Transnational partnerships in higher education in China: The diversity and complexity of elite strategic alliances

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Transnational partnerships between universities can illustrate the changing political, social, and cultural terrain of global higher education. Drawing on secondary data analysis of government educational statistics, university web pages, and a comprehensive literature review, this article focuses on transnational partnerships with particular reference to China in order to illuminate the diversifying relationships between networks of global universities. International partnerships develop in historical, geographic, social, and cultural contexts and the analysis of Chinese universities' partnerships across different social, cultural, and geopolitical contexts indicates that, even within the elite groups of universities, transnational partnerships are diverse and complex. This article aims to demonstrate that the spread of internationalization in the form of transnational partnership is not uniform but is influenced by complex contextual factors, some of which are accentuating inequalities in the system.

Keywords: transnational partnership; internationalization; elites; diversity

Introduction

From early in the history of higher education (HE), universities have been influenced by a strong international and transnational dimension (Gunn and Minstrom, 2013) and have, from their inception, moved across national boundaries. In the past three decades, however, transnational partnerships have become increasingly significant, being at a complex and contradictory nexus of both collaboration and competition (Oleksiyenko and Yang, 2015). Although historically transnational partnership in HE centred on research and scholarship, latterly programme coordination or Transnational Higher Education (TNHE), where students study part or all of a foreign degree in their home country, has emerged as an increasingly significant element of internationalization across a range of countries (Huang, 2007; Trahar, 2015). Global higher education partnerships are diversifying and becoming increasingly important in a broader range of ways. The rise in transnational partnership in the UK has been mirrored in other parts of the globe, with particularly rapid development in East Asia, with Malaysia, Singapore, and China being the top three countries for activity (HESA, 2015).

Transnational higher education in China has also been growing in the last three decades and more than 1000 programmes and institutions have now been approved by the Chinese government (Fang, 2012). TNHE plays out differently in different national contexts, however, and in China the emphasis is on controlled cooperation with joint investment in forms of capital including land, intellectual property, brands, and management systems (Fang, 2012). The underlying purpose of TNHE partnerships often varies internationally, with the motivation of UK TNHE being predominantly financial and the driving force for China relating to access to an international higher education at home for a broader range of the population (Huang, 2006;

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Hou *et al.*, 2014). Research interests around the concept of transnational partnership are also beginning to intensify (Oleksiyenko, 2015) and there has been a sharp increase in published work in this area since 2006 (Caruana and Montgomery, 2015), including initiatives around EU programme collaboration and research carried out by the British Council. Notwithstanding this increase in research, Oleksiyenko and Yang (2015) note that there has been a dearth of research on partnerships and their associated policies and challenges, particularly with regard to the emerging global and economic powers of the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and China in particular.

This article focuses on transnational partnerships in China and considers the influence of geopolitical and sociocultural context on the diversity and complexity of China's global partnerships. The nature of China's transnational partnerships is explored, considering the variation within the country and focusing on the elite 985 and 211 groups of Chinese universities. Firstly, the article will discuss the concept of transnational partnership, drawing on research literature in the field and including reference to the historical perspective on transnational partnership. Secondly, the article maps the geographical location of the elite alliances of Chinese universities as a means of illustrating that the gap between urban east China and the rural west is reflected in the geographical location of the elite groups of universities and has implications for access to higher education (Yang, 2014). Thirdly, the article focuses on the partnerships established by some of the elite groups of Chinese universities, defining 'elite' as those universities that are part of the Chinese C9 group and the 985 and 211 projects that are explained below. Two individual cases of universities in different sociocultural and geographic contexts are considered in more depth with a view to understanding the influence of diversity in context on partnership. Finally, the article draws some conclusions regarding the relationship between the development of elite alliances in China and internationalization in higher education more broadly.

The research

This article draws on three forms of evidence. The first is a systematic literature review of electronically accessible articles on transnational higher education published in journals and other electronic sources (Caruana and Montgomery, 2015). An online search of higher education research platforms was carried out, focusing on higher education journals and resources and paying particular attention to work produced by non-Western authors. This was a broad literature review that selected sources using a wide range of search terms including for example 'transnational education', 'transnational higher education', and 'international/intercultural partnership' and searches were carried out on policy at the national and supranational levels, 'student' focus, 'staff' focus, and 'quality' (Caruana and Montgomery, 2015). A secondary analysis of the library of the initial project was carried out for the purposes of this article and the terms were narrowed to focus on transnational higher education in China and the issue of partnership, elite alliances, and the implications of HE partnerships.

