

# An Analysis of China's Internationalization of Higher Education in the 21st Century: The Utility of Bacchi's WPR Framework

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## Abstract

This study analysed China's policy on the internationalization of higher education (HE) in the 21st Century by employing Bacchi's "What is the problem represented to be" (WPR) framework. Five landmark policy texts published by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) between 2010 and 2020 were examined, and five primary approaches of HE internationalization were identified: Confucius Institutes establishment, foreign education aid, international student recruitment, knowledge transfer, and world-class university building. This study found that the rationales that drive China's HE internationalization process is a combination of socio-cultural development, human resource development, educational quality improvement, diplomacy and soft power, commercial trade, and nation building. All these rationales served the purpose of strengthening the overall national power and competitiveness. Challenges related to the stereotype of Chinese political ideology and the improvement of HE quality are yet to be overcome. Also, the current global situations may slow down the HE internationalization process and shape a stronger inward-looking climate.

## Keywords

HE Internationalization, Educational Policy, WPR Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Internationalization is a key strategy employed by countries and universities in response to the impacts of globalization on HE. A widely accepted definition of HE internationalization refers it to "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11). However, due to the fundamental global inequalities, countries as knowledge recipients are generally the developing countries located in the Global South, while countries as knowledge suppliers are the developed countries in the Global North, resulting in large-scale international student mobility from the South to the North. Marginson (2011) argues that such an imbalanced orientation of HE internationalization could lead to a single-sided adaptation to the educational models in developed countries and the negligence of the country's own national characteristics.

To shift this direction, the emerging power China has traversed into one of the top source countries of international study, ranking as the fourth or fifth destination for hosting international students, after the major Anglophone countries—the US, UK, Australia, and perhaps Canada (ICEF Monitor, 2017). Also, the changing discourse in Chinese education policy clearly indicates that China's strategies of HE internationalization have passed the stages of purely learning and catching up with developed countries to now simultaneously importing and exporting higher education, adopt-

ing both inward- and outward-orientated approaches (Wu, 2019). Such a bi-directional process officially commenced in the beginning of the 21st Century, and more national policies with specific action plans were issued over the past two decades.

The process of HE internationalization is often controlled by the government for its domestic purposes. As policy is written from a position of power, it has the capacity to shape social representations and influence how subjects are thought about (Sidhu, 2006). It uses language and concepts that are likely to become relatively stable, non-negotiable, and dominant, and thus may have a profound impact on people by shaping how they can be thought about, especially on those who lack social power (Lomer, 2017). Hence, national policy on HE internationalization becomes an important area of educational study due to its wide and significant impacts. Also, analyzing national policy can enable an understanding of the power relations and how institutions and we as individuals are governed within these relations (Ball, 2013). More importantly, since many studies on HE internationalization focus on the western contexts, the rising status of China's international HE, its unique local realities as well as cultural and historical contexts make its national policy a significant area to probe into.

## 2. Theoretical background

Contemporarily, state power is often achieved through persuasion of thought rather than force, which is termed as “governing at a distance” (Rose & Miller, 2008). A primary method adopted by the government to legitimize its actions and power is through discourse (Lomer, 2017). Discourse theory argues that “all social practices are constructed through and embedded in discourses” (Lomer, 2017). Since policy is a type of social practice, it can be conceptualized and understood through discourse (Saarinen, 2008). In studies of educational policy, discourse is understood as a theoretical, analytic, and methodological tool, and it constructs reality “via its action-oriented nature by which frameworks for knowledge, rationalities, logics and truths are produced” (Anderson & Holloway, 2020, p. 201). That is to say, policy is more than simply the language and describes problems transparently; it has its own meaning systems and conceptual logics that include assumptions, values, and signs in the discourse (Bacchi, 2009). The patterns underlying these meaning systems and conceptual logics are known as *governmental rationalities* (Rose & Miller, 2008).

