EDUCATION AND SOCIETY IN CHINA

Student Learning and Development in Chinese Higher Education

College Students' Experience in China

Yuhao Cen

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Student Learning and Development in Chinese Higher Education

This book provides an essential source for higher education teachers and student affair professionals in China and around the globe who seek to deepen their understanding of Chinese undergraduate students they work with so as to promote their learning and development. Drawn from interview data with 64 college students in five colleges along with survey data of more than 23,000 students from 21 institutions in mainland China, this book examines student learning and college experiences from the students' own perspectives.

Researchers with a focus on Chinese higher education have reported on large-scale student surveys that have sprouted in recent years. While these surveys facilitate national and international comparison, uphold academic rigor, and shift institutional attention toward student learning, this book will investigate the same important topic but with a different approach that seeks to understand college student life as told by themselves.

- Beyond Subject Matters: What Have I Learned in College?
- Student Learning and Development in Curricular Programs
- Student Learning and Development in Co-Curricular and Extracurricular Activities
- Student Learning and Development at Work, at Play, and in Relationships

Yuhao Cen is Assistant Professor and Assistant Dean at the Graduate School of Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

Education and Society in China
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China's economic rise has been breathtaking and unprecedented. Yet educational opportunities remain highly unequal. China has the essential ingredients to build a great system of education, but educational governance needs an overhaul if China is to realize its goal of dramatically boosting its technological output to world-class levels. As more work by established Chinese and overseas scholars becomes accessible in English to the larger global community, myths will be removed and replaced by more accurate and sophisticated analyses of China's fascinatingly complex educational transformation. This series will provide highly analytical examinations of key issues in China's education system.

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Xie Ailei

Student Learning and Development in Chinese Higher Education: College Students' Experience in China
Yuhao Cen

In memory of Dr. Heidi Ross

and

for Aiying Yu and Harriet Kulis.

Acknowledgments

Searching for answers to research questions has been more than an academic pursuit of knowledge. It has been a journey of personal growth. Along the journey, I asked myself what I had gained in college and graduate school, how I obtained and constructed knowledge, who I was and wanted to be, and how I related to other people in my life. This self-reflection was implicit and unintentional at the beginning, and it grew explicit and deliberate in the process. I came to realize that the research questions raised in this study and the constructed theoretical model were equally relevant to me, the investigator. This was the charm of doing research on college student development in a context of which I was a part, as theories, evidence, and conceptualization enabled me to see, to understand, and to reflect on my own learning and development.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my advisors, mentors, and colleagues who have inspired, challenged, and nourished me on the journey. I wish to thank the research participants for opening their minds and entrusting their stories to me. This book project would have been impossible without the sponsorship from the Humanities and Social Sciences Foundation, Ministry of Education (13YJC880002), and I acknowledge that the conclusions in this book are solely my own.

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1 Introduction

The outcomes for individuals enrolling in higher education institutions have long been of interest to educational philosophers, researchers, and policy-makers. General philosophical inquiry into the purposes of higher education and a more specific question in the field of college student development that explores "toward what ends should student development in college be directed" emphasize the axiological dimensions of higher education. Responses to these questions are embedded in value- and assumption-laden contexts that shape expectations and outcomes of higher education systems and of individuals in those systems (Nussbaum, 1997; Parker, Widick & Knefelkamp, 1978; Strange, 1999). U.S.-based research in labor economics on returns to the higher education sector (Ashenfelter & Krueger, 1994; Kane & Rouse, 1995; Moretti, 2004) and outcome research on the benefits of individual college goers (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) are long-standing and voluminous. Short-term outcomes for individuals, such as college persistence and learning, and those outcomes that occur much later in life, such as civic or workforce participation, have been related to the developmental processes and college experiences of college goers. In addition to feeding purely academic interests, outcome research has the potential to justify public funding and individual investment in higher education. Educators, parents, and other stakeholders desire to know in what ways and to what extent college students have changed as a result of college attendance. Accompanying the massification of post-secondary education systems is a rising number of student learning outcomes studies on the state, national, and global policy agenda of higher education (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2005; Australian Department of Education Science and Training, 2004a, 2004b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008; Zis, Boeke & Ewell, 2010).