The second source of evidence is an analysis of Chinese Ministry of Education documents relating to the location and nature of partnerships of Chinese higher education. The Ministry of Education (MoE) online statistics in the public domain were accessed in Chinese using the official website of the MoE and translated into English. The data accessed was the most recent MoE data available, collected in the years 2012 and 2013; the figures follow a two-year census period and refreshed data will be available at the end of 2015. Three areas of the MoE data were explored in particular: firstly, the geographical distribution of elite Chinese institutions in the 211 and 985 groups was focused on, mapping the numbers of elite and non-elite institutions in the different provinces across China. Secondly the international partnerships engaged in by 11

elite Chinese institutions were focused on, including the 9 universities in the Chinese C9 group (China's elite mission group and equivalent of the UK Russell Group) and 2 example universities that are members of both the 211 and 985 groups. The MoE partnership data discretely analysed different dimensions of relationships between the institutions including exchange and cooperative programmes, joint degree programmes, research, and 'academic exchange and cooperation in running schools', the Chinese term for transnational higher education. The third and final area of MoE data relates to specific reference to the geographical location of TNHE provision in China across the different provinces of the country. The spread of partnerships for each individual province is mapped through this data. This information was also accessed from the official Chinese Ministry of Education website.

The third source of evidence consists of a detailed review of two universities' web pages, which were translated into English where necessary. In addition to this, associated publicly available documents and policies were accessed to investigate the two universities' international partnerships and collaborations, including probing the stated aims behind their partnerships with international institutions, where this information was available.

Transnational partnerships in global HE

Partnership between universities worldwide is a fundamental element of twenty-first century internationalization and Yang and Xie note that globalization has put university international networking 'on steroids' (2015: 66). The growth in transnational partnerships between groups of higher education institutions across the globe represents fundamental changes in the ways that universities are working together and constructing themselves. Partnerships, networks, and global alliances have become strategically important and 'universities can realise significant value from engaging in alliances … global university alliances create substantively important collaborative advantages for those involved' (Gunn and Mintrom, 2013: 180). Partnerships within and between the largest emerging global political and economic powers are becoming particularly significant, with the so-called BRICS nations of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa investing hugely in elite groups of flagship institutions in order to compete globally (Oleksiyenko and Yang, 2015).

However, transnational partnerships between groups of HE institutions are complex and contradictory and develop against a backdrop of intense competitiveness, termed 'competitive-collaborative perspectives' by Oleksiyenko and Yang (2015). Marginson (2015) notes that the shape of higher education systems worldwide is being stretched vertically and that the hierarchies of global universities are becoming more acute. This stratification and the developing significance of the global rankings (Kehm, 2014) has a significant influence on partnerships. The increasing influence of rankings has coincided with a wave of modernization, marketization, and reform of higher education across many national contexts and this has brought interaction between the rankings and marketization (Locke, 2014), and university partnerships are caught up in this cycle. The significance of university rankings has gone well beyond being a tool to support student or family choice of university, with this form of political and economic positioning by nations also having an influence on choice of partnership (Locke, 2014), particularly with respect to research activity that is increasingly enacted cooperatively and competitively on a global level (Horta, 2009). Rankings order the status of institutions and this has accelerated a 'status culture' (Marginson, 2014). Roles and positions are shifting in global higher education, with the strong strategies espoused by China having an impact, for example, on Hong Kong, which is no longer the only nexus or hub of transnational partnership in East Asia (Ng, 2011).

It is important to note that partnership in higher education is historically, socially, politically, and culturally situated, with geography also having an influence. There can be tensions in values, visions, and goals, which can place partnership at the centre of power struggles that can become obstacles to collaboration (Oleksiyenko, 2014). The historical context of partnership is influential and collaboration develops in the context of the historicity of nations and their education systems. There are strong influences from the Western traditions of higher education in countries in both the East and the West (for example, both the UK and China). Partnership in HE is embedded in a context of colonialism, imbalance, and asymmetry and historical inequalities still have an influence today (Yang and Xie, 2015). Higher education is an integral part of the colonial structure and is a site where colonial attitudes are perpetuated (Yang and Xie, 2015). Despite the fact that international partnerships in HE aim to position national interest above global agendas, the majority of countries, including China, tend to favour and prioritize partnerships with Western universities and global competitiveness is still defined by 'the West' (Oleksiyenko and Yang, 2015). Thus international networking could be perceived as being 'a double-edged sword' that should be accompanied by historical awareness and a sense of context (Yang and Xie, 2015: 87). Partnerships develop within a complex environment of power structures, identities, and subjectivities between international, national, regional, institutional, and individual levels of structure and agency (Djerasimovic, 2014). Comparisons across national contexts with regard to the development and nature of global HE partnerships are therefore difficult, given the complexity and diversity of the political, economic, and sociocultural contexts in which universities operate. Altbach and Bassett (2014) argue, for example, that comparison of collaboration across the BRICS group of nations is of little value due to the complexity of the individual countries' higher education environments. This underlines the influential role of historical and sociocultural context in partnership.

