**There’s more than one way of looking at it:**

**States, political cultures and higher education**

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1. **Methodological note: On comparative method**

We are accustomed to thinking of the nation as our heartland and to look out from the nation onto the rest of world. We are on the ‘inside’, the international context is the ‘outside’, and the endogenous or inside elements take primacy over the exogenous ones. This implies that national societies are, as Chernilo puts it, ‘autonomous units ruled by their own dynamics’. So we hold national politicians responsible for the so-called ‘national economy’. Higher education studies mostly embodies this methodological nationalism, constrained as it is to the service of national policy agendas. For politics remains largely nation-bound. And especially since world war two, the social sciences have mostly embodied and furthered a national approach to ‘society’. But this is doubly problematic. On one hand it is a retreat from classical social science’s claim to a common universalism, from which we continue to draw many of our best ideas: Marx, Weber, Durkheim, the English political economists, French social theory and the rest. On the other, it is a failure of the imagination, a failure to get to grips with the world we actually inhabit.

Human society does not stop at national borders. There are local communities and national society. There are also regional societies and world society. The nation is not sufficient in itself and exists only as part of a larger environment. The global environment is a relational environment, an organic interdependent system of people and things. We can only understand the nation, and higher education, when we also understand global relationships, and the nature and position of all nations within those relationships. This does not mean we abandon the nation, or national identity and preference. It means that we understand the nation is not the whole of life. And that there are issues that affect all nations together.

At the same time, the route to an understanding of what the sector has in common lies in appreciating differences, some of which are national in nature. A comparative inquiry into higher education can enable us to identify and more deeply explore generic elements.

1. **Higher education and the nation**

To understand higher education it is necessary to investigate relations between the state, society and university. And despite their globalized character and various traditions of autonomy and academic freedom, mainstream HEIs are above all creatures of society building and nation-building by states. The role of the university in nation-building, and in Europe in Europeanization, is central to its modern evolution. Though, as I will discuss, state/ society/ university relations vary across the world, as do conceptions and practices of ‘higher education’, ‘society’, ‘state’, ‘good government’, and also public’ and ‘private’.

The rise of the modern centralized nation-state in the nineteenth century, notably in Prussia, England and Japan, coincided with heightened global awareness, comparison and competition. And this has increased as post-1990 cultural globalization has taken hold.

1. **Three major developments, all global**

Consider the three major changes of the last decade. All are transformative, and all are global in character: the organization of a single worldwide research university sector on the basis of global ranking, which is largely global ranking of research science; Mass Open Online Courseware, MOOCs; and the spread of scientific capacity across the world, and especially the rise of East Asia to a front-rank position in higher education and science.

1. **New potentials and limits of the nation-state**

The strongest research HEIs have the most organizational agency and most scope for global engagement and partial disembedding in relation to the nation-state. Yet the state remains central. Research universities in all countries are semi-independent institutions tied to the state. In East Asia, Russia and Latin America the leading universities are publicly positioned as autonomous arms of government. Even in the USA, where higher education has long been defined as a market, federal programs and regulation crucially shape that ‘market’, for example in relation to student loans, research funding, intellectual property, for-profits. In their global strategies, American universities mostly harmonize with state policy. They are not state directed but they are very patriotic.

The state management of HEIs varies in intensity and extensiveness and in this period it is not always made explicit. Increasingly, contemporary states achieve policy objectives not through direct provision but through the arms-length steering of actors in semi-government instrumentalities, universities, NGOs and the private sphere, using codes, financial incentives and prohibitions, and models of higher education as a market of competing autonomous producers. In many nations the government share of HEIs’ income is falling, a trend exacerbated in the post-2008 recession. Nevertheless, in the neo-liberal era states have not reduced their hold on higher education. Nor has the broader public withdrawn. State interest in the sector is enhanced by globalization, the economics of innovation, and growth in participation with its promised benefits to the middle classes.

