The Impact of Globalization on International Education

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FEATURE: THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The Translocal Urban Nexus in International Education: Trinity College in China and Southeast Asia

By Xiangming Chen

GLOBALIZATION ISreshaping higher education in the United States, prompting more universities and colleges to internationalize by sending more students to study abroad, recruiting more overseas students, and so forth. In reality this isn’t new—more of a scaling-up process than qualitative change. There are however two significant trends in globalization that have begun to redirect a large segment of the path—and the future—of international education in the United States.

China, Cities, and Globalization

The first is the rise of China as a powerful driver of globalization. According to Chinese government statistics, China’s share of global trade rose from 4.7 percent in 2002 to 10.2 percent in 2011, with its export share of the global total growing from 5 percent to 10.4 percent. This rapid ascent has moved China from fourth to first on the list of top trading nations. The second trend is the acceleration of urbanization. One half of the world’s population lives in cities today. While New York City and London dominate as top-tier financial hubs and innovation centers, a growing number of secondary cities (Chen and Kanna 2012)—especially those in China and India, such as Chongqing and Bangalore—have become more important players in the global economy. Cities become strategic sites where globalization “touches down” and fuses with local conditions to induce social change.

These two trends are reflected in the broader shift of international higher education in the United States. While China was not a major study destination more than a decade ago, it has now become the fifth most popular destination for American students, behind Britain, Italy, Spain, and France. According to the Institute of International Education, there were fewer than 100,000 Chinese students in the United States six years ago—smaller than the number of Indian students then—but the number of Chinese students soared to almost 240,000 by 2013, accounting for 28.6 percent of all international students. With only three students from China in 2007, Trinity College in Connecticut has more than 30 of them today. Even as top American research universities establish branch campuses in international cities like Abu Dhabi (New York University) and Singapore (Yale), they (Chicago, Stanford) have placed most of their campuses in Beijing and Shanghai. New York University opened a new liberal arts college in Shanghai in fall 2013.

These recent developments are facilitating the continued globalization of higher education. Yet much of the programming at these new campuses and centers is fairly conventional: granting new degrees to local and non-local students and hosting visiting students and faculty from the home institutions. On the other hand, if the Global Network University model being pursued by NYU can fully link the knowledge assets of multiple local sites, it will break new ground in international education. In the meantime, American institutions of higher education, large universities or small colleges, continue to search for ways to fully couple and integrate learning both globally and locally. One promising model is to develop horizontal academic ties between urban locations that can generate new parallel and sequential learning opportunities.

Translocal Comparative Learning in Cities

Trinity College has extended its local urban tradition and learning opportunities to China and Southeast Asia, where it has established a strong presence and footprint in multiple urban locales. These activities exemplify a translocal model in which higher education in the United States capitalizes on rising global cities abroad to develop new learning opportunities.

Chinese cities are becoming interesting laboratories for examining the local impacts of globalization. These cities have grown from being export-oriented manufacture platforms at the expense of post-industrial American cities like Detroit, which have become “de-globalized” or lost their global economic prominence (Ryan 2012). The rise of Chinese cities and decline of some American cities, viewed through a translocal urban lens, can shed light on the evolving relationship between globalization and international higher education.

Seizing the opportunity to study globalization from an urban perspective, Trinity College opened the Center for Urban and Global Studies in 2007. The college began its programming design with Trinity’s home city of Hartford. Situated by the Connecticut River and with a population of about 120,000, Hartford’s industrialization began very early. The city became one of the most prosperous American cities in the late 19th century but lost its manufacturing base and a peak population of more than 170,000 from around 1960 on. Located at the upper reach and the mouth of the Yangtze River, Chongqing and Shanghai have populations more than 30 and 20 million people respectively, and have...
undergone rapid industrialization during the past three decades. Despite the tremendous differences in size, the Center uses Hartford as a programming template to send a group of Trinity faculty and students to carry out field studies in cities along the Yangtze River.

“The Megacities of the Yangtze River” summer program was launched in 2009. Its hallmark is its interdisciplinary approach and focus on the nexus between environmental and urban issues. It is based on the complementary expertise of Michael Lestz, a historian of China and Southeast Asia; Joan Morrison, a biologist/environmental scientist; and Xiangming Chen, an urban sociologist. The three faculty and the students in the program went on a cruise along the Connecticut River and to a wastewater treatment plant in Hartford before leaving for China. While in China they cruised down the Yangtze River from Chongqing where they also visited a local wastewater treatment much larger than the one in Hartford. This sequential trans-local learning allows students to see how the United States has cleaned up the environmental pollution of water bodies like the Connecticut River. It also gives students a first-hand appreciation of the much greater challenges facing China in dealing with the environmental impact of the controversial Three Gorges Dam and the problem of waste disposal in its megacities. Through a translocal lens, the students have seen that serious pollution from rapid industrialization in Hartford and Detroit during an early era is already happening in Shanghai and other Chinese cities today, only on a much larger scale. The lesson learned is that China should have anticipated and better prepared to deal with the negative environmental impact of accelerated urbanization and industrialization.