Global alliances and groups: The elite universities of China and the UK

Partnerships developing between universities globally are part of complex multilateral networks and alliances built on historical, political, and sociocultural contexts (Yang and Xie, 2015). The emergence of 'mission groups' in the UK is an example of ways in which HE institutions in the British HE system are establishing 'self-identities' and forming hierarchical alliances in association with other institutions (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015). There are a number of mission groups in the UK including the Million + and the Guild HE, as well as the Russell Group of British HE institutions, which is seen as an elite group that claims to represent 24 research-intensive institutions who also boast outstanding teaching and learning, and excellence in links with business and the public sector (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015). Despite membership of the Russell Group being based on prestige, there is also diversity within this group, which has members ranging from Oxford and Cambridge universities in England to Cardiff and Glasgow universities, two highly distinctive institutions that are part of the Welsh and Scottish systems of HE, which can be differentiated from the English system, not least because of the issue of student fees (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015).

In the last three decades China has engaged in an intensive reform of its higher education system and this has involved a staggering level of investment in the building of capacity and resource in a relatively small number of universities, with the aim of developing world-class institutions that will compete on a global scale. The Chinese 211 Project was initiated in 1995 and in the years up to 2011 a group of 112 universities were supported by investment in the project,

receiving extensive funding to 'groom talents and develop disciplines in face of the challenges in 21st century' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2013a). During the first phase of the project approximately US$2.2 billion was invested in the development of this relatively small group of universities. Alongside the 211 Project, the 985 Project was initiated in 1999. A small group of 39 universities were selected for intensive funding, aiming to support internationalization agendas and develop these universities as elite institutions to reach 'world-class' level (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2013). Table 1 shows the elite higher education institutions of China included in the C9 league, the equivalent of the UK Russell Group of research-intensive universities. The table also shows two institutions that are members of the 985 and 211 groups, but not of the C9 League, and these two institutions will be profiled in more detail later in this article. The full list of elite and non-elite institutions can be found online at the Chinese Ministry of Education website (www.moe.edu.cn).

Table 1: The elite higher education institutions of China

University	Labels
Tsinghua University	211, 985, C9 League
Peking University	211, 985, C9 League
Fudan University	211, 985, C9 League
Shanghai Jiao Tong University	211, 985, C9 League
Zhejiang University	211, 985, C9 League
Nanjing University	211, 985, C9 League
Xi'an Jiao Tong University	211, 985, C9 League
University of Science and Technology of China	211, 985, C9 League
Harbin Institute of Technology	211, 985, C9 League
Two examples of 985 and 211 institutions	
Xiamen University	211, 985
East China Normal University	211, 985

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (www.moe.edu.cn)

As a means of understanding a sample of Chinese partnerships, their relationship with UK institutions is focused on here and their affiliation with UK 'mission groups' is highlighted (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015). A sample analysis of the UK partnerships of three elite institutions of China (two C9 institutions and one 985/211 university) was compiled using data from the MoE.

The analysis of the three universities' partnerships with UK institutions revealed that the Chinese elite institutions had mostly established links with UK institutions that were members of the elite Russell Group. These institutions include the UK universities that perform best in the global rankings and are also known as 'research-intensive' institutions (Filippakou and Tapper, 2015). Table 2 shows the UK partnerships of Peking University, one of the C9 institutions, and demonstrates that the vast majority of Peking's partners are prestigious UK universities including Oxford, Cambridge, and Durham universities.