HEIs do not cease to be national but they take their national role outwards. ‘Global competition states’, in the famous expression of Cerny (2007) model the nation-building role of HEIs in terms of national economy and prosperity. HEIs are expected to advance the global competitiveness of the nation by preparing and attracting knowledge-intensive labour, and fostering innovation. And more and more states are pursuing cross-border engagement to further their inner goals.

In all countries higher education is politicized and an object of economic and societal expectations. In many countries it is subject to extensive public debate. It is not the exclusive province of producer HEIs, student self-investors/consumers, and the employers of graduate labour as human capital, as the market model implies. It is a common political property, though popular awareness rarely turns into effective grass-roots engagement. Not only is the state central to HE, in many countries the larger public is in there too. It is certainly the case in Australia.

1. **But there are states, and there are states**

But there are states and there are states. And the relationship between higher education and the state varies by country. So far I have generalized about the state and higher education, but this is a false universal, unless we also acknowledge the important differences.

1. **Hypothesis 1: States and HE systems vary according to**

This is a central aspect of my current research program – to explore what is common and what is different in higher education systems and in their relations with states, and hence also what is different in states. I have developed two broad hypotheses with which to explore these questions.

My first hypothesis is that the relationship between HEIs and the state varies by type of HEI and also by three master elements: the prevailing state formation, the associated political culture, and the educational culture. These ‘master elements’, especially the character of the state, determine a range of other aspects such as the forms and customs of university autonomy.

1. **Hypothesis 2: States and HE systems vary on a regional basis**

My second hypothesis is about regional variation. This is something I have drawn out of the last five years of work on higher education in East Asia and Singapore, and out of the comparison between Sinic systems and English-speaking systems. Notions of the role of government and of universities vary considerably between different traditions of higher education. Within the global setting we can identify distinctive *meta-national regional* approaches to higher education, deriving from differing ideas of the social character of HEIs, the scope and responsibilities of government and family, and relations between family, state, professions, employers and HEIs. These regional variations are shaped by differences in the role of the state, and in political and educational cultures.

In English-speaking countries there are North American and Westminster systems. The role of national government is felt more directly in the UK, Australia and New Zealand than in the United States and Canada. Europe has sub-regional traditions like the Nordic, Germanic and Francophone. There is Russian higher education, Latin American, the Post-Confucian systems in East Asia and Singapore, South Asia, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Balkan Europe, the Carribean.

Of course within the broad scale variations between the differing regional/ national/cultural traditions there are differences within national systems in the activities of individual HEIs. Private and public goods in higher education and research have a local dimension, a national dimension, in some locations a regional dimension. I focus in this paper on regional and global patterning, but this is cross-crossed and partly fragmented by more local patterning, disciplinary differences, and so on.

1. **Three kinds of state/higher education system**

Contrast the English-speaking systems and Post-Confucian systems. In the Anglo-American world, where the British colonial legacy is strong, and in pockets of Western Europe, Adam Smith’s limited liberal state prevails. It has typical separations between government-market and government-civil society. Normative individualism problematizes ‘collective’ and ‘public’. The state’s right to intervene is habitually questioned. Typically the domain of civil society is larger than in East Asia. State agendas are pursued in the language of deregulation. At the same time, state subsidies are often used to buy the participation of poor families in tertiary education. Tensions on the state/non-state border dominate politics. The correspondingly question of university autonomy as negative freedom – freedom from constraint by the state - dominates the politics of higher education.

The comprehensive and centralizing Sinic state followed a different path to the Roman state, the absolutist European states, the limited liberal state of Locke and Adam Smith, and the French revolution. The state in the Chinese tradition is in direct lineage from the Qin and Han dynasties in the third century BC. The entombed warriors in Xi’an, or Chang’an as it was, embody more than the vanity of a dominant ruler and his desire to live beyond death. They mark the moment of birth of the East Asian state and the first ancestor of all modern states. And it was the proto-type of the comprehensive state. The Qin and the Han standardized weights and measures, written language and the protocols of professions and villages. They overshadowed the merchants and the towns. In the Sinic world, still, government and politics are typically determining in relation to economy, civil society and the professions. Notions of social responsibility are more holistic than in English-speaking systems, and notions of the individual are inclusive, taking in the social Other.

