

# Rethinking higher education in China as a common good

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**Abstract** Tendencies to marketization and privatization in higher education, along with other factors, have challenged the idea of higher education as a public good in many countries over the years. China has experienced this situation to some extent. During the last 20 years, this has triggered various discussions on higher education and public good(s) in China. Drawing on qualitative data from 24 semi-structured interviews in both government departments and universities, this study defines and explores public and common good(s) in relation to higher education in China. As the first empirical study on this theme in the country, it is argued that this study makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge with international relevance. This paper identifies the complex nature of higher education in China and proposes that it may be better described in relation to common good(s). Also, as a common good, higher education in China contributes to the (global) common good and generates (global) common goods in many aspects.

**Keywords** Public good(s) · Common good(s) · Higher education · Contributions · China

## Introduction

### The evolution of higher education in China

In many countries, higher education has long been considered as a public good, which is “a commodity or service provided without profit to all members of a society...” (Pearsall 1998, p. 1498). A public good features non-excludability and non-rivalry in its consumption (Samuelson 1954), producing a broad spectrum of positive externalities (mainly social and public benefits) and benefiting simultaneously the individuals and the whole society (Cheng 2006; Tilak 2008; Marginson 2018). Many scholars have recognized the “public nature” of higher education: creating knowledge, enhancing the life quality of people, and

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supplying innovations for industry (Yuan 2009; Su 2009; Marginson 2018). However, in recent years, the growth of marketization and privatization in education, resulting from declines in public expenditure in many countries, has tended to gloss over the long-cherished view of higher education as a public good and legitimized the sale and purchase of higher education. China, also, has experienced something like this.

In the era of planned economy (1949–1978), higher education was considered a pure public good in China. The government undertook all power in education, and higher education rigorously adhered to the unified requirements of the government to carry out talent cultivation, without charging any fees from students. It was a highly united kind of education system, with a high degree of integration of state and education (Xu 2004). At that time, higher education was practiced entirely for the national interest and was a national monopoly that played the role of a pure public good. However, in this situation, the funding for higher education was very limited, and for a long time China's higher education developed slowly (Mi and Li 2009).

In the 1990s, China began to build a socialist market economy, bringing profound changes to the social structure. The national concept and social logic underwent an adjustment process, from the national power dominating education to a focus on social needs and market factors. This altered what had been a two-tier structure containing only the government and the public, without any intervention from the market and social organizations (Wang 2007). Privately funded colleges began to recover and students gained the right to choose a college according to their purchasing power (although these colleges were still subject to many restrictions), indicating a partial trend of educational commodification. In addition, higher education has charged tuition fees since the 1990s, and the competition among students for the best university places becomes particularly fierce in recent years. Since China's accession to the WTO in 2001, the view that higher education has the property of a service commodity has been recognized by an increasing number of people (Wen 2008).

### **The difficulty of describing higher education in China**

It seems that in these years, Chinese scholars have encountered a dilemma about how to describe higher education, especially in the period of social transition marked by the development of market economy. Clearly, the previous attributes of higher education, those of a pure public good exclusively provided by the government, featuring non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption, have changed. Chinese scholars' views on this issue fall into three broad categories. First, higher education is a pure public good (Cheng 2006; Su 2009). Second, public higher education is a public good and private education is a private good (Yang 2007, 2009). Third, higher education is a quasi-public good, which has the attributes of both public and private goods (Wang 2007; Li and Guan 2009). Apart from this, though UNESCO (2015) has proposed to consider education as the global common good that serves as an alternative to the concept of public good(s) in 2015, few Chinese scholars investigate this new concept in higher education.

In recent years, the third perspective (i.e., higher education is a quasi-public good) has been the most prevalent idea about higher education in China. Scholars maintain that higher education has a distinctive “public” character or responsibility to society and contributes to public goods in various ways, while it also produces private benefits, such as academic certificates and individual professional skills (Yang and Zhang 2000). Many Chinese scholars consider that it may be most appropriate to describe higher education in China as a “quasi-

public good” which is positioned between a public good and a private good. As a quasi-public good, higher education charges tuition fees and brings about competition among students (meaning that it is more or less excludable and rivalrous), and it can be provided by both the government (public universities) and the market (private and for-profit educational institutions). Despite that, most Chinese scholars contend that for higher education in China, while it is reasonable to have a limited intervention of the market, the dominant form of regulation should be from the government (Lao 2002; Wang 2007).