Rationality refers to the “thinking that lies behind, or rationales for, particular styles of governing”, which is believed to constitute the mentalities of governance (Bacchi, 2009, p. 6); in other words, governmentality is mostly derived from its rationalities (Rose & Miller, 2008). Rationales are the driving force for a country to address issues and make the investment in internationalization, and they dictate the outcomes that can be generated (Knight, 2015). One traditional categorization of HE internationalization rationales was to classify them into four aspects: political, educational or academic, sociocultural, and economic (Gao et al., 2015). With the increasing growth and complexity of HE internationalization, Knight (2015) further specified the national-level rationales as “human resource development, increased access to HE, commercial trade, nation building, social-cultural development, diplomacy and soft power” (p. 329). However, these rationales may still differ from country to country due to the divergent social, historical, and political factors.

Although the production of national policies is often enabled and legitimized through collecting statistics and transforming them into knowledge, Bacchi (2009) strongly argues that these policies should not be embraced uncritically. It is believed that each policy can be understood through its problematization, i.e. “how and why certain things, behavior, phenomena, processes become a problem” (Foucault, 1983, cited in Ball, 2013, p. 17). The premise of this problematization approach is that policies are not passively reacting to existing problems but actively framing or shaping the problems to be solved (Van Aswegen, Hyatt, & Goodley, 2019). The primary goal of studying problematizations “is to dismantle taken-for-granted fixed essences and show how they have come to be” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, by critically identifying and analyzing policy problematizations, different forms of government rationales can be recognized.

This study aims to analyze China's policy on HE internationalization in the 21st century by understanding the governmental rationales and the problems it aimed to address. The research rationales are threefold. First, there is a dearth of studies that comprehensively analyze China's policy on HE internationalization. Most of the past studies only focused on one or several dimensions of this policy such as the establishment of transnational schools (Montgomery, 2016), the creation of world-class universities (Song, 2018), and foreign education aid (Yuan, 2014). Very few of them had holistically analyzed this policy to depict a full picture of the Chinese HE internationalization strategy. Second, there is a paucity of policy studies in China that are rigorously designed and conducted by following appropriate analytical frameworks. This was probably a result of the past research culture of Chinese policy studies that critical thinking is often discouraged (Li, 2017), but the phenomenon is now changing positively with more empirical studies being advocated. Thirdly, understanding Chinese governmentality makes a significant theoretical contribution to the research area due to its uniqueness. Previous studies have revealed that China's governmentality is neither completely neoliberalization nor entirely authoritarian (Kipnis, 2011), but an integration of different governing forms. Hoffman (2006, p. 17)

concludes it as “patriotic professionalism”, a form of nationalism intertwining economic competitiveness, social responsibility and patriotism. Such a combination of governing forms may lead to discoveries of distinctive policy rationales.

As such, this study aims to fill in the research gaps and make theoretical and empirical contributions by answering the following two research questions:

1. What are the rationales behind China’s policy on HE internationalization?
2. How does the Chinese government problematize HE internationalization?

### 3. Methodology

This study takes a poststructuralist stance for policy analysis. As Peters (2002) explains, poststructuralism is a theory that commits to the critique of authoritative institutions, and their modes of writing, thinking, and speaking. It contests the notion of objectivity and challenges the belief that language is neutral and value-free, and argues that to understand an object, the systems of knowledge that produce the object is essential for analysis (Peters & Burbules, 2004). This worldview offers a theoretical lens to examine the rationalities and logics of policy. As the current policy studies of Chinese education are believed as relatively conservative or uncritical (Li, 2017), adopting the poststructuralist stance has the potential to critically unpack assumptions by considering contextual factors and to suggest alternatives to the authoritative practices that are often taken-for-granted (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Drawn on the poststructuralism theory, Bacchi (2009) developed the “What is the problem represented to be” (WPR) approach for critical policy analysis. This framework is chosen for the present study due to its appropriateness for analyzing rationales and problematizations. It perceives policy as text, discourse, and process, and aims to understand the meaning and sense-making of policy as well as the rationales behind what seems logical or natural (Bacchi, 2009). This discursive approach offers “the means for considering the social, historical, and political contexts within which policy exists, emerges, and is constituted as well as implications for power” (Anderson & Holloway, 2020, p. 189). Secondly, the WPR approach is selected as it incorporates reflexivity into the framework design. It acknowledges and values the need of reflexivity in qualitative policy analysis by comprehensively reflecting on the problematizations (Bacchi, 2009).

