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The Pandemic and Higher Education: Learning and Reflection from the Experience of Chinese Higher Education

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Abstract:

Twenty months have passed since China's first lockdown of Wuhan city. The Chinese higher education sector has withstood the challenges of the pandemic. This paper discusses the experience of the higher education sector in China, drawing primarily from the early period of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, we present a narrative of Chinese higher education managing some of the multifaceted challenges, which is pivotal to understanding its policies and practices during the early pandemic. In particular, this paper extends and provides further contexts to Ma et al. (2021) in better understanding their Chinese perspective, giving readers a fuller picture of the governance of Chinese higher education and some of its practical insights. It also provides some important lessons and reflections drawing from localised experiences, which provide important insights into the Chinese higher education policies and practices in response to the national crisis. In addition, we suggest further areas of research relating to the content of this paper, and finish this paper with a future picture of hope after the crisis.

Keywords: China, Covid-19 pandemic, higher education, student rights, employee rights, power abuse

1. Introduction¹

Eighteen months have passed since China's first lockdown of Wuhan city. The higher education sector in China has withstood the challenges of the pandemic. Ma and colleagues (Ma et al., 2021) have recently discussed some of these challenges, comparing and contrasting among the different national contexts of China, Malaysia and the UK. This paper presents a narrative of Chinese higher education managing some of the multifaceted challenges, which is pivotal to understanding its policies and practices during the pandemic. We discuss and reflect on the implied priority of 'crisis management' which enable stability to overtook pedagogical issues to be treated as the primary focus of higher education in China, creating a dynamic scenario whereby continuance of operation or a sense of normality has been sought under difficult circumstances. In support of Ma et al. (2021), we concur that 'rapid pragmatic change and stringent policy implementation through localised responsibility have been key in Chinese HE (higher education)'s dealing with the pandemic, anchoring on top-down authority, urgency of collective crisis, and categorical patriotism. Underpinning the central policy's complete authority, such anchors carry legal power, social control, and political sensitivity' (also see Davidson, 2020; Huang, 2020).

Taking the initial response period for illustration, this paper takes Anhui province and a public university in Bengbu city (University A) as examples to discuss how the national emergency response was quickly expressed in relatively more detailed measures going down the hierarchical education structure. It reveals the potent role of government and its central authority in Chinese (higher) education (Bray, 1999), which validates the university' practices despite a messy reality. In particular, this paper extends and provides further contexts to Ma et al. (2021) in better understanding their Chinese perspective, giving readers a fuller picture of the governance of Chinese higher education and some of its practical insights. It also provides some important lessons and reflections drawing from localised experiences,

which provide important insights into the Chinese higher education policies and practices in response to the national crisis. In addition, we suggest further areas of research relating to the content of this paper, and finish this paper with a future picture of hope after the crisis.

2. Policy: The Passage of Responsibility

In order to understand the logic of policy in the Chinese educational context, it is important to remember that the education sector is under strict government control. Although education reforms have been carried out since the 1970s (Wang, 2010; Tan, 2013; Zhang, 2010), up to this day both private and public educational establishments are still being closely monitored by the government. The picture is particularly complex, because major control comes from three major aspects. First, this is through administrative control. Although university presidents are meant to have the highest administrative power over their respective Chinese universities, their decisions must be approved by the respective party secretaries who must be legally appointed by the government. In turn, the party secretaries report directly to their political superiors, according to the political ladder within the party. This means that while university presidents make administrative and management decisions and take the according responsibilities, all universities are under direct party and government control through the appointed party secretaries.

