Reviews on Industrialization and Publicness of Higher Education in China

Xiu-feng ZHANG¹,a,* and Hui GAO¹

¹Department of College English, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

a zhangxiufengcnu@126.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. This paper introduces the industrialization processes of higher education in China and then reviews those researches, conducted by Chinese scholars since the 21st century, on the issue of industrialization and publicness of higher education mainly from four aspects: contribution made by the industrialization of higher education, defects brought with the industrialization of higher education, academic dispute on industrialization and publicness of higher education.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, countries all over the world have undertaken reforms of higher education, most important of which is to build market-oriented higher education and operate higher education as an industry. With the establishment of socialist market economic system, educational reform, especially reform of higher education, began its industrialization practice. In China, although authorities have not recognized the industrialization of education reform policies, but the concept of education industrialization was put forward and was partially put into practice since 1998. Under the particular social context (the Asian financial crisis), this practice, aiming at expanding domestic demand and promoting economic development, has greatly changed the mode of operation in traditional education, and has met the requirements of the times in its early period, and has vigorously promoted the development of higher education. Nevertheless, with the further development of higher education industrialization, a variety of defects emerged, which caused great reflection to Chinese scholars, who began to concern the nonprofit aspect of higher education, that is, the publicness of higher education. Accordingly, the industrialization and publicness of higher education launched a great academic debate in China.

This paper starts from the reviews of the industrialization processes of higher education in China and of the researches by those Chinese scholars on the issue of industrialization and publicness of higher education, and ends with the author’s self-reflections.

2. Industrialization Processes of Higher Education in China

The move toward a market orientation in Chinese higher education could be said to have started from the deregulation policies set forth in the middle of the 1980s.

Since the 1990s, due to the vow for a “socialist market economy” the move toward a market orientation of higher education was accelerated. Privatization, the introduction of corporate management, and entry into the international market began in this period.

At the end of the 1990s, the need for higher education to move toward a market orientation increased along with the dramatic development of massification of higher education. The introduction of corporate management expanded further.

Since 2003 the central focus of national policies turned from high economic growth to correcting disparities and emphasizing consumers. Introspection in the increasing market orientation of higher education began to appear against this backdrop.
3. Researches on the Industrialization and Publicness of Higher Education in China

Overall, the researches, conducted by Chinese scholars since the 21st century, on the issue of industrialization and publicness of higher education, mainly focused on four areas, which will be stated in details in the following passage.

3.1. Contribution Made by the Industrialization of Higher Education

The concept of the industrialization of education has won wide recognition and affirmation from many scholars. They believe that the implementation of the industrialization of education in China is necessary and feasible. From a macro perspective, the socialist market economy system has become an irreversible change; correspondingly, the industrialization of higher education, as the trend, is unstoppable and inevitable, and the industrialization is a must to reform the higher education.

From a micro perspective, the practice of industrialization of higher education has made great contribution to the social development and that of higher education in China. Firstly, the industrialization of education introduces the competitive mechanism, which greatly increases the operating efficiency of education and boosts the vitality and quality of higher education. Secondly, the industrialization of education reduces the government's financial burden, and the diversified sources of funding are conducive to solving the funding shortages faced by Chinese higher education. Especially in China, the number of people demanding for higher education ranks first in the world; however, China, as a developing country, has the limited financial resources unable to support the huge expenditure on education. The industrialization of higher education means the diversification of educational input, thus enabling to reduce the government's financial burden. Thirdly, the industrialization of higher education will facilitate the optimal allocation of educational resources. For example, the reduction of expense on higher education funding enables the government to have more financial education expenditure for elementary education, thereby improving the national education budget in the allocation. Fourth, the industrialization of higher education meets the educational demands of the entire community.

Statistics shows that China's higher education has experienced a leap-forward development since 1999. Take 2008 as an example. Various universities and colleges in China admitted 5.99 million students, which is about 5.8 times as many as that of 1998. The number of college students in school has reached more than 20 million and the gross enrollment rate has reached more than 23%. It is recognized internationally that if the gross enrollment rate arrives at 15% ~ 50%, the higher education will enter into the period of mass higher education. The industrialization of higher education greatly meets the demand for higher education for the general public so that the higher education in China accesses fast to the era of massification.

3.2. Defects Brought with the Industrialization of Higher Education

However, with the deepening of the industrialization of higher education, a lot of defects are increasingly springing up, which led to the strong opposition by many scholars to the industrialization of higher education reforms. The oppositions focused on the following points.