Like its counterparts worldwide, the higher education sector in China endeavors to improve quality as its quantity goals in college enrollment are being reached. During the past decade, Chinese higher education has undergone an unprecedented reform and expansion, with an upsurge in college enrollment, diversification of institutions, and devolution of higher education finance. As the state's role in the global labor market and academic

research arenas expands and the higher education landscape evolves from elite education toward massification (Min, 2004; Trow, 1973), the missions of universities have diverged and broadened dramatically from the core educational purposes advocated by earlier generations of leaders such as von Humboldt (1810), Newman (1889), and Cai Yuan-pei (see Gao, 1987). These changes are likewise reflected in increasingly diverse societal and individual expectations of college attendance.

What student outcomes are expected from college education in contemporary China? How are these outcomes fostered or inhibited through college experiences? What is the status of college outcome research in China? Bearing these questions in mind, I did a research tour in 2008 and visited universities of various missions, tiers, and geographical locations in China. Review of literature and policy documents, conversations with educational scholars, and interviews with college students revealed several findings that later shaped my research questions. First of all, students conceived the concept of individual outcomes from college in much broader terms than degree attainment or job placement. Knowledge, competencies, and self-understanding are among the expected learning outcomes of college. Second, student interviewees demonstrated a strong ability to connect college experiences with personal outcomes, that is, to reflect on the "take" from engaged moments in college experiences and the "loss" from other moments, as well as on how the "take" was internalized and helped blaze a trail for personal growth. The interview process to some extent served as a developmental intervention through which the participants could examine, articulate, and reflect upon their college growth both as product and as process, and such "reflection contributes to development" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). Lastly, student outcome research in China has been limited in investigative scope, theoretical foundation, and research methodologies. For example, Yang's dissertation (2003) gives a historical analysis of state policies on goals of undergraduate education, and Shen (2008) evaluates student outcomes as part of student assessment at a single institution. Student learning outcomes perceived from the student perspective, processes that foster or inhibit these outcomes, and implications for quality undergraduate education have been largely left unexplored; meanwhile, the administrators and practitioners with whom I spoke expressed their concerns about the lack of empirical research and theories for Chinese college students.

These preliminary findings from the field, on the one hand, narrowed my research topic to student learning and development in Chinese colleges, and, on the other hand, they broadened my thoughts about situating this study in the national and international contexts. Two research questions were raised as a result:

1. In what domains, and to what extent, are learning outcomes attained as reported by college students in China?
2. How do students learn and develop in various contexts in college?

The purpose of this investigation was to describe and understand student learning and development as perceived by students in Chinese colleges and universities. The "what" question sought to *describe*, that is, to provide a detailed account of and classify learning outcomes as perceived by college students. The "how" question aimed at *understanding*. Different from the explanations offered by the researcher from the "outside," understanding was based on an "insider's" view of students conceptualizing and making sense of their own growth in college, and I attempted to obtain student perspectives through interview conversations.

This study's relevance and significance lies at the crossroads where rising quality concerns in Chinese undergraduate education encounter, are influenced by, and inform growing attention to undergraduate student learning outcomes worldwide. This chapter's first two sections provide a description of the contexts of both Chinese undergraduate education and global interest in student learning outcomes. Then, I will introduce the concept of student engagement, and the National Survey of Student Engagement in both the United States and China. Self-authorship, a holistic perspective on student development, is introduced later. The conceptualizations of student engagement and self-authorship serve as the theoretical lens for under-standing college student experiences in China. The last section of this chapter presents the mixed methods research design, in which survey data were collected from 21 institutions in 2009 and interview data were collected from five universities in 2010. Chapter 2 presents a taxonomy of learning outcomes in four domains: knowledge, skills, intrapersonal awareness, and interpersonal competence. Chapters 3–5 share findings on student learning and development in six sub-contexts of college life: curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular settings, at work, in recreation, and in relationships. The book concludes in Chapter 6 with a pyramid model of student growth and discussion of its implication for Chinese higher education.

Chinese Higher Education: From Quantity to Quality

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the expansion of higher education in China. The enrollment of undergraduate students skyrocketed from 5 million in 2000 to over 25 million in 2014 in 2,529 regular higher education institutions (HEIs) (Figure 1.1).[1] These numbers still underrepresent the total undergraduate population, as the undergraduate enrollment in adult HEIs in 2014, for example, was 6.5 million. The growth exceeded the state ambition of 25% gross enrollment rate in tertiary education by 2010 (The State Council, 2007). In 2010, the gross enrollment rate of the entire sector of tertiary education reached 26.5%, and the figure rose to 37.5% in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2012, 2015).[2]

Rapid expansion in China's college population has not been accompanied by proportionate increases in resources. The increase in state appropriations for higher education has not kept up with the growing costs in the entire