The WPR approach is a framework of six questions (see Table 1) for organizing the analysis of discursive problematizations. This problematization approach views policy rationales and actions as justifications and means of problem-solving, and serves as an effective tool for recognizing and evaluating various rationales and techniques of governmentality (Bacchi, 2009). The WPR approach starts with “working backwards” from specific policy proposals to identify the implied problem representations, and with the six questions answered, the origins, assumptions, exclusions, effects, justifications and challenges of the problem representations in the policy can be critically uncovered. As Bacchi (2009) recommends, these six questions can be addressed separately and in order, or more frequently, they can be integrated into analysis and applied where their use occurs. This study follows the integrated form of analysis and notes the question numbers as Q1, Q2, etc. when a specific question is applied. Moreover, the study only answers the questions that are appropriate and relevant to the analysis.

**Table 1. The WPR framework (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy?</li> <li>2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?</li> <li>3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?</li> <li>4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?</li> <li>5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?</li> <li>6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?</li> </ol>
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This study adopts a text-based approach to analyze the Chinese policy on HE internationalization. This approach is employed because texts can be considered as snapshots of policy discourses, with the language and contents being consciously selected and socially constructed (Lomer, 2017). The policy documents selected in this study are five national landmark policies issued between 2010 and 2020, as shown below:

- 1) The 12th Five-year Plan (2011-15) for National Education Development (MOE, 2012)
- 2) The Overall Plan for Developing World-class Universities and Disciplines (MOE, 2015)
- 3) Promoting the “Belt and Road” Education Initiative (MOE, 2016)
- 4) The 13th Five-year Plan (2016-20) for National Education Development (MOE, 2017)

#### 5) Modernization of China's Education 2035 (MOE, 2019)

There are two main reasons for choosing these documents for analysis. First, these are all guideline policies published in the 21st century that reveal specific action plans of China's bi-directional process of HE internationalization, and thus can be analyzed for answering the research questions. Second, these are publicly accessible policy texts from a national level so that they have the widest influence on the development of the whole HE sector as well as all institutions and individuals that have interactions with them. To answer the first research question, the selected policy texts were coded for analyzing the government rationales. Together with the WPR analysis, some less obvious governmental rationales could be revealed. At the same time, the second research question could be answered with the use of the WPR framework. Overall, this study aims to provide a holistic analysis of the rationales and problem representations embedded in the Chinese policy on HE internationalization.

### 4. Findings and discussion

Five main approaches of HE internationalization were identified from China's policy: establishing Confucius Institutes, providing foreign education aid, recruiting international students, transferring knowledge, and creating world-class universities. See the qualitative discourse analysis and detailed WPR analysis in the following sub-sections.

#### 4.1. Confucius Institutes (CIs)

One initial outward-oriented HE internationalization strategy is to set up CIs worldwide. The establishment of the first CI for promoting Chinese language and culture was a move in response to the "Chinese Bridge Project" advocated in the 2003-2007 Action Plan for Revitalization of Education (MOE, 2004). Deepening "language and cultural exchanges with other countries" and promoting the status of Chinese language were the goals stated in the policy discourses (MOE, 2012, 2017). The mission statement in the CI Charter aimed to contribute to the worldwide multi-cultural development and the construction of a more harmonious world (Hanban, 2020). The building of CIs seems to be driven by the rationales of cultural development, diplomacy and soft power.

