

Internationalised While Provincialised? A Case Study of South China Normal University

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ABSTRACT *Globalisation and internationalisation are both taken as salient features of our times in significant modern and post-modern social theories. Their impacts on the university are substantial. This study examines how Chinese universities are responding to these phenomena, using South China Normal University as an example. By presenting an analysis of China's internationalisation of higher education through an in-depth case study in an international context, the article captures some of the university's experience in its cultural complexity and social contexts. It sheds light on the general current state of internationalisation in the mainstream of China's higher education, and underscores the idea that changes attributed to globalisation are modified and fashioned by the particular circumstances and choices of local institutions. The study reveals how local circumstances offset and/or resist the global, and that how difficult it can be to manage the global within the local in a new, changed context.*

Introduction

Globalisation and internationalisation are taken as salient features of our times in significant modern and post-modern social theories (Held *et al.*, 1999). They are not only most interchangeably used in academic circles, but are also often confused in the wider world. They are, however, two different terms, reflecting phenomena with different rationales, objectives and effects (Welch, 1998).

The concept of globalisation spans separate, overlapping domains (Sklair, 1998). Ultimately, it is a process spearheaded by multinational financial and industrial conglomerates (Burbach *et al.*, 1997). The widely discussed globalisation phenomenon fundamentally results from the globalisation of economic life, which is largely a universalisation of capitalism (MacEwan, 1994). Today's globalisation is a market-induced process (Mittelman, 1996), driven by market expansion (United Nations Development Programme, 1999).

As globalisation is radically reshaping the face of the university worldwide through market competition (Kishun, 1998), internationalisation is entailed. With the advancement of human understanding and the universality of knowledge as its fundamental meaning, internationalisation is principally different from globalisation in that it refers to the reciprocal exchange of people, ideas, good and services between two or more nations and cultures identities (Yang, 2002a).

The current world trend of globalisation has delivered clear disadvantages as well as

benefits. Its effect on higher education is not likely to be uniform, nor is its outcome inevitable (Curie & Newson, 1998). Neither globalisation nor internationalisation is an uncontested phenomenon or concept. Ideas of globalisation are always implemented only under the specific conditions of institutions, while the impact of globalisation must be measured against the retention of local values and contexts.

The phenomena of internationalisation and globalisation are becoming major domains of enquiry within comparative education. A key question concerns the interfaces between the local, the national and the international (Yang, 2000), within the current changing context (Arnove & Torres, 1999). To achieve this, the existing literature cannot suffice, and empirical research is urgently needed. One major problem of the existing literature is the tendency for arguments to be based on sweeping generalisations and abstract theoretical assertions insufficiently connected to specific historical examples and evidence. There are still too few studies of the implications of globalisation processes grounded in detailed examinations of particular historical and geographical times and spaces (Knight & De Wit, 1997). Empirical comparative studies in internationalisation of higher education particularly in less developed countries are badly needed.

This study presents an analysis of internationalisation of higher education in China through an in-depth case study of South China Normal University (SCNU) in concrete flesh-and-blood form. It is based upon fieldwork and field interviews carried out by the author at SCNU in 1998. Data derived in such manner hope to portray the living reality of SCNU, and the perceptions of relevant actors. The study is also based on the researcher's longstanding personal working experience at a Chinese university, and on some primary as well as secondary sources of information about the current situation in China. The aim of this study is to capture some of China's experience of higher education internationalisation in its cultural complexity, and its social contexts. It attempts to better understand how expanding economic globalisation and changing international relations between China and the rest of the world is having implications at ground level for the mission and functions of the university.

The administration of higher education institutions follows vertical and horizontal patterns of general public administration in China (Cheng, 1998). There are institutions all over the country that are administered in the vertical system by ministries of the central government. Another system is the horizontal system where institutions within a locality are administered by the local (mainly provincial) governments. The differentiation is a major factor of influence on the extent of internationalisation. SCNU belongs to the horizontal system. A detailed discussion of its practice sheds light on the general current state of internationalisation in the mainstream of China's higher education.