Whether in single-party or multi-party polities, East Asians mostly accept the comprehensive state as the supervisor of society and social conduct. There is less anti-statism than in English-speaking world. Though there is criticism of particular states, dissidents rarely rail against the legitimacy of state action as such. They call on the state to discharge its responsibilities in a proper manner, to behave as a state should behave. China has changed since economic liberalization in 1978. The extra-state sphere is expanding. But the role and standing of the state in East Asia and Singapore remains qualitatively different to Western states.

Sinic states have long-term historical agendas—whether the polity is single-party or multi-party, there is continuity in the bureaucracy—and apply central intervention selectively to achieve specific purposes. And in all Post-Confucian societies, except Hong Kong, government as a vocation has higher standing than in the UK or USA. Many of the best and brightest graduates head for state office, not the professions or business. And Sinic universities, especially the leading national universities, are openly part of the state. Though there can be considerable scope behind closed university doors, for example in China, for independent scholarship, debate and criticism of state practices.

East Asian societies are moulded by the universal desire for education that extend even to very poor families. Unlike the state in Europe, the Sinic state does not need to incentivise poor families to participate. Post-Confucian takeoff in higher education and science is created not only through performance-focused state policy, state-financed infrastructure and international benchmarking, but by symbiosis between state and family. Yet in East Asia the family plays a larger role in financing education, health and welfare than it does in English-speaking nations and Europe. The family and the state are stronger than in the West, the intermediate institutions are weaker. Thus while in East Asia comprehensive states are joined to high levels of household funding of higher educaiton (especially in Korea and Japan) and stratified systems of institutional provision, in Nordic countries the state provides equitable access to universal high quality public services, though the Nordic model is now under pressure. Compared to East Asia, and notwithstanding recent funding cuts, higher education in English-speaking nations and Western Europe is more state dependent in the economic sense while more autonomous from direct state ordering in the political sense. The state has a lesser need to buy its power in East Asia. It must provide conditions for prosperity, though, if it is to receive consent.

East Asian higher education is shaped not only by the Sinic tradition, of course. It is also shaped by norms and models from European and North American education, especially the US research university—as re-interpreted by governments in East Asia and Singapore that operate as global competition states. Since Meiji in Japan, catch-up with the West has been a major or dominant policy driver. The result is that the Post-Confucian systems of higher education and research are East-West hybrids. They are also something new: a Post-Confucian modernization in the university sector. They combined inherited traditions with external drivers of modernization that are articulated and reinforced by Post-Confucian states; states that themselves combine long-standing Sinic perspectives and practices with more Western and globally generic precepts of economic supervision and government.

So far the Post-Confucian systems have avoided the trade-offs between advances in educational quality and advances in quantity that seem endemic to Anglo-American systems. They also avoid trade-offs between public and private financing. Government and households share the cost of expanding participation. As Post-Confucian systems mature, the proportion of tuition paid for by the household rises; and the state focuses an increasing part of its funding on academically elite national research universities and their students, and in some countries on social equity objectives. In Korea 77.7 per cent of all costs of tertiary education institutions are paid by the private sector, including 52.1 per cent by households, with 22.3 per cent by government. In Japan the private sector share is 66.7 per cent. Government pays for 40 per cent of costs in China. The spending on extra schooling is remarkable. Teachers’ College economist of education Hank Levin estimates that in Korea ‘shadow schooling’ exceeds 3 per cent of GDP.

At the same time there has been dramatic growth in Post-Confucian scientific output. China, the world’s 12th largest producer of science in 1995, was second in 2009 with 74,019 papers.. Since the year 2000 China’s output has grown by 17 per cent per year. In future much of the world’s knowledge will come from East Asia with the main share from China. In South Korea the growth of science has been almost as rapid. It has now passed India’s output though India has thirty times the population of Korea. There has also been very rapid growth of science in Taiwan and Singapore. We simply cannot understand these dynamic developments, if we expect East Asia to follow a European development path, an Australian path or an American path.