From a macro-point of view, the industrialization of higher education is contradictory with the socialist system. From the basic principles of Marxism and the nature of education, Meng made it clear that the higher education in socialist countries should adhere to the services to the majority of people, and thus the industrialization and commercialization of higher education should be avoided. From the micro-point of view, first of all, the industrialization of higher education has led to the educational gap among different classes of people, which goes against the publicness and equity in education. Education has a public property and public welfare, which is the essence of education and determines that the education is essentially a lofty public welfare activity. Secondly, the industrialization of higher education has transferred the cost of education, but also has set up the breeding ground for local bonds and high fees, increasing the burden on the population. Thirdly, the industrialization of higher education has expanded the scale of enrollment, but it has resulted in lower quality of education, due to the growth of lagging educational resources; meanwhile, it has damaged the credibility of higher education. 
Fourth, the industrialization of higher education is not feasible considering the current social and economic development of China. [22]

3.3. Academic Dispute on Industrialization and Publicness of Higher Education

As noted above, on the industrialization of higher education, the challenge and controversy has always existed and the argument focuses on whether the higher education is a public or private or quasi-public product? Can the industrialization and publicness of higher education be compatible with each other? To what extent will the industrialization of higher education be practiced? Some scholars believe that education belongs to the field of mental production, responsible for disseminating knowledge, educating people, exploring the truth, making the innovation and progress, so the education is a public good with public welfare, and it cannot be industrialized. [17][21]

It is pointed out that considering the reality of higher education, the publicness is the essential attribute of higher education and its content involves three aspects: first, the higher education is for the public and it should benefit the most population; second, the effect produced by the implementation of higher education benefits the public. [24] For example, the public cause, the social development and the economic development have all gained from the development of higher education in a wide range of benefits. In this sense, the higher education has provided more room and platform to achieve personal welfare and public welfare simultaneously. Third, the higher education provides the support and spiritual guidance and lasting values on the national cause and long-term development of human wisdom. Therefore, we cannot just focus on the immediate utility, partial satisfaction, and short-term interests and demands. In view of the publicness of higher education, some scholars hold that the state and government cannot shirk its responsibility in the protecting and promoting the publicness of higher education and they have to take the primary responsibility to ensure the publicness of higher education. [25][26]

However, some scholars challenge the publicness of higher education. They state that higher education is a quasi-public product because the education has not only a nature of public products but also that of private products. [8][9][26] Education, as a social product, has the public nature reflected in the results of consumption, which not only benefits the receiver but the society. In other words, the educational products benefit the receiver; at the same time, a large part of those benefits spillover to the society through the actions of those receivers. Therefore, the education including higher education contains both a private and public product attributes and it should be regarded as quasi-public product. From this perspective, we cannot blindly emphasized the public attribute of higher education, and swallow the conclusion that the higher education can only be invested by the government, which has resulted in the awkward situation of education because of the a state monopoly in education.

Meanwhile, some scholars agree that higher education has the public attribute, but do not agree on the total negation of the industrialization of higher education. They believe that the concept of higher education industrialization has nothing wrong in itself, however, it has been misunderstood and distorted in practice. [1][6][23] The idea of education industrialization has been introduced from western countries, but its real connotation has been undermined, which has led to the result that considers the industrialization of higher education equivalent to the commercialization of higher education. Such an idea of the industrialization of education in China is far from the idea of the industrialization of education in Western countries. It is pointed out that the "industrialization of education" is completely a "Chinese concept", which was implemented in the field of education as " the education reform purely from the financial perspective", that is, this kind of education reform has been undertaken under the serious shortage of funding for education background, whose purpose is to make up for funding shortage and pursue the growth and efficiency around the school, management, conversion, fees, property rights and other issues. [27] The counterpart concept of it in western countries is called "marketization of education ", which was put forward in the 1980s and applied mainly in the field of higher education. It has three main aspects in practice: first is to reduce the state’s or government’s proportion of investment in higher education funding and to increase non-governmental (marketing, personal or family) investments in higher education; second
is to strengthen higher education links with the private sector and strengthen university-business links; third is to strengthen the role of private higher education. Thus, the original market-oriented approach was designed to improve governance by introducing market mechanisms in allocating resources, adjusting educational structure and improving the vitality, quality and efficiency of higher education. The misunderstanding of Western ideas of “the industrialization of education” in China brought about the result that those major higher education policy, conducted in China since the 1990s are generally followed this idea so that the increasing defects of them are subjected to being criticized. These policies includes those income-generating activities by universities, such as high charges, attached companies, "Secondary College", "Independent Institute" and the construction of "University City" and so on.

Moreover, some scholars believe that the public interest and private interest of higher education can co-exist, and they can be transformed into each other under certain conditions, which is the result of policy choices. The publicness has always been the essential attribute of higher education, but in the case of lack of resources, production of personal interest of higher education is inevitable.

Speaking from the essential meaning, the publicness of higher education doesn’t entirely conflict with the higher education industrialization or marketization theory. The publicness and the profit of higher education can be unified in the industrialization of it.

4. Conclusion

In short, the industrialization of higher education is not concerned only with realizing the marketization, nor is it with the increase of fee or investment or with the issue of efficiency and equity. The industrialization of higher education is a complex project closely related to the public policy, politics reform, economic reform and other aspects in China, and thus it requires the further improvement and development both theoretically and practically.

References


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