A Historical Sketch of SCNU

The founding of SCNU can be dated to the establishment of the Teachers' College of Rangqing University which was established in 1933 with three schools: Arts and History, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry, and Geography and Museum Studies. The College was at the highest level of academic quality in Guangzhou in the South, and challenged the National Peking Normal University in the North. By the end of the 1930s, there were four schools (Arts and History, Social Studies Education, Geography and Museum Studies, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry), one training programme (Physical Education), and 18 classes with a total student population of 192, of which 90% were from Guangdong.

By October 1949 when control over the College was assumed by the Chinese

Communist Party, it had eight departments: Chinese, Foreign Languages, History, Education, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Geography; 646 students, and 124 teaching and working staff. Its name was soon changed into South China Teachers' College (SCTC) to reflect its primary purpose of strengthening teacher education, to meet the need of secondary school teachers. By 1953, it became one of the largest institutions in southern China with 2,480 students. Academic programmes were expanded to 11 departments. Staff numbers increased from 154 to 552 with a total teaching and research staff number of 243, of which 64 were Professors, 33 Associate Professors, 44 Lecturers, and 102 Teacher Assistants.

From 1953, SCTC began to systematically use knowledge and texts from the former Soviet Union. From the first semester of 1953–1954 academic year, SCTC required that all its disciplines use Soviet textbooks as much as possible. By the second semester, at least 50% of all courses used Soviet textbooks or syllabus. The Mathematics Department, for example, used Soviet textbooks in all its 19 courses. This was considered 'necessary to change the situation of using the inadequate Western textbooks and efficient in stopping teachers' free talking in classes' (Liang & Zhao, 1996, p. 100). Beyond the utilisation of Soviet materials, there was little conscious international activity.

From May 1966 to November 1977, China cut itself off from the outside world, and its whole academic system was closed for almost a decade. Among higher education institutions in Guangzhou, SCTC was one of the most severely afflicted. When order was re-established in higher education, and China began to adopt policies of openness and reform, SCTC followed suit; it recruited 1,050 students in 1977, and 700 in 1978. Its operations were gradually regularised and it increased its international contacts. In 1979, there were 50 visitors from foreign countries and Hong Kong, including a group from Hong Kong, which was invited to lecture on computer sciences for 15 days.

Meanwhile, more and more SCTC staff went abroad for academic purposes. Ten teachers were invited by the Chinese University of Hong Kong to participate in a symposium on language education in 1979. In 1980, six staff went to India, the USA, Japan and Hong Kong for academic visits or conferences. In 1981, a professor attended the International Symposium on Rice in Philippine as a keynote speaker, and two scholars of education were invited to visit the University of Sydney for 8 weeks. From 1978 to 1982, 15 teachers went to the USA, the UK and Australia to read for higher degrees or as Visiting Fellows.

From here, international collaboration grew. The first agreement with a foreign institution was reached with the University of Nebraska to conduct collaborative research on special education and to exchange academic staff. The University of Nebraska sent a professor of child psychology to work in SCTC in 1981 for one year. In exchange, a lecturer in education was sent to the University of Nebraska for a year of training.

In recognition of this smooth recovery and further developments, the Guangdong Government classified SCTC as a provincial key institution. In October 1982, permitted by the Guangdong Government and the then State Education Commission, its name was changed to South China Normal University.

Perceptions of Internationalisation

As a provincial teacher training institution, SCNU has been relatively stronger in humanities and social sciences, particularly in educational studies. Most interviews

conducted at SCNU represented views of contemporary Chinese academics in social sciences and humanities.

