreign corporate, individuals, and related international organizations in cooperation with educational institutions or other social organizations with corporate status in China, jointly establish education institutions in China, recruit Chinese citizen as major educational objectives, and undertake education and teaching activities” (Chapter 1, Provision 2).

But unlike some TNHE institutions established in Japan and other Asian countries, foreign religious organizations and individuals are not included and as a result not permitted to provide any forms of TNHE in China (Chapter 5, Provision 41). The document indicates explicitly that none of the forms of transnational education mentioned above can be provided absolutely and solely by foreign institutions themselves without any form of cooperation with, or involvement, of Chinese institutions located in China. With respect to requirements for establishing such institutions, it is emphasized that TNHE institutions or programs must be accredited and approved in accordance with the same criteria as are used to accredit and approve Chinese institutions, directly determined and supervised by the SEC. Moreover, it is only the local Chinese partner that can submit an application for registration, licensing or granting corporate status. The application to the relevant educational administrative body in central government is then examined and approved by government at the level appropriate for the type of TNHE institution (Chapter 2, Provisions 10, 11, 12 &13). It is especially stressed that the operation and administration of these TNHE institutions requires that the number of local Chinese members of the Board or any governing bodies cannot be less than half of

the total membership; and that the post of president, or leader of such institutions can only be held by Chinese citizens living in China, approved by the related administrative body in the government (Chapter 3, Provisions 20 & 22).

Since 1995, there have emerged a large number of TNHE institutions and programs. To regulate their operation and especially to assure the quality of programs, the Degree-Granting Commission of the State Council promulgated another important document on January 23, 1997: the “Notice of Strengthening Degree - Granting Management in Activities concerning Operation of Institutions in Cooperation with Foreign Partners”. In the “Notice”, the import of foreign higher education services and joint programs is strongly encouraged and identified as an important complementary component of Chinese higher education. However, at the same time, the conditions imposed by the “Regulation” of 1995 are repeatedly stressed. For instance, no TNHE institutions or programs can confer Chinese or foreign degrees unless there is a special demand that cannot be provided by Chinese institutions in China; and in every case, approval by the Degree-Granting Commission of the State Council is required. Moreover, it is further emphasized in the “Notice” of 1997 that only after the qualifications to award degrees of both foreign and Chinese institutions have been approved by their respective governments, can they be endowed with authority to confer foreign degrees on local Chinese students. It is emphasized that the foreign partners must also enjoy a high international reputation in the areas of the programs or specialties they provide (Provision 1, 2).

Context and rationales

Context

At present, Chinese higher education institutions can be categorized into two major types: regular institutions and adult institutions. In this paper, the discussion is restricted to the regular institutions that comprise the public sector and a relatively very small number of private institutions. In December 2001, there were 1,224 regular public higher education institutions, constituting three levels of postgraduate, undergraduate, and short-cycle programs. In the private sector, there were 85 higher education institutions, most providing short-cycle programs, with only two being 4-year institutions with accreditation to confer Bachelors' degrees (<http://www.moe.edu.cn>). The public institutions are generally divided into three sectors and vertically administered and financed by one of the three types of administrative authorities: (1) the MOE, (2) central level ministries and agencies, (3) provinces and province-level municipalities. Most of the private institutions are monitored by provincial or municipal governments, although no financial support is provided to them by these governments. According to government statistics, in 2000 the gross enrolment in higher education

institutions amounted to nearly 11% of the cohort aged from 18 to 21 (Ling Zhihua, 2001).

Currently, all of the TNHE institutions or programs awarding foreign degrees belong to the public sector, among which nearly all are administrated by the MOE and central level ministries and agencies. No private institutions (*Minban* in Chinese, meaning non-governmental institutes, without any public subsidy and operating largely on tuition and fees; by 2002, only two were conferred with the authority to issue bachelor degrees) have qualified as approved to provide any programs to confer foreign degrees.

Rationales

Three major factors can be identified in affecting the establishment and development of TNHE in China in recent years.