Although existing Chinese literature provides certain insights into the description of higher education with regard to public good(s), the connection and interaction between higher education and public good(s) remains unclear. Also, few people explore whether the idea of (global) common good fits in with the Chinese context. This is partly due to the complex situation in China, and the vagueness of the relevant concepts in Chinese. Consequently, using a qualitative research method, this study aims to explore the perspectives of Chinese participants from government/agencies and universities, on higher education and public/common good(s). It is hoped that these perspectives will assist in defining and observing such goods in Chinese higher education. First, this paper offers a review of previous literature. Second, it presents the research method and procedures. Third, data drawn from the interviews are analyzed. Finally, there is a discussion in relation to the results and findings of the research.

## Review of previous research

### The theoretical concept of public/common good(s) in China

There is a wide array of Chinese translations for the concept of public good(s), including “*gong gong wu pin*,” “*gong gong chan pin*,” and “*gong yong pin*,” among which the most widely known one is “*gong gong wu pin*.” However, when introduced into the Chinese environment, this English-language concept faces a problem. All of the above-mentioned Chinese translations are misleading to some extent. These translations do not comprehensively summarize the meaning of public good(s), which has stimulated a number of discussions in China.

In general, over the past 30 years, Chinese scholars’ discussions about “public good(s)” have mainly focused on meanings, classifications, and externalities. In economic discussion, most Chinese scholars draw on Samuelson’s schema to demarcate (pure) public goods from private goods (Li 2002, 2009b). However, in the real life, goods with clear-cut public and private features are rare. Therefore, some scholars cite Buchanan (1965) and Barzel’s (1969) ideas, clustering goods into three categories, pure public goods, quasi-public goods/mixed goods, and private goods (Huang 2014; Zhou 2005). In addition, following ideas proposed by Buchanan (1965) and Ostrom (1990), other Chinese scholars assume a more detailed classification of goods, since quasi-public goods can be further divided into club goods and common-pool resources (Shen and Xie 2009).

The classifications described above are on the basis of the natural attributes of goods (i.e., excludability and rivalry). Some scholars disagree with such ideas and argue that items should be classified as public or private goods in relation to the method of supply. Zang and Qu (2002) refer to Marmolo’s (1999) constitutional theory of public goods, whereby the method of supply (public or private) determines the nature of goods. For instance, a free health emergency service is a pure public good in some cases. However, there is a congestion point

when an overwhelming number of people use this service. In this circumstance, free health emergency service is a quasi-public good (non-excludable while somewhat rivalrous). However, even in such “congested” situation, the government could still consciously adjust the (non-) excludability and (non-) rivalry of it, for example, the government could arrange more hospitals to provide free health emergency services for more people when needed and then such service may transform again into a pure public good, with non-excludability and non-rivalry. Therefore, it is impossible to have an objective criterion for the classification of goods, free from the influence of the outside world, delineating a strict and clear boundary between public goods and private goods (Tong 2013; Marginson 2018). Scholars holding this perspective believe that the supply of public goods is essentially a matter determined by participative public decision-making. Which goods are public goods, with compulsory public supply, is a matter that is politically determined. Such decision-making usually reflects social, cultural and ideological patterns (Zang and Qu 2002; Ma 2012).

In fact, in China, the meaning of “public goods” goes far beyond the idea of “goods” or “wealth.” It includes all mandatory collective activities, which are based on solely common interests, including “goods (services) of the common consumption” (Ma 2012, p. 6). In other words, public goods are goods for public benefit, which are produced on the basis of public demands, relying on public power and through consensus and cooperation (Zhang and Qi 2016). In this sense, to some extent, the meaning of public goods in China is related to common goods, which are shared by and beneficial for all, or most members of a certain community, and they could be generated by collective and shared participation in both public and political spheres (Locatelli 2016; Zhang 2015; Gao 2018).

More specific, UNESCO’s interpretation of common goods is that “irrespective of any public or private origin, these goods are characterized by a binding destination and necessary for the realization of the fundamental rights of all people,” and “goods of this kind are therefore inherently common in their ‘production’ as well as in their benefits,” which is “inherent to the relationships that exist among the members of a society tied together in a collective endeavor” (UNESCO 2015, p. 77).

Literally, this approach to common goods has a number of implications. First, the definition of a particular good steps away from the long-disputed topic of whether it is public or private. Second, the notion of common goods may complement the concept of public goods. A public good is open to free-riding, whereas a common good highlights the collective endeavor of all participants. However, few Chinese scholars investigate this concept or analyze the relationship between the two concepts of public and common.