In particular for public universities, the control is also directly through funding. With the educational reforms (see Yang & Welch, 2012; Tao, 2021; Lewin & Hui, 1989) especially in higher education (see Han, 2020; Cai, 2012; Mok, 2003), the funding of Chinese universities has become more complex. In general, there are three main levels of funding. The top level is by the central government and its functional bodies/bureaus. There are only a small number of Chinese universities that are directly funded by the central government, mainly those included in the '211 project', '985 project' and the more recent 'Double First-Class University' ('双一流大学') project (see Zong & Zhang, 2019; Allen, 2021; Yang & Leibold, 2020). Besides these privileged universities, a portion of universities are also directly/partially funded by the central government's ministries (For example, a university featuring agriculture would have partial funding from the Ministry of Agriculture). The next level of funding comes from provincial level governments and its functional bodies. Similarly, the final level of funding comes of the city level government and departments. In reality, a large number of universities have more than one level/source of funding while the sources of funding also have administrative relationship. This makes the financial control usually difficult to articulate in practice, which further complicates the relationship between Chinese universities and its governments at different levels.

Although a small number of privately funded universities are arguably not subject to the financial control, there exists strong government control by policy. Again, policy control is another very complex aspect of the university-government relationship. Not only is this manifested in the government influence in educational policies, but it is also shown in other government policies which may have an administrative implication for party organisations, secretaries, and members. This is because, as explained above, universities presidents' decisions are by law subject to the respectively appointed party secretaries' approval, making university governance subordinate to party management and control (see Liu, 2020; for a different perspective, also see Kennedy, 2009). Furthermore, Chinese universities – especially the majority of them that are not directly funded by the central government – are particularly vulnerable policy influence and control due to the multi-sourced funding of Chinese universities (see above).

The primary implication of this context is that public and private universities in China are both directly and indirectly subject to arms-long control of Chinese government(s). For the present discussion of the policy manoeuvre of Chinese higher education during the early pandemic, the unique Chinese political and university governance contexts promote stringent policy execution and quick policy turnaround down the hierarchy. This leaves little room for question by the lower levels, as party's will that is carried by government policies became the most imperative above all. Given the varied contexts for the daily operations of Chinese universities especially across different regions, the Ministry of Education issued the guideline of 'one city one policy' (一地一策) and 'one university one policy' (一校一策). On the one hand, this empowered local/institutional decisions. On the other hand, the responsibility of pandemic prevention and control were also passed down to the joint responsibilities at city-university levels. In turn, a crisis discourse calling for national solidarity, central authority and local responsibility justifies universities' diversified practices fitting their respective contexts for the rapid overall turnaround. Next, we show this by we taking the initial response of Chinese higher education as an example.

The Ministry of Education issued a contingency plan on the 21st of January responding to President Xi Jinping's instructions regarding the national battle against the outbreak in Wuhan that was issued a day before. The contingency plan assigned responsibilities to the lower-level departments of education with a clear focus on prevention control and safety. Soon after the Ministry of Education's issuance of its national contingency plan, lower-level plans were issued by the provinces, cities, and universities. For example, University A, our example university, issued its initial contingency plan in response to the plans at provincial and municipal levels. Anhui Education Department released three documents in response to the Ministry of Education's contingency plan between the 22nd and 26th of January. These procedures aimed to create an understanding of the seriousness of the outbreak, along with encouraging personal hygiene and the prevention of get-togethers in order to hinder and control the spread of the virus. On the official WeChat account of Anhui Education Department there was a 'Warm Reminder' for parents to read which supplemented the responsibilities that were deputised to lower-level facilities and education institutions in the area. The education division subsequently deferred all formal activities in educational settings after the first confirmed instance of COVID-19 in Bengbu. This notice came in place on the 24th of January. This decision, and the higher-level strategies after it came after a revision of the decision three days prior, to rapidly respond to the spate of local COVID-19 cases in Bengbu.

