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# **International Student Education in China and its Connections with Local and Global Society**

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# International Student Education in China and its Connections with Local and Global Society

Wen Wen and Die Hu

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## **Abstract**

China has become the third largest host in the world for international students. China's international student education (ISE) is often seen as a way of exercising soft power and legitimizing Chinese universities' status in the global market of World-Class universities. However, we have limited knowledge about the connection of ISE to the core missions of the higher education institutions (HEIs) and the role of ISE in serving society. This paper examines the connection of China's ISE to the local, national, regional, and global society by synthesizing multiple types of data on international education and the international student experience in China including national policies,

institutional documents, and interviews with higher education administrators and students. The discussion also focuses on the ways in which the interplay of political, economic, and social-cultural forces shapes the relationships between China's ISE and society.

**Keywords:** International student education (ISE), China, Internationalization in higher education for society, Social justice, Economic development, Public good

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## Introduction

Despite China having 500,000 international students and becoming Asia's top study-abroad destination as of 2019 (MOE, 2019a), recent research indicates that the intended objectives related to society, such as improving the international atmosphere on campus and in the community, increasing university reputations, and projecting soft power, are not well-achieved (Mulvey, 2020). International student education worldwide is characterized by ad hoc, reactive, fragmented, and unrelated activities which lack social engagement (Knight & de Wit, 2018). International student education, and even the broader term of higher education internationalization, is often seen as a concept that draws resources, rather than as a tool to support social engagement and responsibility – locally, nationally, and globally.

The lack of connection between international education and society generates tensions against international students and arouse debates on the legitimacy of international education in China. Many studies have shown that the on-campus segregation from admission to graduation and the not-supportive environment leads to cross-cultural adaptation challenges, pedagogical and linguistic barriers, and education quality concerns (Wen & Hu, 2019; Ding, 2016; Wu, 2019; Li, 2015; Ma & Zhao, 2018; Tian et al., 2020). The public showed strong resistance to the foreigners' permanent residence, and there was also criticism or dissatisfaction on the super preferential treatment of foreign students. It is thus imperative to understand how international education in China connects with society and the ways in which political, economic, or socio-cultural forces shape the mission and goal of international student education in China.

Different from many other countries, there is a specific term in Chinese to refer to education for foreign students: international student education (ISE, 来华留学生教育, lai hua liu xue sheng jiao yu). Such terminology is not commonly used in western literature because the education of international students is usually an integrated part of domestic student education in many receiving countries. However, international students in China are legally required to live in

designated accommodation which is apart from accommodation for domestic students. In addition, in order to attract international students, English versions of programmes are designed for them, which limits the feasibility of international and domestic students sharing the same classroom.

This article investigates the landscape of ISE in China with a focus on its connections with society. It firstly elaborates on the internationalization of higher education for society (IHES) framework and its application into the Chinese ISE context. A historical context of the ISE development and an illustration of the current landscape of ISE of China drawing from international enrolment data follows. Guided by the internationalization for society framework, this paper then analyses how ISE in China is connected to society in terms of the social justice, economic development, and public good perspectives. The findings draw on data derived from a multi-year research project on China's internationalization of higher education, which includes annual MoE statistics on international student enrolment, policy documents, 107 survey answers from university directors in charge of the ISE affairs, and materials based on one-on-one interviews with 32 international degree-seeking students, 8 university ISE directors, 3 administrative staff in ISE, 3 teaching faculty members, and 3 human resource managers in corporations.

International student education is a crucial lens through which we can better understand the logic, patterns, challenges, and prospects of China's higher education in the global-national framework. This lens provides insights into how China's higher education system pursues a unique path between globalization/neoliberalism versus centralized governance/national will. The case of ISE in China can serve as a reference for other emerging host destinations after the pandemic.