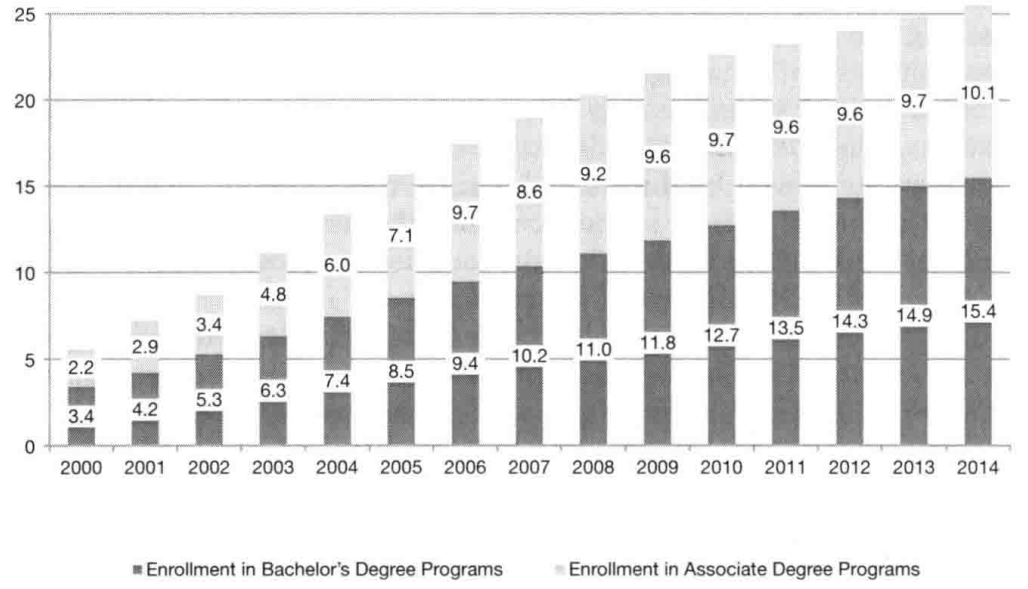

Figure 1.1 Undergraduate enrollment in regular HEIs, 2000–2014 (million)

sector. Institutions have been encouraged to generate income and seek external funding on their own. Tuition and fees, as a primary source of institutional revenue, were increasingly borne by students and their families, but have leveled off since 2009 (Figure 1.2). Meanwhile, the student-teacher ratio, one possible proxy for the level of personal attention a student receives

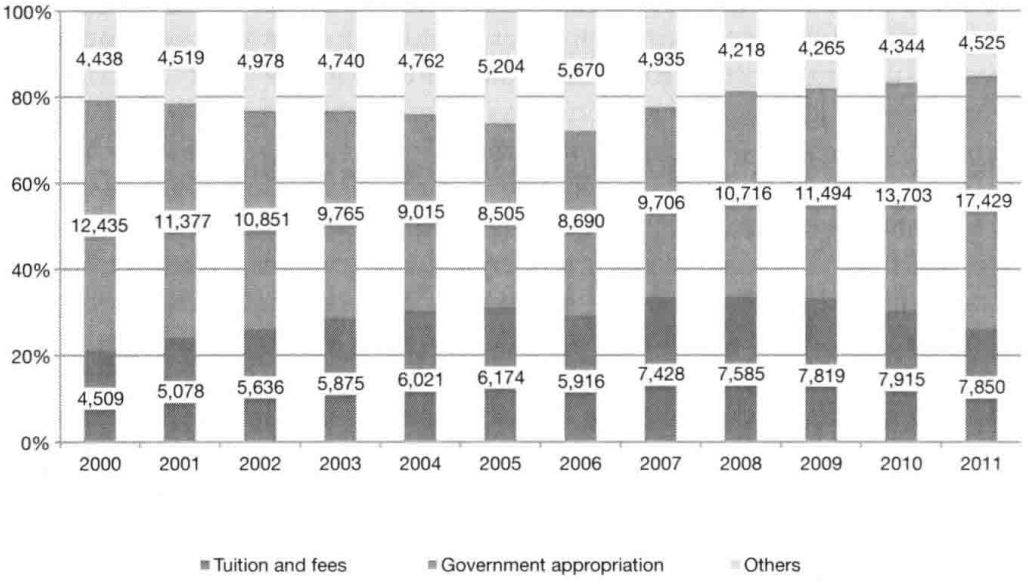

Figure 1.2 Share of educational revenues per student in regular HEIs, 2000–2011 in constant 2011 RMB yuan

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