### **Public good(s) in higher education in the Chinese context**

The history of studies on higher education and public good(s) falls into three stages. The first stage (1998–2002) is the period of emerging research on this topic. At this stage, scholars started to explore the public good of higher education (Ke 1999; Shi 2002). The second stage (2003–2008) is the period of development. Studies on the issue of higher education and public good(s) gradually increased, centering on issues of public good(s) and the profitability of higher education, public good(s), and marketization/industrialization of higher education (Lao 2002; Guo 2005). The third stage (2009–) is the period of continuation. Topics in this stage included the relationship between market, government, and education, the maintenance of the public good of private higher education, and so on (Li 2009a; Mi and Li 2009; Li and Xu 2010).

When defining the categories to which higher education belongs, the term “*zhun gong gong wu pin*” (a quasi-public good) is used commonly, but when describing the nature of education and higher education, the concept of “*gong yi xing*” or “*gong gong li yi*” is often used, which represents the long-lasting and intrinsic attributes of higher education and is often expressed as higher education’s contributions to *the public good*. Additionally, as for the outputs and contributions of higher education, the word “*gong yi wu pin*” (appearing as *public goods*, *public welfare*, and *public benefits* alternately in the English abstracts of existing Chinese literature, though these expressions may be problematic) is used with the greatest frequency. It is likely that Chinese scholars use these expressions (in relation to “*gong yi wu pin*”) interchangeably, without a clear differentiation. The meaning of these concepts could be generalized as beneficial products that are enjoyed by the majority of citizens (Guo 2005; Yang 2004). This differentiation in the Chinese context also indicates an important conceptual difference between the sense of “a” public good, or public “goods” in economics, and the more generalized idea of “the public good” (or common good, or public interest). The latter means the shared benefit at a societal level, which is more like a philosophical or political idea (Morrell 2009).

This seems ambiguous when describing higher education in China. First, higher education in China is not a pure public good, as it is selective and fee-charging. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that it belongs to the category of quasi-public goods. However, the overwhelmingly bulk of the literature, including policy documents, laws, and decrees, emphasizes higher education’s contributions to the public good by virtue of its positive externalities and non-profit nature. Also, higher education produces other public goods (e.g., knowledge). Does this mean that a quasi-public good could also contribute to the public good and generate other public goods, under political and cultural influence? Thus, it may be somewhat problematic when describing higher education in China with regard to public good(s).

### Common good(s) in education in the Chinese context

Being inspired by UNESCO’s (2015) report, a very small number of discussions on education and common good(s) in China emerged in the past 2 years, though none of them dealing with higher education. Some scholars suggest to consider China’s future educational reform under the framework of the global common good (Huang and Tang 2017; Gao 2018). They put forward limitations of describing education in relation to public good(s), because the concept of “public good” often puts private education in conflict with public education. However, with the diversification of educational needs, the commercialization of educational services cannot be ignored. There are an increasing number of private institutions obtaining legitimate profits by providing educational services, but policies and regulations based on the concept of public good have restricted their participation in education. As a result, common good(s) could be a more inclusive idea when describing education and is helpful to combine different types of educational resources. Most recently, Song and Rao (2018) propose that viewing education and knowledge as global common goods, which surpass short-term benefit, is conducive to promote learners to be global citizens who are equipped with global perspective and responsibility. However, Yi (2018) discusses this concept with prudence; he focuses this idea in moral education in elementary and secondary schools and asks people to strike a balance between global perspective and national identity, cultural diversity, and cultural uniqueness when adopting the idea of the global common good in China.

In summary, the previous research (here speaking mainly about Chinese studies) has explored concepts of public good(s), profitability and marketization of higher education, common good(s) and education, etc. This prior research lays a foundation for the present project. However, most of the prior research is theory-based, with less emphasis on empirical investigation. Also, the interpretation of the terms public good(s), public welfare, public interest, and other concepts in these studies are relatively vague, owing to the differences in languages and contexts. Further, discussions on common good(s), global public goods, and global common goods have been rather limited—though this has become an important aspect of higher education against the backdrop of internationalization and globalization. Last, concepts of “public” and “common” are intertwined with each other in the Chinese context in terms of higher education, but there is no investigation into this aspect. Therefore, we have formulated the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between government and higher education in China?
2. How does higher education in China relates to (global) public good(s)?
3. How does higher education in China relates to (global) common good(s)?

## Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative research framework, with semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a very flexible way of collecting data, providing interviewees with the opportunity for a genuine dialogue in which they discover their feelings about what they are doing and can explain why they are doing it (Layder 2013).