## **Internationalization in higher education for society (IHES): a case of China**

de Wit suggested a new definition of internationalization in 2015. He emphasized the nature of the relationship between internationalization and society and extended the impact of internationalization beyond the confines of the academy:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all of students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit, Hunter, & Egron Polak, 2015)

The framework of IHES was then developed to address the disconnect between the internationalization of higher education and the third mission of higher education. Recent studies in this regard call for a comprehensive inclusive vision of internationalization that systematically and strategically extends its benefits into local and distant communities (Leask & de Gayardon, 2021) and better “equips the world community to face the challenges of today and of the future” (Brandenburg et al., 2020, p. 83). Scholars have proposed three models for universities to pursue to serve society: the social justice model, the economic development model, and the public good model (Hazelkorn, 2016; Brandenburg et al., 2020). The *social justice* goals focus on addressing social disadvantage and also emphasize students, service-learning, and community empowerment (Brandenburg et al., 2020). Specific aspects include general public education, capacity building, and supporting active citizenship. The *economic development* goals centre on local/regional economic growth, developing countries’ economic growth, and knowledge transfer. The *public good* goals emphasize the public nature of international higher education, making the world better and contributing to community development and revitalization activities. Many aspects of international higher education are within the public good goals, such as supporting social integration, developing global citizens, and supporting science and knowledge diplomacy/soft power (see Brandenburg et al., 2020, p. 43, for the complete list).

The IHES framework was proposed in the Western context in which the relationship between higher education and society is different from that in China. In China, the border between state and society is unclear. The social system is hierarchical in terms of individual, family, State/society, and *Tianxia (All under heaven)*. As well illustrated by Marginson & Yang (2020), university autonomy discusses the extent to which universities are autonomous parts of the state, or



part of civil society. In the UK, institutions lie somewhere between the state and civil society. In the US, institutions are nested more in civil society, and questions about institutional autonomy play out on the sensitive boundary between the state and other domains. In China, questions about university autonomy play out within the boundaries of the state rather on the boundary between the state and society.

Therefore, the paradox of ISE in China is that, on the one hand, it is not seen as a component of the national higher education system, it is a “supplementary” of national higher education. On the other hand, as an individual unit of higher education, it has to serve the state. One distinct characteristic in governing China’s ISE is the government-institution partnership (Huang, 2003), which is very different from the governing pattern of the national higher education system. The central government controls (to a very weak extent) overall policy orientation and quality assurance. HEIs have the autonomy to operate ISE in the process of recruitment, curriculum and teaching, finance, and administration (Wen, Wang, & Cui, 2023). Such a process is loosely managed, contrasting to the strict government control in the higher education of domestic students.

We propose to explore ISE’s connection with the society in terms of the three domains: social justice, economic development, and public good. In terms of social justice, this study examines international students’ geographical regions of origin and their university destinations in China. In terms of economic development, this study focuses on the direct and indirect contributions that ISE makes to the local and global economy. In terms of public good, this study investigates how ISE in China contributes to the public nature of higher education and serves the broader society. Moreover, ISE-society engagement is happening in various spaces: local, regional, national, international. It may bring the global to the local, or the local to the global, regional to global or global to regional. In light of this framework, this paper aims to elaborate on how China’s ISE manifests itself in the spaces of local, regional, national, and international.

## **ISE in China: a historical perspective**

ISE has gone through four major historical periods in China. The first period dates from the 1950s till the beginning of the reform and opening-up policy. During this period, most international students studying in China came from the socialist countries, neighbouring countries, and Asian, African, and Latin American independent states. In 1960, the number of international students studying in China was 1347 from 37 countries, 89 percent of which were socialist countries. Chinese HEIs regarded hosting international students as a national mission and they had very limited authority over the administration of international education.

Since the opening-up reform in 1978, ISE started to build the national higher education system as the market economy reform of China was intensified. In 1989, the Ministry of Education published the “Relevant Provisions of Self-Financed Foreign Students” (MoE, 1989), which authorized Chinese provinces to assess institutions’ qualification for hosting international students and permitted HEIs to recruit and admit self-funded international students. The HEIs were granted more autonomy to fundraise and develop international education and academic exchange and the constraints in the managerial system of ISE were largely loosened. The ISE system construction includes the establishment of the academic degree system, the visa system, and the Chinese language standardized test for foreign students – Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK).

Since mid-1990s, both the internationalization agenda and world-class university building influenced China’s ISE. The number of international students studying in China rose from 43,000 in 1998 to nearly 300,000 in 2012. Except for a few years, the annual increase of international student enrolments was over 10 percent. The number of HEIs that have the authorized qualification to admit international students was 690 in 2012, more than twice that of 1998 (339). Chinese top universities followed the world-class standards and boosted their international student enrolments. Some second-tier universities imitated first-tier universities and regarded the expansion of international student enrolment as an important task to accomplish.