Table 2: The UK partners of Peking University

Institution (Chinese)	Institution (English)	Country	Affiliation
剑桥大学	University of Cambridge	England	Russell Group
格拉斯哥大学	University of Glasgow	Scotland	Russell Group
诺丁汉大学	University of Nottingham	England	Russell Group
伦敦大学学院	University College London	England	Russell Group
牛津大学	University of Oxford	England	Russell Group
伦敦政治经济学院	London School of Economics and Political Science	England	Russell Group
杜伦大学	University of Durham	England	Russell Group
卡迪夫大学	Cardiff University	Wales	Russell Group
伦敦大学玛丽皇后学院	Queen Mary University of London	England	Russell Group
米德尔塞克斯大学	Middlesex University	England	Post-1992 (Former polytechnics)
爱丁堡大学	University of Edinburgh	Scotland	Russell Group
阿伯泰邓迪大学	University of Abertay Dundee	Scotland	Post-1992 (Former polytechnics)
华威大学	University of Warwick	England	Russell Group
东安格利亚大学	University of East Anglia	England	Unaffiliated
苏塞克斯大学	University of Sussex	England	Unaffiliated
利兹大学	University of Leeds	England	Russell Group
克兰菲尔德大学	Cranfield University	England	Post-1992 (Former polytechnics)
南安普顿大学	University of Southampton	England	Russell Group
约克大学	University of York	England	Russell Group
赫尔大学	University of Hull	England	Unaffiliated

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (www.moe.edu.cn)

This pattern was repeated across the three institutions highlighted in this part of the study and Table 3 shows the UK partnerships established by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, including the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and two of the prestigious colleges of the University of London. Both the C9 universities in Tables 1 and 2 have established links predominantly with English universities but all of the three universities in the sample had links with at least one university in Scotland and one 'post-1992' (or former polytechnic) university in their list of partners.

Table 3: The UK partners of Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Institution (in Chinese)	Institution (in English)	Country	Affiliation
伯明翰大学	University of Birmingham	England	Russell Group
邓迪大学	University of Dundee	Scotland	Unaffiliated
帝国理工学院	Imperial College London	England	Russell Group
华威大学	University of Warwick	England	Russell Group
剑桥大学	University of Cambridge	England	Russell Group
克兰菲尔德大学	Cranfield University	England	Post 1992
拉夫堡大学	Loughborough University	England	Unaffiliated
伦敦国王学院	King's College London	England	Russell Group
曼彻斯特大学	University of Manchester	England	Russell Group
南安普顿大学	University of Southampton	England	Russell Group
牛津大学	University of Oxford	England	Russell Group
纽卡斯尔大学	Newcastle University	England	Russell Group
诺丁汉大学	University of Nottingham	England	Russell Group
萨里大学	University of Surrey	England	Unaffiliated

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (www.moe.edu.cn)

In addition to this, the data analysis included attention to the recorded purposes of the partnerships established, and the categories provided by the MoE included details of the nature of the exchange and cooperation including: faculty exchange, student exchange, joint degree programmes, research collaboration, academic exchange, and cooperation in running schools (TNHE) and information exchange. From the data collected it was clear that the establishment of partnerships by elite Chinese institutions was strategic and purposeful. For example, the cooperation with the post-1992 institutions appeared to be predominantly for student exchange. The partnerships established by East China Normal University with Nottingham Trent University in England were marked as being for the purposes of student exchange, rather than for faculty exchange, research, or TNHE. Table 4 shows the partnerships of East China Normal University, with the purposes of those partnerships indicated. East China Normal University's links with the UK for the purposes of faculty and student exchange and TNHE are predominantly with Russell Group or research-intensive universities. It is interesting to note that the only partnership listed in the table that is indicated to be for the purposes of research is that with the UCL Institute of Education, University College London, which is the top research institute for educational research in the UK, ranked top in the UK in many of the global league tables.

In terms of collaborative partnerships involving transnational higher education the picture is similar in that elite Chinese universities seek TNHE partnerships with high-ranking universities across the globe. According to the MoE statistics there are 577 Chinese higher education institutions who 'host' TNHE, which accounts for 21 per cent of the total number of Chinese universities. However, only 79 of these institutions are in 985 or 211 elite groups, representing only 16 per cent of TNHE institutions (MoE, 2013b). This suggests that the elite institutions are more risk averse when it comes to TNHE (Hou *et al.*, 2014). Research has indicated a differentiation in the way that elite universities and post-1992 institutions approach TNHE, with

the new universities in the UK and non-elite universities in China being more prepared to set up overseas validated courses (Fang, 2012; Hou *et al.*, 2014; Bennell and Pearce, 2003).