Meanwhile, China has concurrently had to walk a tightrope when dealing with pressure from internal and foreign issues following the downpour of international critics taking to social media to denounce China for what ostensibly were its inadequacies (Erlanger, 2020; Eve, 2020; Fisher, 2020). This pressure motivated the government to ensure that education authorities (Education Law 2015, Higher Education Law 2018) in China provided domestic security and stability at a populace level. The Ministry, in a letter unambiguously addressed to 'nation-wide university students' that was issued on February 3rd sustained that 'the outbreak is the order, and prevention control is the responsibility', written verbatim. The Ministry 'believes... (university students) certainly will uphold the mission and responsibility of the time, share the motherland's fate and people's trials and tribulations, and make the due contribution to winning the battle with the new coronavirus' (translated and cited in Ma et al., 2021).

To illustrate this, we direct readers' attention to three letters published by the Anhui Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Education Work Committee and Anhui Education Department during the early lockdown period, to highlight tasks for party and administrative leaders, teachers, and students and parents, respectivelyⁱⁱ. These letters are first translated by Ma et al (2021) and we use their translations below:

Party and administrative leaders: uplift the political standpoint **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, maintain ground command, leverage Party organisations' outreach, ensure work implementation, and give loving care to teachers **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and students.

- *Teachers:* realistically uplift political standpoints **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, uphold confidence of outbreak control, promote and implement prevention control, scientifically arrange teaching during the winter holiday, and reinforce thoughts-politics education **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- *Students and parents:* uphold confidence of outbreak control, reduce outdoor activities, increase personal safety awareness, scientifically arrange learning during the winter holiday.

Letters, such as the one above, pronounce the essential position that Chinese universities must apply to their policies at all levels prioritising security/wellness, public assurance and solidity, especially given the context of being within the jurisprudence of various levels of government in China (Education Law 2015), and their role as higher education in both the public and private sectors. Authority in a centralised sense therefore comes from the government (Huang 2019), which the universities comply with in their entirety, with due deference to the government's position as primary stakeholder in China's higher education system. Below, we contextualise a messy reality at University A, coping with fragmented practices which have resulted from a need for order, compliance, and control on one hand, and little previous experience, no existing protocol, and inadequate resources on the other.

3. Practice: Seeking Order in Chaos

University A is a public university under Anhui government's direct jurisdiction. On Chinese New Year (on the 25th of January, 2020), a 24-hours on duty emergency team was assembled and stationed at the campus infirmary, led by the university's Party and administrative leader and consisting of the next level in command from all the departments and schools. Several prevention control measures and procedures were subsequently issued to reify the plan, citing and reiterating the themes of higher-level policies. The decision of moving classes online was made much later (on the 14th of February, 2020) in response to the Ministry's notice on 'suspending classes but not learning' ('停课不停学'), only ten days before the semester started. The university has partnered with the leading Chinese third-party platform for online learning, commonly known as Chaoxing, registering for which was pushed by the university since late 2018. Despite the mandatory registration order for all courses by last year, only 2,086 out of 2,661 (78 per cent) courses were registered online a week before the semester started in February 2020.

With little previous experience and no established procedures of managing virtual classrooms, the university has faced more immediate administrative and technological concerns. Since Chaoxing was not designed to substitute traditional teaching, the platform lacked the technical and functional capacity to accommodate large data traffic or support an effective virtual classroom setting. With a surge in active users (for example, Chaoxing had seven million new registrations on the 24th of February, 2020), there were frequent service disruptions with long login queues to reduce server overloads. These factors led to the university's decision to decentralise decision-making to the teacher's discretion and responsibility, who have pragmatically used various combinations of platforms, teaching methods, and class arrangements involving over 10 communication and social media apps. Similarly, the administrative departments have been overloaded by working remotely, while managing both prevention control and moving classes online. That is in addition to their previous workloads without existing protocols, extra help, training or adequate information technology systems and support.