A professor from the Department of Audio-Visual Education, for example, considered higher education internationalisation as the training of highly qualified personnel with the most contemporary knowledge and perspectives. With his central focus on humanities and social sciences, the meaning of internationalisation was to gain a better perspective on traditional Chinese culture and to dialogue with the whole world. For him, internationalisation was inevitable because a researcher of humanities and social sciences has to possess good knowledge of both the mainstream of world cultural development, as well as her/his own culture, in order to be internationally accepted. Internationalisation is thus substantially a means to use the spirit of the times as a background to reflect on one's own culture and to reactivate those elements that suit the present era. It is in this sense that a researcher lacking a global perspective cannot grasp the essence of the times, and will fail to explore the true value of her/his work.

Such a stress on internationalisation, however, does not imply the domination of Western culture. According to most SCNU respondents, Western culture did dominate most parts of the world early in this century. Things, however, had changed by the end of the twentieth century. One respondent remarked, not without some satisfaction, that 'one of the inclinations of the current post-modernist thinking is its increasing colouring of oriental cultures' (Interview SCNU/2). Internationalisation is perceived by SCNU respondents as a process in which various cultures run up against each other and mix together, a process of diversification in cultural and educational spheres. Their viewpoints correspond with the view that people are currently advised to ponder the tolerance of cultural diversity (Jones, 1998; Kellner, 1998).

A professor of education at SCNU defined the internationalisation of higher education as international scholarly communications, and emphasised the increasing participation of Chinese scholars into the world academic community. He suggested that the integration of Chinese academia with the international community as the only way that China has adapted its national open and reform policy. This, however, is not to pay homage to systems or practices in certain countries, claims another professor of education, who clearly expressed his perception that there is indeed a centre-periphery set-up in global higher education, that the modern Chinese higher education system was an import from the West, and that the major centres of learning are all in Western countries (Interview SCNU/3). Given this context, internationalisation of China's higher education becomes especially important and urgent, with some specific implications. The only choice is to integrate Chinese universities with the international community of higher education, and to develop themselves in the process.

Several interviewees interpreted the substance of internationalisation from a viewpoint of educational quality and research strength. A returned student from Japan (and subsequently professor of psychology) pointed out emphatically the differences between the present Chinese way of conducting research in social sciences, and that of the international practice. Heaving an expressive sigh, he said 'we have no choice but to work hard and approach the world level' (Interview SCNU/5). He was not optimistic, however, that this would happen in the coming decades.

Scholars from science and technology responded to internationalisation of higher education in a very different way. Their responses were more specific, with concrete emphases on the international similarities of science and technology research paradigms and output. A female lecturer of physics and returned student from Japan argued that internationalisation centres on educational quality and research strength. She articulated

that China faces various difficulties brought especially by poor governmental administration at various levels, and inappropriate institutional management, which hinders rather than promotes international cooperative activities (Interview SCNU/7). According to her, the meaning of internationalisation is to connect with the world community and conform to international practice.

The remarks made by SCNU's respondents demonstrates that in addition to concrete contents internationalisation encompasses commitments, attitudes, global awareness and orientation. The case of SCNU also reflects the national scenario in which the current emphasis on internationalisation is regarded as a strategy to develop China's higher education. What is easily accepted by individual universities then is the practical aspect of internationalisation: the improvement of institutional research competitiveness in the international arena.

Internationalisation, Institutional Relevance to Community and Local Interests

The relationship between internationalisation and institutional local characteristics is crucial to universities in non-Western societies, where nearly every university has to struggle for a balance between conformity with world trends, and its service to local society (Knight & De Wit, 1997). The problems of looking outward and inward at the same time are substantial, particularly when combined with immense pressures to contribute directly to national development and to participate in the international system (Altbach, 1998). The relationship has long been a concern of scholars in international relations in education. Based on her longstanding observation, rich knowledge and actual experience of educational development within China and internationally, Ruth Hayhoe, for example, expressed her concern about whether Guangzhou universities would sacrifice their regular duties of serving the needs of local society to international activities, during an interview in which I consulted her *en route* to China to do my field study.