## Participants

Potential participants were invited by the researchers through email. Twenty-four Chinese people from government/agencies and universities participated in the research. They were divided into three groups according to their affiliated institutions and positions (see Table 1), to ensure coverage of all relevant groups of people who might have a good understanding of public good(s) in higher education in China. The study chose two universities in China, at two different levels, a top research university (S university) and a local university (N university), with participants from different disciplines. This study population matches that being used in other countries in which parallel research on higher education and public good(s) is being conducted, so enabling comparative analysis.

## Data collection

There were three different sets of interview questions for the above-listed three groups of participants in the study. For participants in Group 1 (government and agencies) and Group 2 (university leaders), the interview questions were almost the same, except question 1 and 8. There were 15 questions, as well as scope for follow-up angles, involving the relationship between government and higher education, concepts of (global) public goods, university activities relating to (global) public goods, higher education and (global) common goods, and so on. For participants who were academics in universities (Group 3), there were 14

**Table 1** Population of this study

Groups	Number	Notes
(1) Participants from government and agencies	3	Including participants from relevant government departments and agencies
(2) University leaders	S university = 4 N university = 5	Including (vice) president, directors, deans, etc.
(3) Academics	S university = 6 N university = 6	Including lectures and professors from engineering, economics, and history disciplines

general interview questions, with some of those questions centering on more specific issues such as university contributions, social mobility, and tuition fees.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese and each session lasted approximately 40 to 70 min, depending on the interest of the participants and the natural pace with which the interview moved. At the beginning of each interview, researchers provided background on the project and explained how the interview would proceed. Then, researchers asked the consent of the informants, before audio-recording of the interview commenced. During the interview process, researchers took brief notes in order to track the points raised by the interviewees. After the interview, the recorded data were transcribed into written form by the researchers.

### Data analysis

The interview data were coded by NVivo 11 under broad headings, such as “relations between government and higher education”, “social-educational culture” and “public goods in higher education.” Then, according to the research questions, researchers grouped these headings into different tables for analysis. The categories were later modified as researchers further engaged with the transcripts.

In the paragraphs that follow, participants in the interviews are referred to by different codes, for the purposes of both ensuring anonymity and facilitating tracing references from the data (see examples of codes for participants in Table 2).

### Ethical considerations

All interviews were confidential and anonymized. A consent form was sent to potential participants before the interview, and then signed by both the researcher and the participant. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and of the ways in which the data would be used. The consent form also clarified how anonymity and confidentiality would be protected throughout this project. All interviews were conducted on an opt-in basis.

**Table 2** Codes for different participants in interviews

Codes	Explanation
PGA1	The first participant from government and agencies.
PSL2	The second participant in S university, who is a university leader.
PNA5	The fifth participant in N university, who is an academic.

*P*, participants; *GA*, participants from government and agencies; *S*, S university (a top research university); *N*, N university (a local university); *L*, leaders in a university; *A*, academics in a university



## Results and findings

We report the results and findings in relation to the three research questions, from the perspectives of each group in succession: participants from government/agencies, and university leaders and academics.

### Perspectives of participants from government/agencies ( $N=3$ )

#### *Relations between government and higher education*

All three participants saw government as playing a dominant role in higher education, especially in strategic planning and the provision of funding. The governmental participants saw the role of government in higher education in largely positive terms. In addition, the government also monitors the quality of higher education, by establishing evaluation systems, with regular assessment of higher education quality.

PGA1: The government's role in education is obvious, it acts like a director in a broad way, it focuses on the development strategies and funding of universities. Of course, it has some policies for higher education. There is also a big plan for higher education development... and I guess this is also the government's responsibility... I think government plays a positive role.

Despite that, three participants noted that universities should also have autonomy in three areas: first, student recruitment; second, certain specific aspects of higher education (e.g., the provision of specializations and the teaching programs); and third, internal management (e.g., salary scheme, faculty promotion, and evaluation).

PGA3: I think universities need to be autonomous in various aspect, for example, in the area of talent cultivation... in the educational aspects... discipline construction, talent selection for enrollment, and curriculum arrangement, etc. The talent training model, should also have the universities' own philosophy, like what kind of people they hope to educate.....

Also, two of the interviewees emphasized that the autonomy is conditional, which means that the university cannot be separated from the society. The overall goal of running a university should be consistent with the country's goals.

PGA1: The autonomy of a university must conform to the country's social needs... under the country's macro-control. If it is completely autonomous, for example, in student recruiting, it brings inequity. The degree of autonomy of the university should be compatible with the stage of development of the society and also the ideas of the university administrators.