1. The increasing demand for higher education in modern China

Compared with Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Australia in the Asia Pacific region, higher education in China is still in the “elite” phase. Various reasons contribute to this, including the decreasing public allocation of funding for the public sector and the rigid control of the expansion of private institutions. But according to research undertaken by Blight and West, there is a large potential market for TNHE in the Asia Pacific, including China (Denis Blight and Leo West, 2000). In particular, since the middle of the 1990s, the increasing demand for higher education and the inability of the limited number of higher education institutions to meet this demand has become a more and more serious issue as China’s economy rapidly expands. Therefore after 1995, the Chinese government attempted to expand the Chinese higher education system and to satisfy the growing demand for higher education by operating TNHE institutions based on existing institutions and joint programs.

2. The influence of economic globalization and the World Trade Organization

Since the 1990s, economic globalization has significantly affected higher education in many countries. China is no exception. In China, importing TNHE service from abroad is regarded as a practical and also a very efficient way to meet the challenges of economic globalization and membership of the WTO. TNHE provides a means for existing institutions to offer joint programs, particularly in fields of study relating to management, international trade, law, and information technology. In these and related areas, the current system is incapable of meeting demand because

of the influence exerted by the Soviet Union during the Cold War period.

3. The need to enhance academic quality and standards and to internationalize Chinese higher education

For several decades, higher education in China was rigidly and directly administered and controlled by the MOE and other agencies in governments at various levels. Up to the 1970s, the major function of higher education institutions was to train professional manpower specialized in engineering and science. With the introduction of market mechanisms and the delegation of more responsibility and autonomy to institutions after 1992, importing TNHE service in educational ideas, curricula and delivery of programs has been regarded as an effective way to improve academic quality and standards, as well as to facilitate the general internationalization of Chinese higher education.

Growth and major characteristics

Phase of development of TNHE

The growth of TNHE can be roughly divided into two phases in accordance with the promulgation of “Contemporary Regulation” in 1995: the informal, incidental and laissez-fair phase prior to 1995 and the more structured, systematic and well regulated phase after 1995.

In fact, as mentioned above, even before the issue of regulations and polices concerning THNE, some institutions were cooperating with foreign partners in the 1980s to offer joint programs. These programs were essentially conducted in the form of *twinning*, based on partnership agreements between the Chinese institutions and their foreign partners. Most of the joint programs during this phase were concerned with foreign languages and foreign culture, with the objective of promoting mutual understanding between China and foreign partners. Although in some cases certificates or diplomas could be awarded to students after they had finished these joint programs, none of these institutions or joint programs was approved to confer foreign degrees or even Chinese degrees. One example is provided by the Johns Hopkins-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies, which was set up in September 1986 and financed by both Chinese and American governments. Another was the Goethe Institute, Beijing, which was an outcome of cooperation between Beijing University of Foreign Studies with the Goethe Institute in Germany, conducting German language training for Chinese faculty members and students as well as introducing aspects of German culture.

After 1995, in addition to institutions and joint programs that were authorized to offer certificates and diplomas, there has been the emergence of institutions and joint programs that were approved by the Degree-Granting Commission of the State Council to issue foreign degrees or degrees of universities in Hong Kong. It is estimated that by April 2002 there were 657 Chinese institutions that had undertaken various forms of TNHE in cooperation with foreign or HK institutions (China News Agency, April 25, 2002). Of these, about 67 TNHE institutions in China and 72 joint programs were approved by the government with authority to award foreign degrees and degrees of HK universities. The remainder of the institutions were engaged in training activities for venture companies in China in cooperation with and/or partly financed by foreign enterprises. These institutions and training programs are only authorized to offer certificates and diplomas (Yu Fuzeng, etc., 2001).