Surprisingly, while most Chinese scholars see this as a key issue, they almost unanimously agree that there are no conflicts between internationalisation and institutional relevance to local demands, despite the fact that there are very different understandings of what these characteristics are (Yang, 2002b). There is an evident convergence in the relationship between university internationalisation and the building of institutional capacity at national, local and institutional levels. As more than one scholar from SCNU insisted, China can learn from Japan to integrate its traditions with Western culture in order to build a new culture which both resulted from global trends and suited local needs.

Interestingly, one respondent cited Japan as a negative instance. He talked about his impression that some international activities exerted a negative influence on Japanese psychological studies, which after years of following the Western path blindly, had approached the international level in terms of theoretical studies on the one hand, but failed to reflect on its own contents on the other. Although Japanese educational psychology, he argued, has been simulating the West, Japanese researchers have now found that there are many educational problems in Japan calling for their attention. Advocacy of approaching so-called world-class level has been seriously criticised in the late 1990s for its ignorance of local needs. According to the interviewee, while China should learn a good lesson from the Japanese case, the two cases are very different: China's system of higher education is less developed than that of Japan, thus the

aforesaid effect is correspondingly almost nil. Nonetheless, China must remain vigilant, to ensure local needs are not ignored.

As Zhang Renjie (1994) points out, to foster Chinese characteristics involves a process of indigenisation/localisation of higher education, itself an integral part of internationalisation. This view was popularly held by SCNU scholars, albeit often with different emphases. To implement internationalisation is considered a fundamental prerequisite of the fostering of Chinese characteristics due to the fact that Chinese modernisation is later than that of many other countries. As a latecomer, China's higher education needs to strive for world-class levels, which requires learning from, and conformity to, international practices; which, however, can only be carried out on Chinese soil with China's contemporary context and real needs as the starting point. Internationalisation then in no way contradicts national, regional and institutional characteristics. An institution can preserve its strong national, regional as well as institutional identities while becoming highly internationalised.

Such viewpoints are further justified by the fact that science and technology have penetrated every corner in modern societies. This has important implications for the provincialism of SCNU in its strive for internationalisation. Provincialism refers essentially to localisation/indigenisation. Its central focus is on the grasp of the knowledge of locality, which, however, has to be achieved within an international context. It is here that the universal is conjoined with the particular (Spybey, 1996). The meaning of globalisation becomes a reflective process involving global inputs and local acts of reproduction (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992).

Under this scenario, local issues have global relevance. Research projects on local development, for example, can be highly theoretical and entail the most advanced knowledge. As the world is increasingly globalising, solutions to local problems require sophisticated understanding of the external world. This required local conditions that determine institutional approaches to internationalisation to be seen in a qualitatively different context.

In practice, however, this is far easier said than done. Even if a few SCNU scholars did mention the possible conflict between the two, they did not assume it to be a serious problem. While a noticeable number of them cited Japan as evidence to prove there were no such conflicts (which mirrors the view commonly held by the Chinese academics), the recent recession there has provoked some reassessment of international practices, and a move towards multiethnic and indigenous education (Suzuki, 1998). Such self-scrutiny, however, has been largely absent at SCNU.

Orientations for Development

On 21 November 1981, the then President Ma Xiaoyun spoke at a celebration of the 30th anniversary of SCTC. He argued that, since Guangzhou enjoyed a privileged status as the Southern gate of China [generally one step ahead of other parts of China (Vogel, 1989)] to build direct, and comprehensive contacts with foreign countries, SCTC should make good use of this privilege to develop into the centre of Guangdong's teacher education (Liang & Zhao, 1996). Ma set the tone for the later development of SCTC. Both its structure and scale were determined by the perceived demands of secondary school teachers, largely in Guangdong. In 1982, SCTC had 13 specialities in 11 Departments. By 1998, the number had reached 27 and 21, respectively, while the University now offers 35 Masters and four Doctoral programmes.