##### WPR analysis

The establishment of CIs represents a solution to two underlying problems, i.e., the need of image enhancement on the global stage, and the necessity of promoting Chinese culture (Q1). Historically, China was a world leader in both technology and economy and has unique advantages of expanding its cultural influence (Gill & Huang, 2006). Given the historical and cultural background, China's current fast socio-economic development, and its increasing political influence worldwide, it is reasonable for China to have the desire for national revitalization by introducing its cultural programs to people in other countries (Q3). Culture is a major type of resources for soft power projection (Nye, 2008), and Confucius philosophy is chosen as the representativeness of Chinese culture because it promotes some famous positive values such as "harmonious co-existence within diversity". Such values could enable the possibility of establishing a friendly and mutually beneficial relationship between different countries and civilizations.

This policy is not implemented without assumptions (Q2). First, the policy discourses presumed soft power could be achieved through the promotion of culture and language. As Gill and Huang (2006) pointed out, the constraints of transforming China's cultural heritage and other soft power resources into desired political results were mainly caused by the stereotype of its political ideology. Indeed, there were suspicions on CIs claiming these institutions were funded by the governmental executive council Hanban and operated in the mode of joint ventures (Yang, 2010). The closure of the last remaining CI in Sweden amid its strained diplomatic relationship with China during the COVID-19 pandemic (Evans, 2020) indicated Sweden's perception of the connection between CIs with politics. The second presupposition is that learners in CIs would mostly have a positive learning experience and be willing to help enhance China's image. Though there were positive comments on mutual understanding enhancement and Chinese language learning opportunities, learners in CIs should be understood as individuals with their own agency, thoughts, background, and experience.

Nevertheless, none of the above arguments is against the establishment of CIs. CIs should be viewed as more of educational and cultural institutes, and they might be less disputable if they could be established without or with less governmental background and operate as independent organizations. Perhaps, having been aware of this issue, the Chinese government started to call for more non-governmental support on CI establishment (MOE, 2016) (Q6).

#### 4.2. Foreign education aid

Another outward-oriented strategy is to provide foreign education aid. The purpose of providing education aid was to be "in line with China's diplomatic strategy", as stated in the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan (2011-15) for National Education De-

velopment (MOE, 2012). The low-income developing countries in Asia and Africa used to be the main recipients of the education aid (State Council, 2014), and in response to the “Belt and Road” Initiative, the international education aid was extended to the countries along the belt and road (MOE, 2016). Different from the western countries, the uniqueness in China’s education aid is that it highlighted the importance of “win-win” partnership, mutual benefits, and equality (MOE, 2016, 2017). A primary mission of educational aid was to develop human resource development in the recipient countries (MOE, 2012), and that can possibly accelerate the goal realization of the “Belt and Road” Initiative (MOE, 2016). As Yuan (2014) pointed out, this win-win logic of China’s education aid could possibly contribute to China’s growth in the soft power of improved international understanding and the hard power of economic development.

### **WPR analysis**

Underlying this policy, the problems represent to be the challenges faced by China of improving its international status as well as speeding up its economic development (Q1). First, there are still misunderstandings over issues such as its political regime, democracy, human rights, and territory defense (Yuan, 2014) (Q3). Enhancing the country’s image by aiding more low-income countries appears to be feasible for overcoming these constraints, and educational aid is very often a significant component in the international aid package. Second, after a remarkable growth of the domestic economy over the past four decades, China’s economic development slowed down in the 2010s (Loke, 2018) (Q3). This led to China’s gradual shift from indoors to overseas trade markets. However, personnel shortage and intercultural and language communication issues could hinder such cross-border cooperation. In this case, education aid in developing countries and educational exchange with the “Belt and Road” countries can probably ease these challenges and thus contribute to the economic development of both China and the recipient countries. The assumptions underlying these political and economic rationales are primarily twofold: China’s enhanced image, and more economic cooperation opportunities (Q2).