Upon entering the new century, there is a re-emerging nationalism in the internationalization of higher education. First, China has started to adopt new supervision methods including verification, assessment, and quality assurance to manage international education. Second, a feature of this period is the adoption of the cultural path to legitimize China's soft power in the world, under the guidance of the "going global" strategy. This strategy was first raised in 2000 by the Standing Committee of the 9th National People's Congress and had the goal of promoting Chinese cultures to the world (Wang et al., 2016). Besides Confucius Institutes, some ISE programmes targeting high-level global talents were being built including the Schwarzman college, Yanching Academy, and Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development. Third, China has started playing an increasingly important role in several regional and international efforts on higher education qualification assurance system building. For example, China led the work of Asia-Europe qualification recognition and quality assurance under the Asia-Europe Education Ministers' Meeting (ASEM ME) framework.

The development of international education in China is a mirror representing the aspiration and endeavour of Chinese higher education faced with opportunities and challenges in the global era. More importantly, it represents the complex relationship between the state, international relations, and higher education institutions.

## **ISE in China: the current landscape**

China's current higher education landscape is vast in scale: China has 2,663 public HEIs and 750 private HEIs, with 1,004 of these, mostly public, receiving international students (MoE, 2019b, 2020). In 2018, China's total inbound international student numbers reached 492,185, and more than 50% were degree-seeking students. Engineering, management, and medicine have become competitive choices of study (Wen, Chen & Wu, 2018). About 13% of international students are government scholarship recipients (MoE, 2019b).

The current enrolment trends exhibit several features. First, there is a tendency for China's ISE to enrol more degree-seeking students and enrol more students beyond undergraduate level. Since 2018, the number of degree-seeking

international students enrolled has surpassed that of non-degree students (Figure 1) and about three quarters of all degree-seeking students are at a postgraduate level (Figure 2).

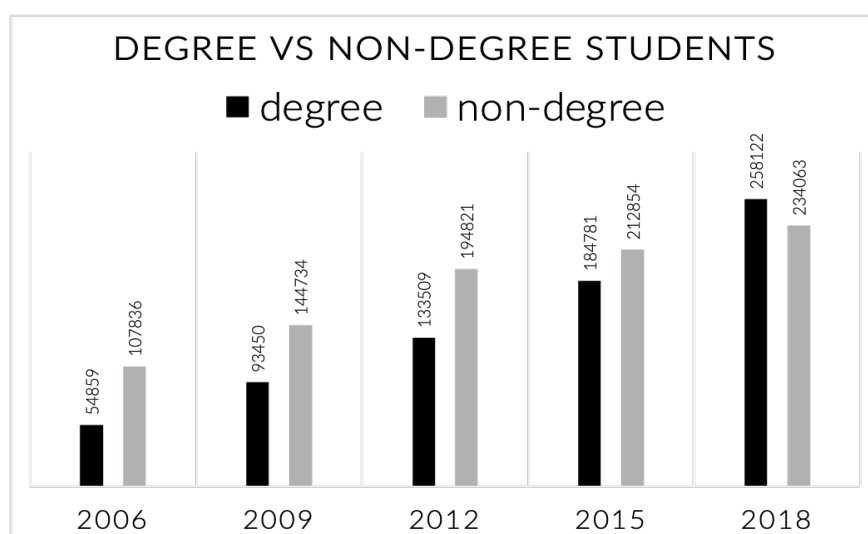


Figure 1. Enrolment of degree-seeking and non-degree students from 2006 to 2018 (MoE,2007; MoE,2008; MoE,2009; MoE,2010; MoE,2011; MoE,2012; MoE,2013; MoE,2014; MoE,2015; MoE,2016; MoE,2017d; MoE,2018; MoE,2019a).