#### *Higher education and (global) public goods*

Two participants found these concepts to be somewhat elusive, but they believed that while higher education in China cannot be regarded as a pure public good, it has a public good aspect. Students needed to pay tuition fees, but the tuition fee was relatively low in China, and



it was not a completely profit-making system. The government was still the largest sponsor of higher education. China also encouraged universities to obtain funding from diversified sources, and one participant also mentioned that alumni donation was potentially very important, but this area was a shortcoming in the funding system of higher education in China, compared with Western countries. Recently, relevant government policies had encouraged alumni giving.

PGA2: Higher education is certainly not like compulsory education...you have to pay tuition fee... but the government still provides large amount of funding to higher education... but in fact, because government spending is limited, now we are also emphasizing diversified funding... but all of this, will not change the public nature of higher education...Our government has done something about alumni donation...for example, if you get 50 million RMB from your alumni, the government will provide you the same amount of money...

All three participants agreed that higher education contributed to public goods in many aspects. Two of them highlighted the talents cultivated by universities, and the outcomes of scientific research which solved challenging problems faced by mankind. They also noted the cultural influence of higher education.

PGA3: The talents we educated in higher education, I think they are the public goods, though we'd better not call people as goods...Because when they enter the society... they have their roles and the positive roles are always beneficial for our social development. Then, our research outputs, solving problems for us, making our lives more beautiful...

Also, after acknowledging that higher education may provide private goods ( $N=3$ ), all participants reaffirmed that the public nature of China's higher education would continue and these two types of goods could be developed together. In some cases, the accumulation of private goods may become public goods. Also, if there was a private investment in higher education, it did not mean higher education became a private good. In contrast, when higher education had achieved diversified funding sources, this was an indication of its development.

PGA2: Private goods and public goods...they can develop at the same time. Private goods are not completely opposed to public goods. I guess private goods are just like individuality while public goods like generality, so you see, if we have enough private goods, we may get some public goods...

PGA3: Multiple funding sources... in nature, is a fundamental guarantee of modern universities' development. I think that China will continue to strengthen this trend in the future... which doesn't mean they become private.

In terms of the global public good and global public goods, one participant put forward President Xi's idea of "a community of shared future for mankind" (*ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*), which thinks highly of the benefits for all. Higher education contributed to global good(s) in various aspects, for instance, it can educate global citizens with international perspectives who will play a role in the world.

PGA3: Speaking of talent cultivation... you are cultivating talents who will be internationally-oriented, not only focusing on a region, but having a global perspective and vision, they will enter the international world and then serve the world.

### *Higher education and (global) common goods*

Two participants believed that “common goods” could represent goods that were beneficial to all people. However, there was a boundary for such benefits. That is, who should benefit from these goods and how many people should enjoy the benefits? For example, the core values with Chinese characteristics promoted by Chinese universities might be applicable largely to Chinese people. By contrast, the research spirit and scientific literacy cultivated by universities were applicable to people all over the world. Participants in the study believed that research outputs, good values, and knowledge were included in such goods.

PGA2: Yes, our higher education contributes to such goods, we are talking about our core values... equality, unity and dedication are all included in the core values. Higher education will certainly contribute to the formation and optimization of such values, but these values may be more suitable for China’s national conditions. In addition to this, higher education, it also educates the spirit of science and I guess it is applicable for all...

One participant also argued that higher education in China was a common good because it attached great importance to serving the public. In this sense, regardless of the funding resources, higher education’s purpose was to benefit the society.

PGA3: Our fundamental direction of China’s higher education is to serve the people, serve the society, and make efforts for China’s modernization. From this point of view, no matter who invests or trains talent, the final product is such a goal to serve the society. I think this is a common good. What higher education cultivate is to serve the society, not to nurture the development of a family, an enterprise, or an interest group...

With respect to global common goods, two participants considered that these goods were similar to global public goods and it was hard to differentiate the two concepts in the Chinese context.

### **Perspectives of university leaders ( $N=9$ )**

#### *Relations between government and higher education*

All university leaders in the study ( $N=9$ ) agreed that in China’s higher education system, the state and the government played a leading role, since national or local financial allocations were the main source of funding for public universities. This determined the basic characteristics of public universities in China, that is, serving the country and the society. Though universities had their own positioning and development strategies, these strategies had to be closely integrated with state-designated educational programs.