Table 4: East China Normal University's partner institutions in the UK

Institution (in Chinese)	Institution (in English)	Country	Affiliation	Exchange and cooperation code
艾克斯特大学	Exeter University	England	Russell Group	FSA*
曼彻斯特大学	University of Manchester	England	Russell Group	FSA
利兹大学	University of Leeds	England	Russell Group	FSA
霍尔大学	Hull University	England		FSA
诺丁汉特伦特大学	Nottingham Trent University	England	Post-1992	S
爱丁堡大学	University of Edinburgh	Scotland		
英国伦敦大学教育学院	UCL Institute of Education, University College London	England		FRIS
班戈大学	Bangor University	Wales		FS

* Exchange and cooperation code: F – faculty exchange, S – student exchange, D – joint degree programmes, R – research collaboration, A – academic exchange and cooperation in running schools (TNHE), I – information exchange

Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (www.moe.edu.cn)

Geography, demographics, and the concentration of higher education in China

China has 34 provincial-level administrative units, which are made up of 23 provinces, 4 municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing), 5 autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Ningxia, and Xinjiang) and 2 special administrative regions (Hong Kong and Macau) (Travel China Guide, 2015). Figure 1 illustrates the provinces and in addition divides China into the Eastern Region, Central Region, and Western Region.

The most populated and urbanized areas of China are the Eastern and Central regions of the country with the municipality around Beijing and Tianjin, the area around Shanghai, Hong Kong, and the eastern provinces of Shandong and Jiangsu being the most densely populated. The least densely populated areas are in the west of China with the regions of Qinghai and Xinjiang in the far west being much more sparsely populated (Waugh, 2009). If a line were drawn across the country dividing the Eastern and Central regions from the Western region, it would demonstrate that the Eastern and Central regions have 40 per cent of the land area and 94 per cent of the population, while the Western region has 60 per cent of the land area but only 6 per cent of the population. This illustrates the acute differences in demographics across the different regions and provinces of China. The areas of dense population are also among the most urbanized and industrialized parts of the country.

Figure 1: Map of China showing the provinces (Shen, 2015)

There is a significant relationship between the density of the population in China and the concentration of provision of higher education institutions. The data gathered from the Chinese Ministry of Education website (www.moe.edu.cn) shows that the extreme variation in demographics from the West to the East of the country is reflected in the location and concentration of higher education institutions. Most significantly for this study, it is also clear from the data that the elite universities of China (those included in the C9, 211, and 985 groups) are concentrated in the Eastern and Central regions of the country to a greater extent than the non-elite institutions (universities not included in the C9, 211, or 985 groups). The non-elite higher education institutions are more widely spread across the regions, although there is still a concentration of non-elite institutions around the Eastern and Central regions. Figure 2 shows the number of non-elite universities in the different provinces of China, illustrating that there is an unequal spread of universities in general across the provinces.

When contrasted with the spread of the elite 211 group of universities, however, it is apparent that the spread is even more unequal in the elite group, with the number of 211-ranked universities intensely concentrated in the regions of Beijing, Jiangsu, and Shanghai. Figure 3 illustrates that, in comparison with the spread and number of non-elite institutions, the elite institutions are even more intensely concentrated around the urbanized and wealthy regions of the country.
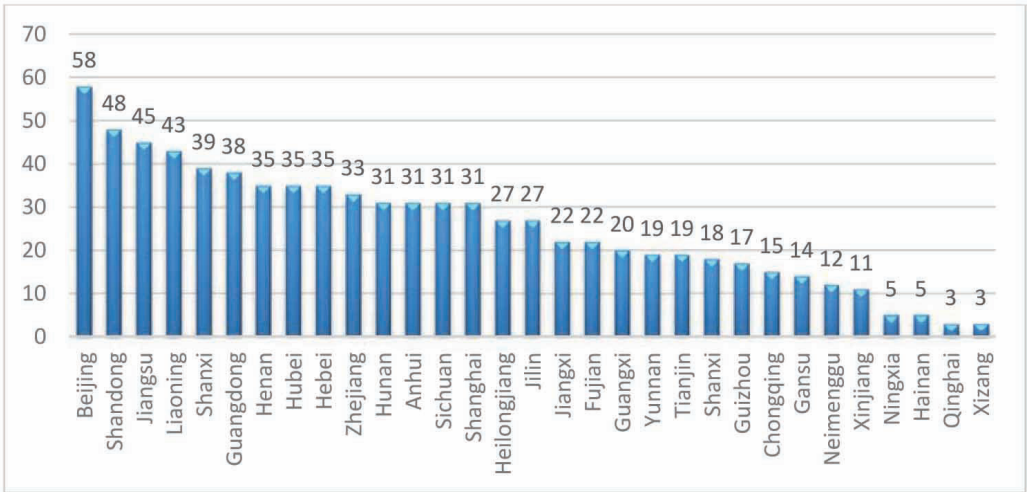
Figure 2: The number of Chinese non-elite universities in different provinces
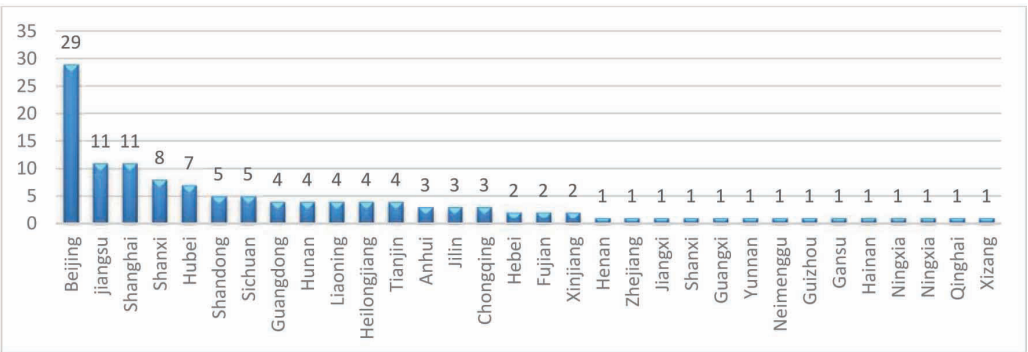