Understandably, the stringent policy implementation aiming for the rapid turnaround at the university has resulted in a chaotic reality especially in lacking adequate resources and infrastructure. For teaching, irrespective of the actual platform(s) being used, teaching content and class attendance have been recorded on Chaoxing which can provide the university with progress reports. For minor administrative matters, WeChat Work, the transitive office automation (OA) system has been used since late 2019. More substantive matters must refer to respective online systems being used in separation to each other and/or in relation to Chaoxing and/or the OA system. For monitoring, Anhui Education Department requires all the university staff and students report daily on DingTalk regarding location and health since February, extending to the coming semester break. At the university level, both leave applications and 'permission to leave' must be obtained before staff leave the registered residential area including those who reside outside Bengbu and during national/school holidays, while the 'permission to leave' procedures also apply to staff's co-living family members. For communication and in place of emails, an unmanageable number of around-the-clock chat multi-layered groups have

gained (more) legitimacy. On QQ, WeChat, WeChat Work, DingTalk, and Chaoxing, work related chat groups are in use at university, school, department, research cluster, and various functional levels, in addition to student related affairs including module teaching, research supervision, student activity/event coaching, class-based pastoral care, and internship/social practice support.

The university's decision of carrying out the semester (including physical education) online with the unelaborated-upon short notice was clearly a policy expedient, especially in light of significant barriers that one would expect to resemble the earlier stages of transforming traditional teaching into information communication technology assisted environments (see Berge 1998; also see Berge & Muilenburg, 2001). Nonetheless, the expedience's necessity appears to be widely and implicitly understood among staff and students, suggested by their salient compliance and justified by ongoing national and international uncertainties. Seeking a sense of normality amidst such messiness, the semester has been generally carried out with little discussion on pedagogy or concerns, with the least possible disruptions to the pre-existing environments. Met no observable objection or disobedience (also see Horton 2020), all respective levels of research grants applications still took place with or without delayed deadlines, and a comparative variety of internal and external events having been carried out online. The staff's and students' endurance are particularly illuminating of their general understanding of the state and sensitivity of crisis, coping with a chaotic reality while trying to carry out teaching and learning, research, and administrative activities as 'normally' as possible.

4. Learning and Reflection from the Experience of Chinese Higher Education

The learning from the Chinese universities' experiences would be difficult to summarise given the great variety of their localised contexts and conditions, especially given the fact that our paper has primarily drawn a localised experience of University A in Anhui province. However, the implications of higher levels policies and guidelines can be reflected upon. We now turn to our reflections of the experience of Chinese higher education during the early pandemic for the Chinese educational sector and beyond.

To begin with, we acknowledge that China has performed exceptionally well in terms of infection prevention and control. The stringent policy design and delivery in the education sector has always focused on pandemic prevention and control, putting it on top of all else. As a result, Chinese universities have taken a very proactive approach to combat the pandemic (Yang, 2020). For illustration, even more recently during the Autumn semester in 2021, a number of universities in China including University A have carried out campus-wide compulsory Covid-19 virus tests for all staff and students. Nobody was allowed to be on campus without a recent negative test result while students must remain on campus. The nation-wide effort at all levels showed visible results, especially in the fact that China was among the first countries that reduced the infection rate to a much controllable level. This suggests that strict policy formation and rigorous policy implementation indeed works when the overpowering aim is to control the pandemic. It must also be stressed that the stringent and speedy policy turnover and implementation were only made possible because the direct line of report and control of the party, through different levels of party organisations and secretaries (see Ogunniran 2020).

However, the above also shows that there is a potential concern regarding students' rights – to what extent did they 'sign up' for these strict measures of their campus life when they decided to attend university? This can be particularly problematic as such measures are not mandated by any national policies or higher-level plans. We argue that the stringent measures were put in place in response to the localised responsibilities which were passed down to local universities, rendering the university presidents (personally) responsible for pandemic control in their respective universities. Nonetheless, we recognise that university presidents in China were placed into a difficult position. On the one hand, they are legally responsible for the decisions running the university and the outcomes. On the other hand, their decisions cannot go effective without the party's approval, symbolised by the party secretary of the university. In a nutshell, Chinese university presidents can only make decisions which are aligned well with the party's agenda, despite the fact that in case anything goes wrong they will be legally responsible for the outcome. Bearing this in mind, it is perhaps understandable why they made decisions which would verge on safety over students' rights, especially given the fact that students' rights is still a newly developing legal concept in the Chinese context (see Rosen, 2019).

