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Similarities and differences between notions of ‘public’ in the Sinic and liberal Anglo-American traditions, and the implications for higher education

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A common trope, particularly in the liberal Anglo-American tradition, is the notion that higher education plays a public role and produces public goods. However, there is a lack of clarity about what this means. The Anglo-American economic or political explanations of higher education’s role in public goods do not necessarily apply outside Anglo-American societies, including China with its comprehensive state. The comparison between the two cases may bring us closer to what might be common (and diverse) in higher education’s role across the world. The study conceptually explores meanings of ‘public’ and related key terms in each of the Sinic and liberal Anglo-American traditions, through a critical literature review of existing scholarship.

In this process, five pairs of key themes (comprising both Chinese and English/ Western terms) have been identified that open up aspects of the ‘public’ in higher education: (1) xiushen, self-cultivation, and Bildung, (2) gong/public and si/private, (3) gongping/equity, (4) zhi, the free will, and liberty, and (5) tianxia weigong, all under heaven belongs to all, and the global public good. The comparison focuses on hybridisations, synergies, and complementarities between the two traditions.

The findings demonstrate both similarities and differences between the two traditions, manifested in their distinct worldviews, political and social imaginaries, understandings of the ‘public’ and ‘public good,’ and so forth. The research not only sheds new light on how higher education contribute to the public or collective good of societies (including the global public good or common good), but also help to enhance potential collaboration among higher education systems worldwide.