Major characteristics of TNHE and joint programs

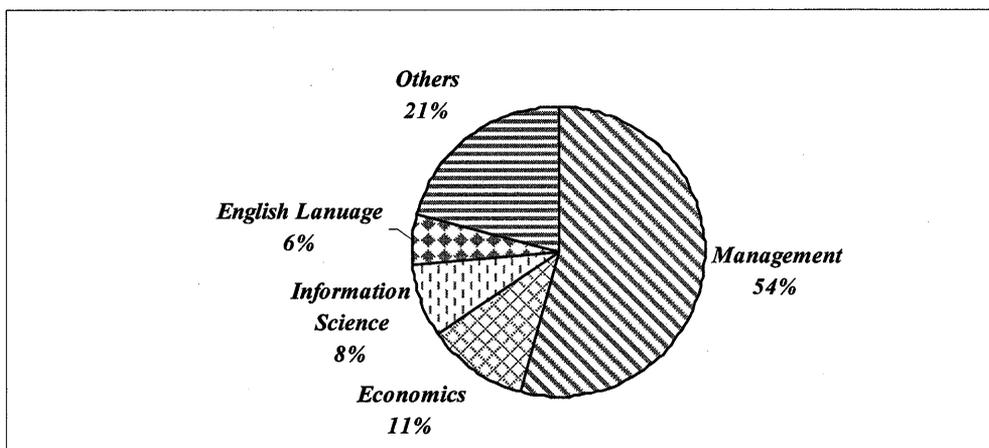
Since 1995, Chinese universities have undertaken cooperation in various forms to offer joint programs leading to foreign degrees with more than ten foreign countries, notably developed Western Countries, international organizations, and universities in Hong Kong. As shown in Table 1, the newly-accredited joint programs from 1995 to 2002, which were provided in cooperation with the U.S. institutions, constituted a major share. However, from 1997, those joint programs in cooperation with Australia and universities in Hong Kong have also increased rapidly, reaching 16 and 11 respectively. In particular, in 2002 the newly-accredited joint programs in cooperation with Australian universities surpassed those with universities in the U.S. Furthermore, following the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, more and more universities in Hong Kong have begun to provide joint degree programs as an educational service in mainland China. In sum, at the turn of the century, apart from the U.S. and some EU member countries, Australia and Hong Kong represented more and more sources of TNHE services, indicating that the countries or regions undertaking TNHE in China have become diversified and are mainly located in the Asia Pacific region.

Table1. Newly-Accredited Joint Programs, from 1995 to 2002

Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	July. 2002	Total
Newly accredited Programs	2	3	5	8	9	14	18	11	70
Countries & Area									
U.S.	1	1	2	5	1	5	7	2	24
The Netherlands	1	1	1						3
France		1	1	1		1	1		5
Australia			1	1	6	1	2	5	16
H.K.				1	1	4	4	1	11
Singapore					1				1
Canada						3	2		5
Belgium							1		1
U.K.							1	2	3
EU.								1	1

Source: Based on government data (<http://www.moe.wdu.cn/>.) with author's modifications.

Almost all of the joint programs offered with foreign degrees over the decade are concerned with international management of trade, finance, and information science; that is, a focus on newly developed and popular subjects similar to that found in some Western countries. According to the data shown in Figure 1, the programs relating to management, especially the MBA, constitute the largest proportion of the joint programs, followed by programs concerning international economics and computing, information science, as well as English language and literature. This pattern reflects the great demand in China for training manpower equipped with advanced knowledge of international economics, management, information science, and law.



Source: Based on government data (<http://moe.edu.cn>) with author's modifications.

Fig.1. Percentage of major programs offered with foreign degrees by July 2002.

Closely related to the structure of fields of study above, nearly half of the joint programs lead to an

MBA degree. About 90 of the joint programs are delivered at postgraduate level and award master's degrees. Some of these programs are even approved as appropriate for the award of a PhD by the foreign partner. The joint program in eye optical science, cooperatively offered by Wenzhou Medical College and the U.S. may be the first PhD joint program in Chinese TNHE institutions (<http://www.wzmc.net/index.asp>). Almost all of joint programs are provided in China's most prestigious universities. These universities are mostly located in the larger cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjing, and Guangzhou. Many of these institutions enjoy a higher level of international academic influence and are often equipped with a better infrastructure and more highly regarded staff than other Chinese universities.

Normally, the duration of joint programs for Master's degrees ranges from one and half years to two years. During the first year or one and half years, basic courses such as fundamental theory or introduction to designated major subjects are provided in China. Usually, lecturers are sent from the foreign partner to conduct teaching in cooperation with local Chinese professors. Before students complete their study, they are usually expected to move to the partner institution for a short period, often lasting about three to six months. In most cases, the periods of study abroad will include internships, field investigations or site visits. Upon finishing all required programs and meeting the academic standards approved by the government for these joint programs, students can be awarded foreign degrees. In general, at a postgraduate level, students are expected to spend most of their time in local TNHE institutions in China and only a very limited time is scheduled for them to attend foreign partners' institutions.