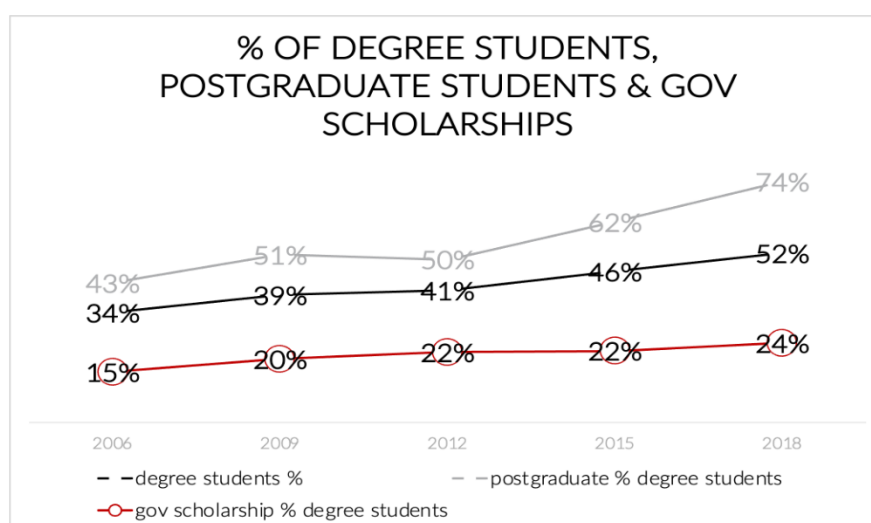


Figure 2. Proportion of degree-seeking students, postgraduate students, and government scholarship receivers (MoE,2007; MoE,2008; MoE,2009; MoE,2010; MoE,2011; MoE,2012; MoE,2013; MoE,2014; MoE,2015; MoE,2016; MoE,2017d; MoE,2018; MoE,2019a).

Second, research universities and medical institutions host more international students. About 75% of scholarship receivers go to research intensive universities in China (MoE, 2020). Branch campuses of some US or UK universities such as NYU Shanghai, Nottingham-Ningbo, XJTU-Liverpool, and

medical institutions host high proportions of international students studying in China.

Our recent study explored the decision making of international students who chose to study in China found that economic motivation, including the low living cost and better career prospects, due to economic exchange and cooperation between China and their home countries, was an important pulling force of international student mobility to China. The academic quality reputation of China's research universities also serves as a driving force for attracting international students, especially those from East and Southeast Asia (Wen & Hu, 2019). However, China's contemporary culture does not function as a pulling force due to the difficulty of explaining it to a foreign culture.

China's motivation to develop ISE was to serve the national strategy, from promoting socialist camp in the 1950s to assisting the new global plan in the 21st century. The process has been complicated by the pragmatic understanding that internationalization of higher education (IoHE) is a tool to advance the Chinese higher education system to a world class level, not as an aim itself. University reputation, diplomatic and soft power rationales are the most prominent rationales behind ISE (Chan & Wu, 2020; Gao & Liu, 2020; Haugen, 2013; Wu, 2019). With the pervasive invasion of academic capitalism, Chinese HEIs, and particularly the research universities, are becoming quasi-corporations (Marginson & Considine, 2000). HEIs seek to perform well on proxies such as publications in English and international students/faculty numbers to improve their rankings (Wen & Cui, 2020) and are rewarded by the strong state for internationalization enhancement (Zha, et al., 2019). Focusing on the most salient proxies of IoHE, top Chinese research universities could gain global presence and integrate into the international higher education system.

One distinct characteristic in governing China's international higher education and ISE is the government-institution partnership (Huang, 2003). The central government controls overall policy orientation and quality assurance, delegating the administrative power to institutions. Such a process differs from the strict government control in the education of domestic students. HEIs have the power to operate ISE in the process of recruitment, curriculum and teaching,

finance, and administration, all within the overarching regulatory legal framework.

## ISE and social justice

In the following sections we discuss the ways in which China's ISE is linked to the three models that pursue to serve society. First, the social justice goals focus on addressing social disadvantage and structural inequality, and emphasizing student and community empowerment. China has cultivated a group of undergraduate, graduate, and professional talents for developing regions in Asia and Africa with favourable enrolment quotas and scholarships. In 2017, 160,323 degree-seekers in China came from Asia (66.37%) and 51,959 from Africa (21.51%). In China's ISE, aside from South Korea and the United States, most of the top ten sending countries were middle-income Global South countries: Pakistan (8.76%), India (7.84%), Thailand (4.93%), Laos (3.55%), Kazakhstan (3.53%), Indonesia (3.36%), and Vietnam (2.72%) (MoE, 2018). Data show that China is particularly welcoming students from lower-income African countries, as the percentage of African students enrolled in Chinese HEIs is on the rise. African students constituted 17% of all international students studying in China in 2018 (Figure 3).