Is university autonomy less in the Sinic world, or different? It is certainly different. If the Post-Confucian state and family appear as stronger institutions than in the West, civil society and institutions between state and family, such as the university, appear weaker. To generalize (for there are exceptions) the university is less independent, less entrepreneurial and more directly tied to policy. Nevertheless, in these systems there is common movement towards New Public Management-style corporatization with greater HEI autonomy over budgets, priorities, staffing and international relations, and a common shift from direct to indirect steering. This enables the Post-Confucian states, like Western states, to retain the capacity to secure their objectives. The state remains an active supervisor. Universities in East and West have moved in parallel towards the NPM while keeping the distinctions between them.

China’s system of dual university leadership, where the party secretary sits alongside the president, has ambiguous potentials for institutional autonomy. At worst it operates as continuous official interference in academic judgment. At best it is a form of distributed leadership that buffers the direct role of the party-state and secures partial institutional autonomy. Perhaps the larger concern about university autonomy in China is that both positions are appointed from above, though by different branches of the party-state. Some Chinese scholars of higher education argue for selection of leaders by university governing bodies rather than the state. In equally one-party Singapore, university councils choose their presidents, though it would be unthinkable they would choose a leader at loggerheads with the government.

Recurring tensions between universities and regulation are part of all higher education systems. What is distinctive about the Post-Confucian systems is that the state is a larger factor than in English-speaking countries and parts of Europe. This cuts both ways. When states are building investments and capacity, they strengthen the positive freedom and the agency of universities and their leaders, all else being equal. At the same time more comprehensive states have greater scope for interference and coercion that would reduce negative freedom. When the state focuses on doing more with less, as in Japan in the last decade, it can bear down hard on higher education. This problem can occur in any system: it is a matter of degree. A larger concern about Post-Confucian systems is the potential for the state to intervene in research planning and resourcing, cutting across peer judgment in the disciplines. State intervention may be justified to break down opaque and unresponsive peer cultures that resist transparency and the globalization of knowledge. However, once modernization is achieved, peer cultures are more effective than states in shaping creative work. At this point it is inherently difficult for the Post-Confucian states to step back. As long as research is treated as a branch of state it is open to symbolic political manipulation, talent capture and even economic corruption, as evidenced in the recurring debates about cronyism in China. Singapore works hard to construct intellectual autonomy from above!

**9. Final thoughts**

To summarize the argument I am making about comparative method. The way to a generic analysis of higher education does not lie through adopting or imposing the norms of one higher education system such as the American or the German. It lies through appreciation of difference—through nuanced exploration of national practices and regional cultural variations, enabling not just differences but also commonalities to be found. Further, this requires an interdisciplinary method. A political economy framework tends to flatten out qualitative differences that are nested in cultural practices. But when political economies are paralleling globally, the differing political and educational cultures around the world, with their associated behavioural practices, become mediums in which political economic practices and global trends become articulated or filtered in varied ways. This does not mean a relativist cultural analysis replaces a generic political economy analysis. Arguably, both are needed. Together their analytical power is maximized.

To summarize the argument I am making about higher education and the state. The development of higher education is closely affected by the evolution of the state, while at the same time, the higher education is one of the means by which the state augments and transforms itself—on a good day at least, as in the 1960s in the United States, and China in the May the Fourth Movement in 1919, in 1989 before the crackdown in Tiananmen, and in quieter ways in many countries. Higher education has immense intellectual resources. Under certain conditions, it can help to change states. Potentially, higher education is in a mutually productive relationship with the state. We know the state relation is central, and it frames research activity in our field, yet we rarely look directly at it.

Because the natural relationship with the state is productive, when the positive momentum falters, that relationship can become deconstructive. In short, higher education needs the nation-state, and it needs the state to be travelling well, and it needs the state to be handling higher education policy well also. In the English-speaking countries the breakdown of the old public compact about the positive role of government and of taxation—a common commitment to the social good—has left the limited liberal state adrift. HEIs have been left underfunded and confused. The finance sector has a stranglehold on the polity. Even leading research universities can do little, despite their scientific authority and social prestige. Political short-termism, anti-taxation and gridlock in the electoral democracies (notably USA) constitute radically unfavourable conditions for long-term HEIs. Consider crisis of the great Californian Masterplan. [Story about Provost of UC Davis].