Being a provincial university with teacher training as its central focus, SCNU is not

at the forefront of research. Its one and only plant physiology post-doctoral centre at the Department of Biological Sciences is an exception. [A post-doctoral centre is eyed as a sign of the highest academic level in the concerned field in China, whose establishment needs to be approved by the Ministry of Education (Hayhoe, 1989; Gu, 1991).] By 1997, 11 post-doctoral fellows working in this centre had contributed more than 80 publications in national and international scholarly journals. Several of them had received numerous invitations from abroad to attend conferences in the USA, Japan, Italy and the like. Despite the fact that internationalisation means much more than research, in practice research plays the central role in internationalisation of even provincial institutions that are not very much research-oriented. Accordingly, the substantial internationalisation of SCNU is fairly limited because it lacks a strong research record.

A returned PhD, now full professor and head of one of the few departments with Doctoral programmes, responded in a minor key:

Research in China lags far behind that of North American and European countries and Japan. Internationalisation means to catch up with them, or at least follow them closely. It is not only necessary but also urgent. But this seems to be hard to achieve. The first problem we face is our financial difficulties. Secondly, is our very limited international communication and the lack of foreign language proficiency of most faculty. This has limited our capacity to exploit possible exchange channels, and develop collaborative research. In my judgement, I think these have all resulted from the inappropriateness of institutional administration within our University. On the one hand, almost everyone agrees that we have a long way to go to approach the level of advanced countries; on the other, it seems that it does not matter whether we are behind or not. Within our University, for example, if you want to get promoted, the basic requirement is four or five research articles published in nationally, or even provincially, circulated journals. No extra value is given to international publications. Then why should I bother that much to try to achieve them? In fact, promotion is almost the only powerful means to push most staff to publish. Unlike international publications that usually represent fresh findings, as you may know well, Chinese publications do not mean the same. Appropriate incentive mechanisms are especially needed to encourage greater interest in publishing internationally. If you do genuine research, you have to work hard. But at the end of the day you will find you get less than others. Is it worth the trouble? (Interview SCNU/5)

My interview was conducted just after this respondent had successfully competed for the post of Director of the University's personnel department. His choice of this career path was based more on economic than academic rationales, because to be a director of a personnel section can mean to have more power and income (often hidden) than that of a full professor.

Other respondents echoed the above view. One established scholar, who had been selected to be on the Committee to assess qualifications for academic promotion, also expressed his worry about the failure of SCNU's institutional policy to lead its members to foster a healthy organisational culture. He claimed that academic promotion has failed to stimulate teachers towards doing excellent research work. 'Such policy is especially demanded in social sciences and humanities because they are soft, more difficult to link to international practice, and hence the need of guidance is also more urgent.' (Interview SCNU/1)

Faculty

While the total number of teaching and research staff remained largely unchanged, internal structures have changed significantly. From 1985 to 1995, the average age of professors, associate professors and lectures has changed respectively from 69.8, 61.5 and 45.8 to 58.01, 48.52 and 37.55; the percentages of Doctoral, Masters and Bachelor degrees as the highest degrees held by SCNU faculty changed from 0, 6.16 and 93.84 to 5, 32 and 63, respectively; the numbers of professors, associate professors, lecturers and teacher assistants changed from 40 (3.4%), 157 (13.2%), 485 (40.7%) and 510 (42.7%) to 131 (11%), 371 (32%), 450 (39%) and 145 (17%) (Liang & Zhao, 1996, p. 450). The changes show that SCNU's more favourable conditions than the average Chinese higher education institutions (due to the greater economic development in Guangdong), has attracted better-qualified faculty from other regions of China.