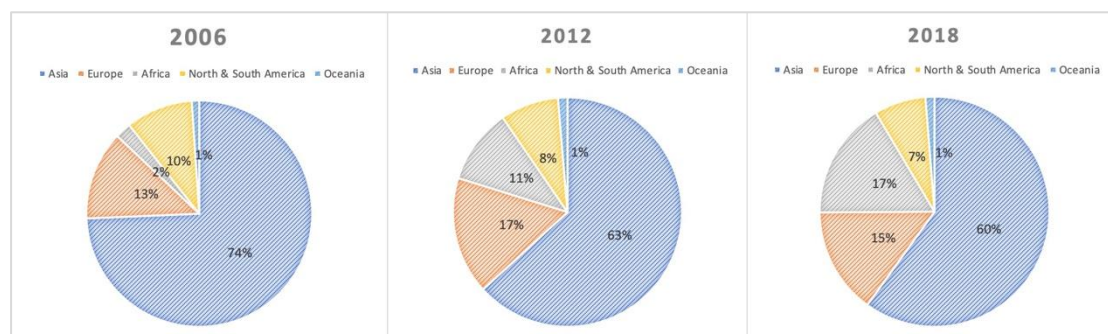


Figure 3. The proportion of international students by their regions of origin: 2006, 2012, 2018 (MoE,2007; MoE,2013; MoE,2019a).

China's ISE has addressed the unequal distribution of global educational resources and empowered some communities that tend to be historically disadvantaged. However, from the local and national perspective, the downside of this is that ISE has intensified the inequality or the stratification in Chinese higher education. At a national level, most international students study in universities in the economically advanced areas. At an institutional level, the

survey conducted in 2018 collected in this study has shown that research-intensive universities received an average of 962 international students per institution, while non-research universities hosted 159 international students per institution. The disproportionate distribution of international students meant that universities at the top of the hierarchy benefited most from both the economic gains (tuitions and fees) and international influences (intercultural exposure opportunities). This reality perpetuates the imbalance between regions and between institutions and holds back the social justice goals. Many large countries with regional disparities would face similar issues where regional universities lag behind those located in the national capital and large cities or economic centres.

## **ISE and economic development**

The economic development goals centre on local or regional economic growth. The latest official data capturing international student revenue, dated back to a decade ago, showed that, for the year of 2011, international student education contributed 28.3 billion RMB (USD 4.5 billion) to China's GDP and created 0.24 million jobs (Wu & Chan, 2019). The number of international students studying in China has almost doubled from 2011 to the present, so the contribution to economy is also likely increased. To compare, more than one million international students at U.S. colleges and universities during the 2015-2016 academic year contributed USD 32.8 billion to the U.S. economy and created more than 40,000 jobs (Ha & Chen, 2020). The London Economics analysis shows that a 2018-19 cohort of international students studying in the UK contributed a net economic benefit of £25.9 billion (USD 35.9 billion) to the UK's economy. Additionally, a few studies have also documented that ISE has contributed to China's export and trade (Ha & Chen, 2020; Wei & Yuan, 2017), increased China's foreign direct investment and overseas mergers and acquisitions (Chen et al. 2019).

From another perspective, ISE can indirectly contribute to Sino-foreign trade by training a large number of students who learned soft skills in China that can be used in their work back home. Many international graduates actively participate in multilateral trade in the regional economy. For example, a Thai student

studying in China thought that he would accumulate essential experience working with Chinese, which would be helpful for finding him a job in the Sino-Thai industry. He elaborated:

Obtaining a diploma is not the only purpose for me to choose to study in China.... Studying in China can help me better understand the market environments in both China and Thailand and establish personal connections.... I will accumulate experience dealing with and doing business with Chinese. It will lay a good foundation for me to rapidly enter into the Sino-Thai trade industry in the future.

When asked on the reasons for collaborating with Chinese universities, an ISE administrative leader in Thailand noted that Thailand has a growing demand for Chinese-speaking labour and said:

China and ASEAN [The Association of Southeast Asian Nations] have signed a free trade agreement, which has enabled the close economic relations between China and Thailand to be reflected in bilateral trade ... Thailand's labour market has a growing demand for Chinese-speaking labour.

The contribution of Chinese ISE to the economy is more concentrated in soft skills areas, such as Chinese language acquisition and personal connections. However, in terms of providing professional skills, there is still a gap between China and traditional international student hosts. A human resources manager of a multi-national corporation said, "we do not need fresh international graduates, but we need high-skilled international professionals". According to several other interviewees working at international corporations based in China, the demand for international students was still quite low.