At the undergraduate level the situation is different. For undergraduates, joint education programs usually last for four years, typically consisting of two years' study in China and the remaining two years' study in the foreign partner's institution. Students are expected to complete basic courses (especially English and computing) in the first two or three years in local Chinese institutions. In the third or fourth academic years, some of the highest achieving students will be recommended to enter the foreign partners' institutions for degrees. Not all of these students will be able to move abroad due to the problem of finance and the difficulty of passing the entrance examinations conducted by foreign universities. At present, the central government has not fully agreed to TNHE of this kind at a policy level, and prefers students to complete their programs in local Chinese institutions without going abroad for degrees.

It should be stressed that joint programs at the graduate and postgraduate levels are often accompanied by importing partners' curricula, textbooks, and new methods of delivery. As well, partners often provide financial support for the invited foreign lecturers. From this point of view,

joint programs offered with foreign degrees differ essentially from the non-degree joint programs in China, which are often conducted with a purpose of making profit, not only by importing foreign curricula, textbooks and lectures, but also by being partly financed by the foreign partners, mostly venture companies in China.

Concluding remarks

The growth and development of TNHE in China has developed from an incidental, informal and laissez-faire phase up to 1995 into the currently more structured, systematic, well-supported and regulated phase. At the outset, joint programs were conducted in few universities only for staff members and no national legislation or policy was involved. From 1995, greatly encouraged — but at the same time also strictly monitored and regulated — by the central government, TNHE institutions and programs have constituted a highly important component of the Chinese higher education system and are regarded by government as an effective means of internationalising China's higher education and improving academic quality and standards.

Like many countries in the Asia Pacific region (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001), influenced by economic globalization and challenges from the WTO, great progress has been made in TNHE in China. But it cannot be overemphasized that its growth has been essentially regulated and controlled by the central government. From the very beginning the activities of TNHE institutions and programs in China have been significantly affected by changes of national legislation and policy. In particular, the regulation of TNHE by the central government in China is achieved through “input” – accrediting, registering, and licensing TNHE institutions, and restricting curricula development, as well as “output” - controlling the types and levels of academic degrees. Although the central government has largely reduced many barriers to facilitating development of TNHE in recent years, it still plays a major and vital role in the process.

Accordingly, quality assurance for TNHE is directly conducted by the central government and provincial government, instead of academic bodies in many other countries. As mentioned above, quality assurance is not only based on the same criteria as are used to accredit and approve Chinese local institutions, but also by requiring any foreign institutions that undertake TNHE activities in China with the authority to award degrees to be accredited by their home countries and qualified to issue the equivalent degrees. In addition, up to now, no private institutions (*Minban* in Chinese) have been authorized to conduct joint program awarding degrees (though two of them being qualified to award Chinese bachelor degrees) because their academic quality is not recognized by the government.

Among all forms of TNHE defined by the GATE, the forms of *Franchises*, *Articulation*, and *Twinning* as well as *Study Abroad* are most popular in TNHE institutions or programs awarding foreign degrees in China. The major form in recent developments has been *Twinning*. In contrast to TNHE in Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia, no clear examples of *Branch Campuses* can be found in China; neither are there any examples of private institutions permitted to undertake TNHE in cooperation with foreign partners to confer degrees. Equally there is little evidence of the existence of *Corporate Programs* in TNHE institutions or programs awarding foreign degrees and there is no report of any form of *Online Learning and Distance Education Programs* being conducted in China. The reason for the lack of the former may be simply that foreign companies are not qualified to confer degrees; the absence of the latter may derive from a combination of the strict legislation of central government regarding online education services provided by foreign countries, and the limited equipment and infrastructure for cross-border online learning available in many institutions.

The major source countries that provide TNHE services in China have changed in recent years from the U.S. to Hong Kong and Australia. It might be assumed that, aside from the factors of language and the availability of fields of study, geographic proximity will play an increasingly important role in TNHE in China in the future. As a result, it is quite possible that TNHE institutions and joint programs in cooperation with Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore will continue to increase and eventually may achieve a very large share of the TNHE service in China. However, although there may be an increase in TNHE services provided by both Hong Kong and Singapore, the small number of their total institutions will ultimately limit their expansion in Mainland China.

There is a great potential market for TNHE in China. Now that China has become a member of the WTO and has to accept more responsibilities for opening its educational market to the world, there will surely be a brighter perspective for expansion of TNHE in China. For this to be achieved, central government will need to adopt more supportive and encouraging national legislation and policy concerning private institutions and the various barriers to administrative operation of TNHE institutions.

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