Despite recent improvements, however, SCNU faculty are not particularly strong academically. By 1998, only 10 professors were officially nominated as Doctoral student advisors. [In China, this is a prestigious title given by the central government to nationally leading scholars, based on their academic achievement (Gu, 1991).] This very limited number contrasts starkly with most national key universities (World Bank, 1997). Furthermore, as one might expect, the extent to which these professors engaged in international communications decreased according to their age. Among them, only one, born in 1905, had undergraduate study experience in Japan 60 years ago. It is also worth pointing out that six of them were recently transferred from some prestigious universities, where they conducted their best-known research. Those that have been on faculty at SCNU for many years have done little high-quality research, nor have they published internationally.

Meanwhile, most young academics continue to work behind closed doors without much attention to international development in their fields. The situation is much more serious in humanities and social sciences, where a surprising number have recently gained higher degrees with little knowledge about what is going on with their areas of study outside mainland China. Reasons elicited from the interviewees were: the extreme lack of foreign language reference journals and books (this is regrettably an ongoing problem, due both to financial stringencies and the rising prices of foreign books and journals), little or no substantial scholarly communications, and lack of incentives to work toward internationalisation.

Based on the notion that international scholarly communication can substantially contribute to academic improvement, SCNU has recently started to encourage greater staff activity in international matters, and sponsor them to attend international conferences, read for higher degrees overseas, and conduct collaborative research with foreign colleagues. SCNU also attaches much importance to their foreign language training with particular stress on English, and has paved the way for academic staff to register for membership of international scholarly organisations. However these efforts are only recent, and not entirely successful, because (rightly or wrongly) the University lacks a strong academic base of achievement that it can use to respond to global challenges in its own way.

Students

The fact that SCNU is not very internationally oriented is expressed clearly in its student population. In 1998, it had 9,908 undergraduate and 331 postgraduate full-time students,

with only 40 overseas students (including those from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan). However, as early as in the 1950s, SCTC began to recruit students from Hong Kong and Macau. The reappearance of Hong Kong and Macau students did not occur until 1989. Recently, SCNU held exams in Hong Kong and Macau to recruit students. Compared to other institutions (usually the national key universities) that are also permitted by the central government to recruit students from those areas, SCNU was at a relatively lower academic level with less reputation. It has, however, used its advantages of geographical proximity and historical origin to promote the intake of students from Hong Kong and Macau. Since 1989, SCNU has recruited 77 students from the regions.

In order to better exploit its advantages, SCNU is trying to attract Hong Kong and Macau students to enrol in its postgraduate programmes, which are highly favoured by some SCNU graduates now living in the regions, who hope to further their studies while working. The Masters programmes began in 1989, with six part-time students, initially studying History of Chinese Education, Classical Chinese Literature, and Human Geography. In 1990, Educational Psychology Programmes alone recruited 15 students from Macau and one from Hong Kong. In 1993, the number of Macau students increased to 18. From 1994, the then State Education Commission integrated the University's programmes with the national plan, and therefore the recruitment of postgraduate students from Hong Kong and Macau to SCNU became regular and institutionalised.

SCNU does not attach substantial importance to students, although students have a crucial role to play in internationalisation (Back *et al.*, 1997). Most respondents simply did not mention students, or made only a brief comment. This may be partly because the number of overseas students was too small. It is more directly related, however, to the perception of internationalisation. It is worth mentioning that one rationale for recruiting foreign students is economic benefits, in a situation where the proportion of the institutional budget deriving from central government has declined substantially in recent years (Min, 1999). As a regional teacher training centre, SCNU cannot compete well internationally, and hence has confined on Hong Kong and Macau.

As one interviewee explained, 'The only choice of our University is to make good use of its own conditions to recruit as many students from overseas as possible. By so doing, we can obtain a certain amount of resources for our own survival.' (Interview SCNU/3) He then laughed because we both understood that the real meaning of the 'resources for survival': personal income. In the SCNU case, this has indeed become the first priority of overseas student education, which is quite different from the situation in many other Chinese institutions [although there are strong signs that such developments will occur within these other campuses too in the coming years (Yang, 2002b)].