PSL3: In China, the main body of higher education is... public universities which are mainly supported by the government... the government has played a dominant role in higher education. China has a powerful government... there will be a general education plan, and then the university's plan must be in accordance to and responsive to this plan.

Specifically, in terms of what the government should do in a higher education system, some participants pointed out that, first, as the guider of the higher education, the government generated top-level design and planning for universities ( $N=6$ ). Second, the government provided financial support for universities ( $N=6$ ); third, the government offered policy guidelines to universities ( $N=2$ ).

PNL1: I guess the government's first function is to have a macro control... the second is to give an overall plan for higher education in response to the national strategy... it should serve as a director... also, about the financial support, in fact, it is the government's funding.

Therefore, when asked in what areas a university should be autonomous, participants assumed that first, the level and fields of talent cultivation ( $N=4$ ); second, research directions and contents ( $N=3$ ); third, the right to classify academic disciplines and degree programs ( $N=2$ ); and fourth, the right to plan the talent cultivation model, including curriculum design ( $N=2$ ).

PNL1: ... the classification of disciplines, this right should be given to the university. Then, the talent training programs... the formulation of talent training programs, the specific teaching arrangement, the planning of scientific research and things like this.

### *Higher education and (global) public goods*

Three participants considered that the notion of “public” highlighted the public nature of universities, which meant university education was not just for individual students, but for the benefit of the public overall. More specifically, the scope of the concept of “public” could include both local and global public good(s). The so-called local public goods and the local public good are related to one country and people, whereas global public goods and the global public good are for all people worldwide. Participants ( $N=3$ ) considered the concept of the global public good to be very closely related to what President Xi described as “a community of shared future for mankind” (*ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*), which extends beyond the nation and the region. Such good is meant for the sake of mankind and the earth as a whole.

PSL3: The coverage of the word “public” ... emphasizes the public use or sharing, not only for individuals, but also for the benefit of all people... the so-called local public good is related to the country, to the city.....There are also some goods, the so-called global goods, they are for all people.

PNL3: I think what President Xi has talked about is very similar to this idea... a community of shared future for mankind (*ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*) ... I guess it is

the idea of the global public good... It represents the development of humans. In fact, we must take into account the ecological and environmental things.

With regard to higher education and public goods, Chinese university leaders ( $N=9$ ) consistently saw higher education as belonging to the public service sector, thereby placing emphasis on its public characteristics. In light of this, the most important public goods in higher education were new knowledge discoveries and the tools of knowledge dissemination (e.g., courses, textbooks and theses).

PSL3: China has always regarded education as a public service sector, so it emphasizes its public benefits... our most important non-profit products, are the new discoveries of knowledge and tools of knowledge dissemination, such as curriculum, textbooks, papers, these are completely non-profit things... they can be shared once they come out...

Higher education's contributions to public goods were observed in several areas. First, higher education cultivated talents ( $N=3$ ). Next, higher education provided knowledge and scientific and technological innovations ( $N=5$ ); third, higher education assisted the transmission of culture and preserved traditions ( $N=3$ ); and fourth, higher education provided meaningful policy suggestions for the country ( $N=2$ ).

PNL1: The cultural inheritance and innovation, such a function mainly depends on the university... the second aspect is to provide policy suggestions, especially for some disciplines of humanities and social science. As a relatively neutral institution, university may provide neutral suggestions too; third, in terms of natural sciences, universities create advanced scientific research to society...

### *Higher education and (global) common goods*

All participants agreed that higher education contributed to common goods, but their understandings of this concept slightly varied. One participant made the interesting point that the market and the government may be ineffective for generating and providing common goods. These goods were collective property, and the people who made up this collective group belonged to a community with common interest. Also, higher education itself was a kind of common good.

PNL1: As for common goods, both the market and the government may be ineffective, if we consider a university as a common good, it is just common to people in it or to other relevant stakeholders, these people form a community with common interest...

PNL3: Higher education itself is a common good, you put the teaching resources, including laboratories, for many students to participate in the use, and they continue to deepen the process of a project.

In addition, by exerting its functions, higher education created and maintained the most basic things in human society, such as morality and values, and at the same time, it promoted harmony, civilization, and the progress of mankind. In this sense, the service provided by higher education was also global common goods.

PSL2: higher education helps to contribute common goods... It creates and maintains the basic things in human society, and promotes harmony, civilization and progress of mankind as a whole... higher education may not pose direct impact on these aspects, it creates and improves these things by exerting its functions.

### **Perspectives of university academics ( $N=12$ )**

As noted, the interview questions for university academics were more specific, relating to their universities and disciplines, and with emphasis on their own working experiences.