These problem representations and assumptions can lead to certain expectations towards the educational recipients in the aided countries and pressure on Chinese educators (Q5). In terms of the recipients’ attitudes towards China’s aid, the results seem uncertain. For example, China’s image was largely positive in Africa (Musyimi, Malechwanz, & Luo, 2018), whereas a great number of people in Southeast Asia did not seem to perceive China in a positive way (Stokes, 2015). Additionally, Chinese educators’ concerns are left unproblematic (Q4). The experienced Chinese teachers might be reluctant to leave their families and work abroad (Yang, 2010). These issues could become obstacles for China to achieve its goals. However, compared to the western donors, China has distinctive advantages as poor countries may perceive its developmental pathway as a more appropriate solution to their problems (Gill & Huang, 2006) (Q6). It is believed that education can help maintain a long-lasting relationship between China and the aided countries if quality transformation and communication can be delivered by Chinese educators (Yuan, 2014) (Q5).

### **4.3. International student recruitment**

Instead of treating international education as a marketplace for profit-making, China’s outward-oriented international student recruitment is partly out of a political rationale. In the policy discourses, emphasis was put on expanding the enrollment of international students (MOE, 2012, 2017) and “increasing the number of government scholarship” to students from African and ASEAN developing countries (State Council, 2014) and countries along the “Belt and Road” (MOE, 2017). By 2018, the statistical report showed that the number of international students enrolled in HE programs in mainland China reached almost 500,000 (mostly from Asia and Africa) (MOE, 2019), becoming the largest source country of international education in Asia.

### **WPR analysis**

Recruiting international student appears to be an approach to strengthen the international image of China’s HE sector as well as the country (Q1). To improve the international image and status of the Chinese HE sector, one key indicator is the number of international students (Song, 2018). Recruiting international students can contribute to the improvement of China’s HE global status (Q3). Also, international student recruitment could be a strategy for optimizing the students’ role as a bridge of mutual understanding between countries (Wang, 2014). Hence, largely recruiting students from developing countries could be tied with the enhancement of China’s international image (Q3).

There are two apparent assumptions embedded in this policy. First, the numerical expansion of international students could indicate the success of China’s HE internationalization (Q2). The foreign students were found to be attracted by the distinctiveness of Chinese culture and language, the continuous growth of economy (Ding, 2016), and the opportu-

ities of scholarship (Gbolliie & Gong, 2020). MOE (2019) reported that 48% of international students were enrolled on short-term language programs, and only around 17% of them were on postgraduate programs. Therefore, to what extent the large number of international students signals the success of Chinese HE remains uncertain. Secondly, it is presupposed that the international students could help promote China's image after they returned to their home country (Q2). The premise of this assumption rests on the international students' positive learning experience or their appreciation of China's political ideology. However, even if the students enjoyed their learning, they might not necessarily share its political and ideological orientations. For instance, Chinese students' political attitudes and outlook remained very stable when studying overseas (Wilson, 2016), and the effects of mobility on European students' political identifications were also found to be limited (Lomer, 2017).

Under these assumptions, there are silenced voices from local Chinese. There were concerns towards the possible unfairness caused by foreign student recruitment (Song, 2018) (Q4). Under the pressure of admitting international students, some reputable universities had to lower the entrance requirement towards non-local students (Song, 2018). The positive side is that this issue has been noticed, and improving the quality of international students has become a priority in the Modernization of China's Education 2035 (MOE, 2019) (Q6).

#### 4.4. Knowledge transfer

A principal inward-oriented strategy is to transfer knowledge through international academic exchange and cooperation. In the past two decades, China opened up its HE sector by inviting scholars for teaching and research purposes, sending Chinese scholars and students overseas for short-term or degree studies, setting up internationally-joint research centers, and allowing foreign universities to enter the Chinese education market (MOE, 2012, 2017). Such knowledge transfer was believed to drive the development of Chinese HE sector, and thus the training of skilled labors and the revitalization of the nation, especially on its economic and social development (MOE, 2012, 2017).

#### WPR analysis

Knowledge transfer occurs to be one of the most efficient methods to the need of improving Chinese HE sector on the production of cutting-edge knowledge, the nurture of high-skill labor force, and thus the contribution to the economic development (Q1). China has long been the world's largest manufactory for exporting low-tech products; however, this "made in China" reputation is not capable of boosting the nation's economy and improving people's living standards due to the limited gains from the low valued goods and techniques (Liu, 2018). The HE institutions, as an important birthplace of knowledge and creativity, seem to have an inevitable responsibility for addressing these issues (Q3).