To expose globalization’s local imprints further, in summer 2011 the program visited the jet engine center at Pratt & Whitney’s corporate headquarters in East Hartford, followed by a visit to the company’s state-of-the-art and Leeds-certified engine service facility in Shanghai. As China has become the world’s fastest-growing aviation market, Pratt & Whitney’s Shanghai facility was designed to provide engine maintenance, repairing, and overhauling services for planes in China. The center uses a lean manufacturing principle and an advanced information-technology infrastructure to assist with materials, inventory, cost and quality, and scheduling, which conform to the corporate standards in East Hartford (Chen and Shemo 2013). Through this paired investigation in East Hartford and Shanghai, students developed a concrete understanding of the broad features of globalization, where one company’s global restructurings weaves together vastly different and geographically distant places. Again the translocal approach has yielded such learned insights that, with its high-tech industrial base and local concentration of knowledge and skilled labor, Shanghai can help China quickly move up the manufacturing and service ladder by adopting and absorbing the most advanced technology that Pratt & Whitney in East Hartford was willing to offer.

The cumulative success of this program recently helped Trinity College secure a preliminary grant in 2011 and an implementation grant in 2012 from the Henry Luce Foundation, which has brought in a dozen additional faculty members across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. This new resource has allowed us to extend the river-focused programming from the Yangtze River region stretching from west to east in China to the Mekong River region spanning southwestern China and mainland Southeast Asia. Beginning in the city of Kunming in Yunnan province, participants of the River Cities Program crossed into Laos, then through Cambodia, and ended the journey in Ho Chi Minh City. There were strong footprints of China’s cross-border influence in the three Southeast Asian countries. China’s construction of dams at the upper reaches of the river has affected water flow and biodiversity in the lower segments of the Mekong River. China’s building of a new town near a wetland in Vientiane also poses a local environmental threat.

In extending the China-focused program to Southeast Asia, we have not only maintained the original focus on river cities starting with Hartford but also stretched the translocal urban lens to varied and less developed cities in Southeast Asia. It has allowed our program to further enrich students’ learning experiences through back-forth comparisons of industrialization and environmental issues across multiple local contexts. For example, students questioned whether the much smaller and less industrialized Southeast Asian cities should necessarily follow China’s model and path of scaling up its cities and prioritizing industrial growth at the expense of environmental protection, cultural preservation, and sustainable urban living (Chen 2014).

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Thinking Globally, Learning Translocally
Globalization casts a fresh spotlight on the major cities of China as a rising economic power. The global city of Shanghai, the megalopolis of Chongqing, and secondary cities like Kunming, with considerable local autonomy for economic development and strong and varied global and regional connections, call for us to understand why and how they matter to the world and deserve our attention (Antholis 2013).

Through five years of running a traveling summer program, Trinity College has been developing a translocal approach to stringing together seemingly very different cities in their ecological environs as an experiential learning model for better understanding the relationship between globalization, urbanization, and the rise of China. This model has benefited greatly and somewhat unexpectedly from using the small city of Hartford—Trinity’s home city—as both a place of departure and pedagogical template. Having already graduated 85 Trinity students during the past five years, the 2014 iteration of this summer program will experience further improvement in two ways. It will add two new cities in the greater Yangtze River region for further translocal comparison. It will also formally include one faculty member at Fudan University or Tongji University in Shanghai who can bring and impart local knowledge to Trinity faculty and students.

Xiangming Chen is Dean of Urban and Global Studies. He also directs the Center for Urban and Global Studies and serves as the Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of Global Urban Studies and Sociology at Trinity College, Connecticut, and as a distinguished guest professor at Fudan University, Shanghai.

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the university’s mission statement itself straddles fence between the two concepts by presenting itself as “a center of academic excellence dedicated to the preparation of world citizens through global education...[providing] students with the multi-disciplinary, intercultural, and ethical understandings necessary to participate, lead, and prosper in the global marketplace of ideas, commerce and culture.” This fence straddling is reflected at the curricular level as well, where FDU’s general education program explicitly seeks to develop in students’ competencies needed both for personal success and for responsible membership.1

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, strongly asserts the importance of liberal education in “a global economy and in our diverse democracy.” Indeed, their concept of liberal education “helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.”2 Organized around a set of “Essential Learning Outcomes,” including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, quantitative literacy, written and oral communication, teamwork and problem solving, intercultural knowledge and engagement, civic knowledge and engagement, and ethical reasoning and action, the LEAP initiative should serve as the first port of call for any university that is truly committed to both concepts of global learning. Its related Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) program provides highly polished and field-tested rubrics that may be adopted, or retrofitted, for the assessment of these and several other core elements of liberal education.3

Beyond defending the curricular compatibility of civic and economic concepts of global learning, advocates for global education must also acknowledge and understand the tensions between the two models. Without such an understanding, their distinctive applications are in danger of being lost in the shuffle, to the detriment of our students who need to acquire the competencies necessary to be both successful and responsible, both for their own sakes and for the sake of the communities to which they belong. This, in turn, requires that we accept that neither our general education programs nor our degree programs are value-free or, magically, impervious to value disputation. If we cling to the fiction of value neutrality, as some of us may be tempted to do (under pressure from external critics of academia or from a well-meaning but misguided fifth column within), we are likely to create general education and degree programs that favor the economic model of global learning, a model which in its emphasis on marketable skills may be more easily misperceived as value-free than the civic model.

While we should not recommend that students be “taught” a prescribed set of values, whether civic or economic or a hybrid of the two, we also must acknowledge that whenever we create academic programs we inevitably create learning contexts in which values are indirectly “caught.” Hence, global educators need to acquire the maturity and confidence to discuss the value of civic dimensions of global learning with our students, using the language of rights and responsibilities, just as we discuss the cash value of the economic dimensions. We might even take up the tension between these values as a subject for our faculty meetings, even if, perhaps even because, this means sometimes having more heated—but more deeply revealing and productive—disagreements among faculty and staff charged with educating students for life in a global world.

Jason A. Scorza is the Vice Provost for International Education at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

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