Given that in liberal Western societies—especially English-speaking societies—understandings of the public good(s) created by higher education have become ideologically ‘frozen’, so that the public good can scarcely be identified, it may be helpful to look beyond the liberal Western jurisdictions for fresh insights and possible conceptual frameworks. Sinic states seem to have the tool-box for tackling problems like global warming that are beyond the reach of the liberal liberal state. It is too easily spooked by the market and it cannot mobilize its people in the kind of collective effort required, in any situation short of war.

In the classical Sinic model the danger is the opposite one: the comprehensive state becomes too effective and complete, and it locks-down the university. The problem of the Chinese model is to open up, make transparent and to a degree pluralize the state, while retaining social harmony. Can the Post-Confucian university contribute to democratization within the machinery of state? Leading Post-Confucian universities, such as Beida, Seoul National University, National Taiwan, NUS, are well placed, inside and close to the centre of the state. But do they have the autonomous personality they need to contribute with independent mindedness to state evolution and renewal? And can they also realize the global potentials of the research university as a form, to reach beyond the national state to contribute to making world society?

**Comparison of Post-Confucian and English language country systems**

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|  | **Post-Confucian systems (East Asia & Singapore)** | **United States’ system** | **Westminster systems (UK, Australia, NZ)** |
| Character of nation-state | Comprehensive, central, delegates to provinces. Politics in command of economy and civil society. State draws best graduates | Limited, division of powers, separate from civil society and economy. Anti-statism common. Federal | Limited, division of powers, separate from civil society and economy. Some anti-statism. Unitary |
| Educational culture | Confucian commitment to self-cultivation via learning. Education as filial duty and producer of status via exam competition (and producer of global competitiveness) | Twentieth century meritocratic and competitive ideology. Education common road to wealth/status, within advancing prosperity | Post 1945 ideology of state guaranteed equal opportunity through education as path to wealth and status, open to all in society |
| State role in higher education | Big. State supervises, shapes, drives and selectively funds institutions. Over time increased delegation to part-controlled presidents | Smaller, from distance. Fosters market ranking via research, student loans. Then steps back. Autonomous presidents | From distance. Policy, regulation, funding supervise market, shape activity. Autonomous vice-chancellors |
| Financing of higher education | State financed infrastructure, part of tuition (especially early in model), scholarships, merit aid. Household funds much tuition and private tutoring, even poor families | State funds some infrastructure, tuition subsidies, student loans. Households vary from high tuition to low, poor families state dependent | Less state financed infrastructure now. Tuition loans, some aid. Growing household investment but less than East Asia. Austerity |
| Dynamics of research | Part household funding of tuition, ideology of WCU, university hierarchy: together enable rapid state investment in research at scale. Applied is dominant. State intervention. | Research heavily funded by federal government unburdened by tuition. Industry and philanthropic money. Basic science plus commercial IP. | Research funded (more in UK) by government, also finances tuition. Less philanthropy than US. Basic science, applied growth, dreams of IP |
| Hierarchy and social selection | Steep university hierarchy. ‘One-chance’ universal competition with selection into prestige institutions. WCUs are fast track for life | Steep institutional hierarchy mediated by SAAT scores. Some part second chances, mainly public sector. Top WCUs are fast track for life | Competition for place in university hierarchy mediated by school results with some part second chances. WCUs provide strong start |
| Fostering of World-Class Universities | Part of tradition, universal target of family aspirations. Support for building of WCUs by funding and regulation. Emerging global agenda | Entrenched hierarchy of Ivy League and flagship state universities, via research grants, tuition hikes, philanthropy. Source of global pride | Ambivalence in national temperament and government policy on status of top institutions. Private and public funding hit ceilings |

Source: author