Two assumptions are underlying this problem representation: Chinese individuals and universities would endeavor to learn and then contribute to the nation's revitalization; knowledge transfer could help catch up with the developed countries (Q2). One premise of the assumptions lies in the alignment of goals among the government, individuals, and institutions. However, brain drain caused by study mobility has become one big threat to China's HE sector and national development (Bamberger, Morris, & Yemini, 2019). Another premise of the assumptions is the foreign partners' willingness for knowledge transfer. Although win-win cooperation had been emphasized in the policy, the objectives of the partnership building were divergent. For China, the goals were to transfer knowledge from the world's most advanced educational resources and to achieve know-how through collaborations, whereas for foreign partners, the main driving force was the financial profits from the tuition fees, funding, and university endowment (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Moreover, not all types of knowledge can be successfully transferred. Core knowledge that can offer a university with competitive advantages is "a combination of possessed knowledge on brand building, international networks, management expertise and leading research", which is not entirely transferrable and can take a long time for the recipient to turn the knowledge into its own competitive capacities (Li et al., 2014, p. 352).

Effects resulted from these problematizations are mixed (Q5). It cannot be denied that the continuous knowledge learning can contribute to China's HE development, and even economic growth and social stability. However, this strategy would only turn China into a follower rather than a leader (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). The current increasing barriers of accessing key areas in the developed countries will push the Chinese HE institutions to rely on themselves for research and innovations, which may eventually benefit the nation's development. Recent educational policies have shifted from learning from the advanced countries into creating China's own educational brand and increasing its membership in international organizations for rulemaking (MOE, 2017, 2019), implying a positive development trend of Chinese HE internationalization (Q6).

#### 4.5. World-class universities (WCUs)

As a hybrid inward- and outward-oriented approach, developing China's own WCUs and world-class disciplines is a key quest in the policy documents. "By 2030, a number of universities and disciplines should be ranked among the top in the world, and the overall strength of higher education shows a significant improvement" (MOE, 2015). The rationales of building WCUs were multi-folded: to promote the development, reputation and international competitiveness of Chinese HE; to cultivate and practice the core values of socialism, and to carry forward excellent Chinese traditional culture; to become the important force in the knowledge discovery and scientific and technological innovation, and an important base for training high-quality talents in order to serve the national economic and social development (MOE, 2015, 2019). All these rationales served the purpose of enhancing national competitiveness.

##### WPR analysis

The quest of building world-class universities appears to be a method to improve Chinese HE quality (Q1). The quest of creating WCUs indicates that Chinese HE is now at the turning point from the era of massification to post-massification, i.e. changing from "expansion and growth" to "efficiency, return on investment, effectiveness and value added" (Fairweather & Blalock, 2015, p. 10) (Q3). Underlying these policy discourses, two assumptions are seemingly obvious: a world-class status was equivalent to a top global ranking; a number of WCUs and disciplines could represent improved HE quality and national competitiveness (Q2). Firstly, both policymakers and universities interpreted global ranking as responses to the policy quest. The positive effect was that an increasing number of Chinese elite universities had been acknowledged internationally (Times Higher Education, 2022) (Q5). However, due to the high expectations towards the prestigious universities, Tian and Lu's (2017) study revealed that young Chinese scholars faced intensified research pressure and negative affect such as insecurity and anxiety, and consequently lowered research and teaching quality (Q5). As Marginson (2017) proposed, a world-class university should be understood within three contexts: global, national, and local. In reality, most governments overly focused on improving the global dimension of the WCUs. With the realization of this issue, the term "world-class universities with Chinese characteristics" was introduced in the policy (MOE, 2015) (Q6).