#### *Relations between government and higher education*

The questions for academics were less concerned with relations between government and higher education, focusing more on country, society, and higher education. Many participants ( $N=7$ ) agreed that Chinese universities had a public nature, to a large extent served the country's needs, and promoted social and economic development. Also, top research universities took responsibility for serving the whole country, while local universities often attached more importance to strengthen the local economy.

PSA5: The university is... necessary to serve the development and progress of our country and the society... our university is just a local institution. Compared with other universities, we should base ourselves on serving the local economy or our city, then we will contribute to the economic development in our province, and then may be the whole country.

#### *Higher education and (global) public goods*

For most academics in the interviews ( $N=9$ ), with respect to the current situation in China, higher education was seen as neither a pure public good nor a private good, but as a quasi-public good, because China's higher education was mainly funded by the government and catered for the needs of the public, though it charged tuition fees and involved selection. For most people, higher education in China was more like social welfare, but it was not a pure public good:

PSA5: Higher education would not be a public good. It has public nature... because the most and the best universities in China are public universities. Our tuition fees are very low... in principle, I don't agree that higher education is a private good... I think higher education must insist on its public nature...

The interview participants ( $N=9$ ) agreed that charging tuition fees was defensible in China, since higher education had costs. Also, China's national conditions meant that it was unrealistic to provide free higher education. As for selection, three participants considered that universities could not recruit the right person without selection and a non-selective higher education system might result in a waste of public resources. Four of the participants believed that higher education should protect its public nature, taking into account disadvantaged

groups, promoting the sound operation of society, and enhancing social fairness and equity. This point was reflected in higher education's contribution to social mobility. Most interviewees ( $N = 7$ ) considered that the facilitation of social mobility in universities was noteworthy. Two academics gave their personal experience as examples.

PNA6: Higher education contributes to social mobility. If a student is going to have higher education from the western part to the more developed eastern part of the country, and then stays in a more developed city, does this mean that he flows to the upper stream in social mobility? Of course, this may be what we call that knowledge changes destiny.

### *Higher education and (global) common goods*

The questions for academics triggered little additional information for this theme, when compared with theme of higher education and (global) public goods.

## **Discussion**

The objective of this research is to establish a generic framework for defining and observing public/common goods in higher education in China. The findings of this study show that the vast majority of participants assumed that government was still at the helm of higher education in China. The market might be marginalized in the higher education supply system. Participants considered that public good(s) were closely related to government funding, featuring non-profit, non-excludability, and non-rivalry, whereas common good(s) might be confined to a certain group. Given the current situation, higher education in China tended towards a quasi-public good, as it was fee-charging and selective, but it contributed to the (global) public/common good in many aspects and embraced responsibility for enhancing human well-being and life quality. People also agreed that the public nature of higher education should be maintained in China. Hence, some people suggested that higher education in China might be better described in relation to common good(s), as it was deeply affected by collective culture and government policies. However, participants in this study found it difficult to differentiate global public goods and global common goods.

### **The complex nature of higher education in China**

Our results summarize the government's roles in higher education as including planning, guiding, guaranteeing, and monitoring/regulating the higher education system. As the primary funder of higher education, government provided top-level design and the general arrangement for higher education. It created national development strategies and policies concerning higher education; it provided a large amount of funding for the operation of higher education, with special projects in certain universities; it also monitored and regulated the quality and operation of the whole educational system, with specific evaluation every year. Given the complex situation in China (e.g., the unbalanced development between Eastern and Western parts of the country; the diversified student groups), in relation to higher education, government needs to take into account equity, efficiency, reform, development, and stability. These areas also define the priorities in different stages of development in China's higher education.

Though China now encourages social/private investment, as a supplement for educational funding, this kind of investment, like private education, still took a backseat in the higher education system. This agrees with the findings of Lao (2002) and Wang (2007) that the government dominates the higher education system in many aspects, with less intervention of market forces. This model is also a combination of Marginson's (2018, p. 331) Quadrant 2 (social democracy) and Quadrant 3 (state quasi-market). Higher education in China is shaped, controlled, and largely financed by the government; while at the same time, it can be partially provided by the private sector, and the market logic has a legal presence in the field of higher education. The development and improvement of higher education in China need diversified financial sources. This is also one of the characteristics of modern universities. This confirms Mi and Li's (2009) idea that multiple funding sources would become one of the directions for higher education reform in China.