Figure 3: The number of Chinese 211 group universities in different provinces

This picture is consistent across the 985 group institutions and Figure 4 demonstrates that Beijing and Shanghai have most of this group of elite universities, with the majority of institutions being situated in those two areas. The spread of these 985 group institutions is more intensely concentrated in the urbanized regions compared to the non-elite institutions.

These data show that there is an overall difference in the spread of universities generally across Eastern, Central, and Western China but that the unequal spread of elite higher education institutions is more acute than that of the non-elite institutions, with 60 per cent and 72 per cent respectively of the 211 and 985 group universities being in the East compared to 48 per cent of the non-elite institutions. The picture of uneven geographical distribution is similar for transnational higher education partnerships (institutions that are receivers of TNHE) (Hou *et al.*, 2014).

The data presented above illustrate that there is an intensely unequal distribution of elite universities across the provinces and regions of China. It is important to note that the scale of rural–urban migration is huge in China, with the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics estimating that by the end of 2009 there were 145 million rural migrants in city areas of China with 50

per cent of these being young people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Chiang *et al.*, 2012). However, the majority of these rural migrants are largely uneducated with 70 per cent having less than a high school level of attainment (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Chiang *et al.*, 2012). Given the characteristics of the rural versus urban divide in China, this shows that the provision of higher education in China mirrors the unequal economic distribution in the urban Eastern and Central areas of the country and suggests a socially differentiated access to higher education and an increasingly differentiated access to elite institutions (Chiang *et al.*, 2015; Marginson, 2015). This supports the suggestion of a link between the development of elite groups of universities and economically advantaged regions and populations. Marginson (2015) makes a link between economic inequality, social ordering, and higher education, noting that access to elite higher education is 'sharply stratified by social group' (Marginson, 2015: 4). The data included here on China underline this point by illustrating that there is a relationship between geographical concentrations of elite institutions in urbanized areas, accentuating the urban–rural or, to put it crudely, rich–poor divide in China, and indicating that this is reflected in the provision of elite higher education.
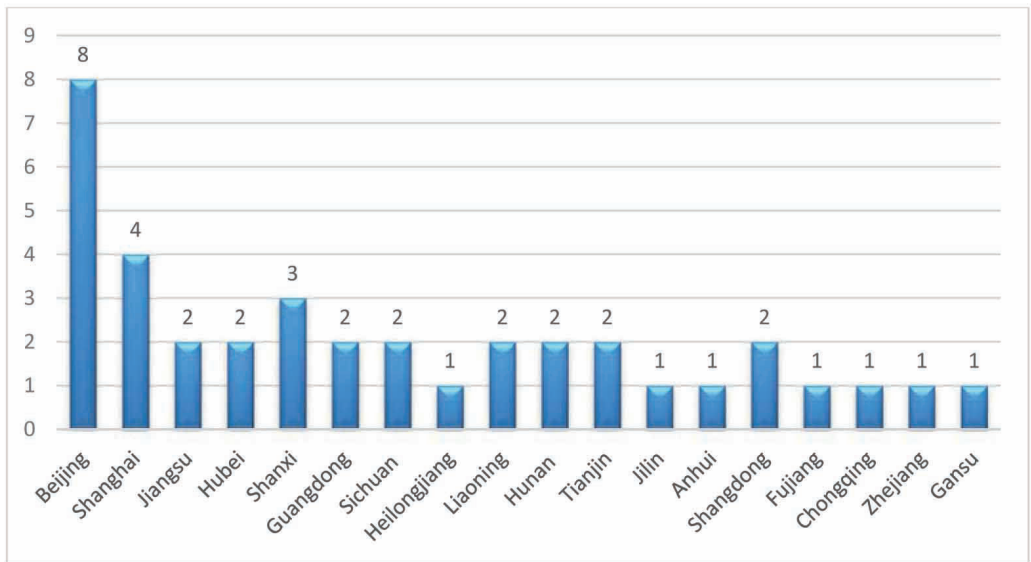
Figure 4: The distribution of Chinese 985 group universities in different provinces