Similarly, staffs' voice has been completely neglected during the entire process (note that there is scarce research on student voice in China; see Wei, 2016; e.g., Mesiti & Clarke, 2010, c.f., Turner, 2006; Smyth, 2006; Kaur, Anthony, Ohtani & Clarke, 2013). A number of lecturers at University A reported that they were forced to apply for leaves because they couldn't return to campus due to the pandemic or its ramifications, and their salaries were deducted accordingly. This is especially peculiar given the fact that they were still required to and still do carry university tasks remotely, including teaching, paperwork, and research supervision, etc. The university's explanation is that they were following its official rules and regulations, which have not been adapted or revised in light of the pandemic. In other words, all that's been changed since the pandemic at the university level is all-in-all pandemic control, there's no official review of the administration of stuff that's been proposed or carried out to protect employee rights (which is, like students' rights, still a newly developing legal concept in the Chinese context). Another important note here is that pedagogical issues have been largely neglected, partially due to the lack of faculty's voice.

5. The Aftermath of Crisis: Future, Collaboration, and Hope

Approaching the end of the Spring semester in 2022, the nation-wide hope was to start the Autumn semester with traditional teaching using detailed preventive control measures. This involved mixed learning as contingency plans. From then on, Chinese universities have used mixed learning as a measure to combat the pandemic, although most of them still

prefer face-to-face teaching due to the limitations of resources and competences. Both faculty and students have experienced a significant level of uncertainty as the teaching/learning experience can be altered with little notice. While challenging, the crisis-induced necessity of moving classes online can act as a catalyst to transform traditional teaching in Chinese universities, especially in light of a long-term education project called 'National Exemplary Courses' (国家精品课程). The nationally funded educational excellence scheme is an ongoing project to build an online higher education database of knowledge, experience, and exemplary cases since 2003, in the form of video-recorded lectures and annually updated learning materials. The Ministry has promoted the scheme courses for the Spring and following semesters, being used as either the primary or supplementary teaching method in situations where creating asynchronous courses would be challenging and synchronous teaching inviable.

Furthermore, privileged Chinese universities are likely to create more online courses as part of China's education internationalisation strategy, prominently featured in the most recent national education blueprint (on the 18th of June, 2020) jointly deployed by the Ministry of Education and seven other departments. The blueprint re-emphasises the importance of both education import and export. The former is mainly facilitated by supporting Chinese students with studies abroad and universities to collaborate with foreign partners, while the latter supports foreign students studying in China and universities in providing more educational resources for international communities, especially developing countries. In particular, it aims to build a 'platform to promote international courses with Chinese characteristics' backed up by the 'Chinese education cloud', contributing to an 'upgraded version' of its 'One Belt One Road' ('一带一路') internationalisation strategy. Although it is too soon to discuss the implications, Chinese higher education's road ahead looks both exciting and challenging. Nonetheless, with this newest development setting a strategic footing in promoting border-transcending education, there is hope that international education, especially through technology enhanced learning which renders cost-effective, fast, and flexible exchanges of educational resources attainable, will bring nations closer despite differences and conflicts during difficult times.

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²a) Letters and tasks are listed in the original order of appearance, b) 'the political standpoint' refers to perfect political synchronisation with President Xi's standpoint, while 'realistically...standpoints' implies permitted (slight) variations of thoughts within the boundary of political harmony, c) the Chinese word 'teacher' is commonly used for both academic and administrative staff working in educational settings, d) more commonly translated as 'ideopolitical education' (思想政治教育) these notes are adopted from the first author's previous paper (see Ma et al., 2021).