The results from this study suggest that higher education in China is not a pure public good, but its public nature will not change, which means that higher education continues to serve the public good and produces public goods. This is consistent with many Chinese scholars' studies and reaffirms the public role of higher education in China (Yuan 2009; Su 2009). Also, this long-cherished public nature of higher education is guaranteed by relevant policies, for example, *Article 24 of the Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, which clearly states that the establishment of higher education institutions should be in line with national and social public interests (the Ministry of Education 1998). Our results show that the private goods (benefits that are confined to individual students/graduates) and public goods of higher education can grow together. This finding may eliminate the concern of some scholars that higher education has narrowed its purpose to the enhancement of individual earnings and employability (Lao 2003; Li 2010).

Our research gives a definition for the public good (*gong yi xing*) of higher education; that is, higher education is not just for individuals but also for the benefit of the overall public. This is a long-lasting and intrinsic attribute of higher education. There is also a need to differentiate between the local and global public good. The so-called local public good is related to one country and people of that country, whereas the global public good is for all people worldwide. This concept is more generalized when compared with specific public goods. Public goods (*gong yi wu pin*) refer to more specific products and activities that are carried on a non-profit basis, which serve the country and the society, for example, research outputs. As for global public goods, they are benefits for people throughout the world. Knowledge, culture, global awareness, and global mobility are global public goods. This finding chimes well with some Western scholars' ideas (Kaul et al. 1999).

### Higher education in China as a common good

In light of our findings, it is obvious that in China, the origin of higher education is not a focal point in discussion since the educational community is largely government-led and regulated by national laws. However, its roles and contributions to people, society, and the whole nation are given wide attention. Also, in view of the above analysis, apart from its intrinsic attributes (contributing to the public good), culturally, higher education is understood as a collective endeavor; politically, it is common to all people. In this sense, describing higher education in China in terms of common good(s) may be less vague and more comprehensible.

Common goods or the common good may be confined to a given group/community, which is socially embedded. Their creation and production are processes of collective participation.



People who participate in these processes can benefit from them and these participants form a community with common interest. This idea reinforces the idea of education as the common good as expressed by UNESCO: education is a dynamic process which requires shared participation (UNESCO 2015). In light of this, global common goods or the global common good is related to all people worldwide. Though participants in our study take President Xi's "a community of shared future for mankind" (*ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*) as similar as the global public good, we believe it is more related to the global common good, since this Chinese concept implies that all humans live in the same planet and they shoulder the same responsibility to make their lives better. In other words, it emphasizes that individuals in the global society belong to the same community of interest, underlining the growing interdependence and convergence between countries and regions. Everyone has unshakable responsibility for making a better world and the care of the earth, which falls in line with the ideas of *intrinsic value* and *shared participation* in the common good (Hollenbach 2002; Deneulin and Townsend 2007; UNESCO 2015; Zhang 2015).

Higher education's contributions to the (global) public/common good or (global) public/common goods can be observed in four areas: (1) talents (with global perspectives), who will serve the development of the local area, the country, and even the world; (2) research outputs, which solve challenging problems and improve human well-being; (3) public services, which include outreach/public engagement activities and policy suggestions; and (4) cultural inheritance and innovation, which spread precious culture and tradition from generation to generation internationally. Most importantly, higher education in China contributes significantly to social mobility, which coincides with UNESCO's interpretation of education's distinctive contribution to the global common good.

In general, higher education is beneficial for all and encourages tolerance, equity, understanding, inclusion, and so on. For example, in the "Belt and Road" initiative, there is a humanistic exchange mechanism that prioritizes the relationship among countries. The main bearer of this mechanism is higher education, which strives to propel mutually cultural understanding among young people. As a result, this initiative is a global common good, because the participants (individuals and countries) gain mutual understanding and benefits. Undoubtedly, this trend will continue and step up to a higher level, which implies a positive change in the role of higher education, due to its increasing power and influence. The country needs higher education, and higher education also has the ability to serve the country.

## Conclusion

In summary, this project indicates the dominant role of government in China's higher education, confirms higher education's contributions to both (global) public goods and (global) common goods, and proposes that the concept of "the global common good" is similar to the Chinese concept of "a community of shared future for mankind" (*ren lei ming yun gong tong ti*).

Higher education in China is not a pure public good, but it contributes to the public good and public goods, under political and cultural influences. It is a collective endeavor and also common to all people. Given that China's higher education is neither a pure public good nor a pure private good, describing it as a common good may be more reasonable. If higher education should be seen as a (global) common good, universities need to cooperate extensively with an open mind, breaking down the barriers erected by the protection of self-interest and constructing a community with a shared future.

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