Diversity of partnership in the elite Chinese universities: Two illustrative cases

This section of the article considers two Chinese universities at closer range, focusing on each individual institution's distinctive range and nature of partnerships and collaborative links as a means of illuminating the diversity and complexity in partnership within the elite institutions of China. Each university's overall strategy is interpreted from the partnership data and some possible themes that emerge from the range of partnerships are drawn out. The two cases underline the influence of historical, geopolitical, and sociocultural contexts on the development of international partnerships. As the data are taken from publicly available documents the universities are not anonymized. The limitations of the data should be noted, as these profiles rely on the web pages of the universities, and the universities' descriptions of the formal partnerships,

not on the perspectives of those involved in the partnerships. They therefore represent only one view of the nature of the collaborations.

East China Normal University: Bringing the world to Shanghai

East China Normal University (ECNU) is located in Shanghai on the coast of the urbanized wealthy east of the country. Shanghai developed in the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) as one of China's major trading ports and became a focal point of modern China. The British, Americans, and French established concessions in Shanghai in the late 1840s and the city had international settlements that were out of Chinese government control (Mitter, 2008). As a result of this history, Shanghai is a multicultural city that has a colonial atmosphere. ECNU is the top 'normal' (education) university in China and is part of both the 985 and 211 projects.

ECNU has 114 formal partnerships with institutions in several continents: 21 in Europe; 3 in Australia; 43 in Asia; 45 in America; and 2 in Africa (www.ied.ecnu.edu.cn/index_en.asp). The concentration of ECNU's partnerships reflect its historical colonial past, and the university's most developed and long-standing partnerships are with France, the USA, and Australia. With regard to France, ECNU has a strong relationship with the Écoles Normales Supérieures that has lasted for over twenty years, involving joint programmes, professorial exchange, and close collaboration in a range of disciplines but particularly in science and business disciplines (www.ied.ecnu.edu.cn/list_en.asp?class=79.87). ECNU's partnership with La Trobe University in Australia is similarly long-standing and has spanned 14 years, involving research collaboration and also transnational programme partnerships where students study for the first two years at ECNU in China and then complete their undergraduate programmes at La Trobe in Australia.

The most notable characteristic of ECNU's partnerships, however, is the establishment of large numbers of research and teaching centres by international partners on or around ECNU's campus in Shanghai. In 2006 ECNU opened an 'international education park' that aimed to attract 'world-famous universities to establish overseas campuses and teaching centres' (www.ied.ecnu.edu.cn/list_en.asp?class=79.87). Since its inception it has attracted more than one thousand international students, the Écoles Normales Supérieures group has established a joint graduate school, EMLYON Business School (France) has established a campus in the grounds of ECNU, and collaboration with the USA has intensified with the opening of New York University, Shanghai, the first Sino–USA joint-venture university. ECNU's approach to partnership is to bring the world to Shanghai, and the history of the city and its multicultural past and present makes this easier.

It is worth noting that ECNU are also developing a new form of partnership and cooperation with developing countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. In 2015 they established an Education Master's Programme for Developing Countries targeting universities in Tanzania, Ethiopia, Jordan, and Chile. ECNU has a stated aim to form closer bilateral ties with the emerging Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ECNU has an ambition to develop its role as a hub for higher education provision for developing countries, challenging the West for its dominance in educating developing nations and extending China's range of 'soft power' (Nye, 1990).