Secondly, whether the creation of WCUs helps improve the overall HE quality is yet to be verified. The pursuit of world-class status could lead to unbalanced development of the HE sector, including regional, institutional, and disciplinary disparities (Q5). As most Chinese elite universities are located in the urban eastern areas, this regional disparity of top educational resources could be further widened with these prestigious universities entering world-class status (Montgomery, 2016). The institutional imbalance is another prominent issue. The ranking system not only depicted a measurable gap between institutions but also attracted more financial resources and top intellectuals to only a few elite universities (Gao, 2017). Consequently, the high-ranking institutions could easily maintain its status whereas the low-ranking ones were often challenged by insufficient funding and personnel (Wei & Johnstone, 2020) (Q5). Furthermore, as the universities largely relied on the STEM disciplines to improve their international competitiveness and rankings, the importance of social sciences was often neglected (Zhang & Suo, 2016) (Q5). Such disciplinary imbalance can pose challenges for WCUs to demonstrate their Chinese characteristics as social science subjects are playing an essential role in preserving Chinese characteristics.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study holistically explored China's policy on HE internationalization in the 21st century by understanding the governmental rationales and the problems it aimed to address. Through qualitative discourse analysis, together with the critical WPR framework, the findings revealed that (a) the three outward-oriented approaches—the establishment of CIs, foreign education aid, and foreign student recruitment were driven by the rationales of cultural and economic development, diplomacy and soft power projection; and (b) the other two strategies—knowledge transfer and WCUs creation were associated with rationales of human resource development, educational quality improvement, social-cultural development, and nation building (see Figure 1). The whole internationalization process appears to be very systematically well-planned, aiming at comprehensively strengthening the nation's overall power and its international competitiveness.

It can hardly be denied that facing the western dominance of the international education market, the Chinese government has smartly utilized the opportunities of HE internationalization to exploit the global market and achieve its own goals (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Also, though under an influence of political economy, progressive and humanistic logics such as mutual understanding, cooperation, cultural inheritance, and educational quality enhancement have not been ignored in the HE internationalization policy. Some scholars (e.g. Zheng & Kapoor, 2020) observed a return of Confucianism in the Chinese governance, aiming to become more democratic, demonstrating positive moral

ethics, making wise decisions on behalf of the citizens, and keeping the country secure and prosperous. These all echo with Hoffman's (2006) viewpoint on China's governmentality—a nationalism intricately intertwined with economic competitiveness, social responsibility and patriotism. However, from a progressive and humanistic standpoint, the ideology of treating education as an investment for making a better country should be challenged. It is the quality of education that determines whether the citizens have the knowledge, innovative abilities, and collaborative skills to create an inventive society (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011). Although the 14th Five-year Plan (2021-25) for National Education Development has not been published, such a weakness has been noticed and emphasized in the recent national policy and will become a key issue to be addressed in the next developmental stage (MOE, 2019, 2021).

Furthermore, though all the policies are united for strengthening the country's overall power and competitiveness, there is a clear tension between the preservation of national identity and the establishment of an international HE profile. One cause is that the promotion of Chinese characteristics may not secure the potential of the Chinese universities' international status in the westernized international education market. Meanwhile, though with a desire for social-cultural development, the country has to rely on STEM subjects for nation building. Given the current global situations where China is viewed as a competitor by some countries and international travel restrictions are in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a stronger inward-looking climate on HE development will be shaped, leading to a slower pace of HE internationalization (Hsieh, 2020).



**Figure 1. Interactions of rationales in Chinese HE internationalization.**

In the end, here are some reflections on the present study. Due to the broadness and complexities of this topic, the analysis has not uncovered all the details thoroughly within the length of the writing. More importantly, the findings were solely concluded based on qualitative text analysis and past studies, other research methods such as interviews to triangulate with the current findings are lacking. Lastly, reflexivity makes up a central component for qualitative research. All authors of this paper have rich learning and working experience from both inside and outside the Chinese context. The past experience, knowledge and values have shaped the researcher identity and influenced this study. Guided by the poststructuralism paradigm together with the critical WPR approach, we hope that a nuanced critique of the Chinese policy on HE internationalization has been conducted and can contribute to the improvement of policy and practice.

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