In addition, China is a non-immigrant nation with a surplus of domestic college graduates. China's demand for absorbing foreign graduates into the labour force is low and the legal limitations for foreign students to stay are valid.



## **ISE and public good**

The public good is perceived as a certain function or social contribution of higher education, emphasizing its public nature. The goals of public good include, but are not limited to, supporting social integration, developing global citizens, and supporting science and knowledge exchange.

Some regional universities benefit local society through ISE. For example, Yunnan and Guangxi, the two southwestern border provinces in China, were quiet achievers in supporting the public good. In recent years, colleges and universities in Yunnan and Guangxi opened several institutional partnerships and joint programmes, language education collaboration, training, and degree programmes, generating profits for universities (Yang, 2012). The relationship between higher education and this region has changed from passively adapting to regional economic and social development to actively leading regional development. The universities not only recruit many international students from neighbouring countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, but actively collaborate with neighbouring Asian countries. For example, universities in Yunnan collaborated with Myanmar in the fields of ecology and biodiversity and promote the environmental and sustainable development of the entire region to their domestic and international students. This highlights the function of scientific research to serve the local society.

Additionally, ISE in China has contributed to promoting global competency, as China remains the stepping stone for international students to enter higher education in the global centres and semi-centres. For many students, China has become an ideal alternative for exploring higher education in another country and improving their competencies. For example, Tsinghua University has led a multilateral initiative to establish a World MOOC Alliance and provide numerous learning resources for global students.

## **Discussion and concluding remarks**

Two major forces shape the development of ISE in China. First, in China, international student recruitment is never seen as a simple educational activity, but is designed with political and diplomatic intentions (Wen, 2018). As clearly

indicated in China's recent national strategies, namely the 2016 "Belt and Road Initiatives"<sup>1</sup> (BRI) and the 2015 "Double First-Class Initiatives,"<sup>2</sup> international student education plays an important role in these plans either to promote university excellence or to project soft power. Thus, for HEIs, ISE is treated as an instrument to achieve such purposes as increasing international presence, other than accomplishing the university's first, second, and third missions. Developing ISE is closely linked to gaining more institutional resources from the government.

Second, the current competing higher education policy priorities have set constraints on institutional agencies in operating ISE. In China's case, universities are pulled in two directions: excellence-oriented versus aid-oriented, with different ISE goals and activities. The excellence-oriented Double First-Class Plan and aid-oriented BRI Higher Education Plan represents the two contrasting orientations of internationalization. Thus, universities of different levels and regions have different considerations and agencies in terms of their ISE goals and activities. Institutions taking an excellence-oriented approach tend to collaborate with top research universities and send students outwards while institutions taking an aid-oriented approach tend to collaborate with universities in developing countries and receive students from these universities. Most universities want to occupy a place in the well-funded Double First-Class plan through the exchange of scientists, scholars, and students with the best research universities. Some universities also hope to gain the government's trust through service to the country by recruiting international students from BRI countries. This divided approach, coupled with an instrumentalist value orientation, has limited institutional agency and so become detrimental to ISE development in the long run. Some top universities in China, such as Tsinghua University, are trying to integrate the two discourses in its ISE practices. It is proactively engaging with global universities through research collaboration and student exchange, as well as leading the Asian

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<sup>1</sup> Initiated in 2013, the BRI is China's transcontinental long-term policy and investment program that aims to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks.

<sup>2</sup> "Double-First Class" initiative aims to ultimately build a number of world class universities and disciplines by the end of 2050.

University Alliance to nurture the next generation of global and regional talents in Asia.

It is a long way for China's ISE to realize the goals of contributing to social justice, economic development, and the public good. This conclusion differs from previous studies that examined ISE from only within higher education (Gao & Liu, 2020; Li, 2015; Ma, 2017; Tian & Liu, 2021). Although there are some merits in benefiting regional economic trade and cultivating human resources for the low to middle-income countries, many other important dimensions of internationalization for society are currently not realized, as China's ISE has not supported most of the public good goals so far.

For ISE to integrate well with institutions and society, the conflicts and lack of coordination between policy priorities should be reconciled. ISE is a social field involving multiple actors, including the state, institutions, and the labour market. Situated within such a strong state, each actor has a priority that requires overall coordination.

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