Xiamen University: Reaching out to Asia

Xiamen University (XMU) is a research-intensive institution with a very high reputation and rank, and a member of both the 985 and 211 groups. It was founded in 1921 by Tan Kah Kee, an overseas Chinese entrepreneur and philanthropist of Southeast Asia, and was the first Chinese higher educational institution established by an overseas Chinese. Xiamen is on the east

coast of Fujian province, south-east China and is home to large numbers of overseas Chinese communities from Southeast Asia. The city is located close to Taiwan and historically has been the site of conflict between China and Taiwan, although this has developed into a more peaceful relationship with the November 2015 historic meeting between the Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou (BBC News, 2015).

Like ECNU, XMU has an extensive list of partnerships with international institutions. XMU's website indicates that it has 157 formal partnerships: 47 in Europe; 9 in Australia and New Zealand; 68 in Asia; 29 in North America; and 4 in Africa (www.ice.xmu.edu.cn/english/showinfo.aspx?info_id=33). The concentration of XMU's partnerships are in Asia (with 68 Asian partnerships compared to ECNU's 43), which appears to reflect both its geographic position in the south-east of China, close to the borders of Southeast Asian countries and also its demographics, being home to many overseas Chinese communities from Southeast Asia. XMU appears to face itself towards Asia, alongside the strength of its partnerships with European institutions. XMU also has fewer links with America than ECNU. It is also interesting to note that XMU has 22 partnerships with Taiwanese universities, reflecting the significance of the geographical position of the city in relation to Taiwan. This again underlines the role of geopolitics in the development of collaboration.

A distinctive element of XMU's partnership is its approach to reaching out to Southeast Asia. XMU is the first Chinese university to set up an international branch campus abroad. In 2014 Xiamen University opened its Malaysia branch, located in the south-west of Kuala Lumpur. As with the branch campus opened by Nottingham University in Ningbo in China, the architecture of the new campus reflects that of XMU in Xiamen. The programme modules and degrees are consistent with those at XMU and all courses will be taught in English. The students will come mainly from China, Malaysia, and other Asian countries (wwwnewseng.xmu.edu.cn/s/212/t/702/a/153660/info.jspy). XMU is setting a huge precedent in its collaboration with Malaysia in transnational higher education. This is also a landmark event in Chinese higher education policy and illustrates again China's changing higher education landscape, particularly in its relationships with other countries.

Concluding remarks

While some characteristics of globalization are promoting common trends across higher education globally, it also appears to be the case that local differentiation in HE is continuing (Ng, 2012). Despite being driven by the market and global rankings, it appears that HE partnerships are also influenced by a complex combination of geographical and sociocultural contexts. Universities such as East China Normal and Xiamen University are influenced by their history and their communities, building partnerships on traditions that support the development of their collaborations. The picture is thus conflicting; while China still retains a strong 'catch-up' mentality and aims for its elite institutions to partner with dominant Western peers such as Oxford and Yale (Yang and Xie, 2015), local social and cultural factors will continue to have an impact on the development of partnerships.

While the open-door policy has enabled more students from rural areas in China to access higher education, research shows that young people from rural areas are in a much less privileged position in terms of education than those in urbanized areas, with access to the university entrance examination, the Gaokao, being easier for urban populations (Chiang *et al.*, 2015). The most elite universities are in the most urbanized and wealthy areas of the country, suggesting the need for enforced mobility for populations in rural areas (Yang, 2014). While access to education, particularly schools, in rural areas of China has expanded very rapidly in recent years (Chiang

et al., 2012), geographic mobility and migration is seen as being 'compulsory' for access to high-quality university education (Yang, 2014; Kong, 2010). The unequal spread of elite universities across the different provinces and regions of China may thus play a role in the continuance of inequality, although it is acknowledged that this may be attributed to a much broader range of complex social, cultural, political, and economic factors than are covered in this article.

It is important to note that the changing relationships and partnerships between universities globally is not just a matter of systems and institutional competition but as Marginson (2014) notes it has an impact on people's social status, their educational aspirations, and their lives more broadly. As Yang points out in the context of China:

> the hierarchical structure of the educational system, coupled with the arduous yet compulsory mobility entailed in educational participation, shapes the social and political imaginaries of citizens living in the periphery whose connections with the central state are otherwise tenuous.
>
> (Yang 2014: 1)

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