Educational Provision in Hong Kong and Macau

To some extent, SCNU's operation in Hong Kong and Macau is exceptional because normally only the top Chinese institutions that are strong in teaching and research are permitted (by governments) to provide education there. The reason that SCNU was able to take this opportunity was its cultural, geographical and historical connections with these regions.

Hong Kong

In 1984, Guangdong government gave approval to SCNU to offer offshore programmes of five-year correspondence education in Hong Kong, as requested by the Hong Kong

Teachers Association and with strong support from by the Xinhua News Agency (Hong Kong). Altogether, there were 41 students: 25 in the Chinese programme, 13 in Mathematics, and three in Geography. Most were Hong Kong secondary school teachers and administrators. 30 (21 in Chinese, 7 in Mathematics and two in Geography) finished their undergraduate study and obtained Bachelor degrees five years later.

This was the only occasion when SCNU offered formal degree-granting adult education in Hong Kong. Thereafter, competition to provide education in Hong Kong became increasingly fierce when some top Chinese universities in various regions of China, and more importantly, some foreign universities notably Australian, American and British universities, all joined the competition. Being relatively weak in its teaching and research strengths, lacking an excellent reputation, SCNU could not continue to compete. It thus lost one good opportunity to expand its education internationally, because Hong Kong has been particularly important in internationalising mainland Chinese universities by playing the role as the beachhead (Postiglione, 1996), and by providing them with crucial benefits (Postiglione, 1998). This shows that international higher education faces stiff competition. Moreover, competitiveness is always closely linked to educational (in reality, research) excellence.

Macau

About half a year before SCNU began to provide higher education in Hong Kong, the All-China Education Society in Macau invited SCNU to offer correspondence higher education in Macau to train secondary and primary schools teachers. SCNU accepted the task with much pleasure. March 1985 marked the inception of a three-year training programme, a collaborative project with the Macau Education Department and the All-China Education Society with 166 trainees. A five-year Bachelor's programme of Chinese Language and Literature began in November 1985 with 137 trainees. Thereafter, more programmes were offered, most of which were upgraded to Bachelor degree level. The number of trainees kept increasing substantially. About one-third of preschool, primary and secondary teachers in Macau participated in these programmes (Zhang & Wu, 1997).

SCNU's educational provision in Macau promoted educational and cultural exchanges between Guangzhou and Macau (Bray & Koo, 1999). Both the Guangdong provincial government and the Macau Government have always been supportive. The programmes have also gained financial support from various media and organisations in Macau. When teachers from SCNU lectured in Macau, they were often invited by the media to give scholarly talks on TV and newspapers. Through these contacts, understandings between the two regions have deepened, showing that implications of the educational cooperation extend far beyond the educational sphere.

There is certainly more than one reason behind SCNU's successfully educational provision in Macau (which is still not the hottest target of competition for many prestigious, Chinese and foreign, universities with better developed offshore academic programmes). SCNU, while one step ahead to enter Macau, continued to base its practice on its advantage—teacher education. This demonstrates strongly that in terms of international activities, universities cannot hit out in all directions; instead they should rather exploit their own advantages, and use them as a basis for further development.

Despite the fact that Macau was incorporated into China in December 1999, after eliciting opinions from SCNU faculty, I often left discussions with a sense that the Macau offshore programmes, perhaps combined with other devices, remained one of the

most promising, yet unexploited and even unexplored, devices to provide SCNU faculty with the benefits of an international experience. It seems that the side benefits of faculty participation in such offshore programmes may not always be readily apparent to those who are benefiting. Similar to the findings of studies in the United States, which show evidence of positive effects (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991), the benefits (except for the economic ones) are more easily observable with hindsight, or through the eyes of outside observers.

International Communications

SCNU has gradually expanded its international educational exchange programmes and communications since the early 1980s. During the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1986–1990), it had regular communications with 18 institutions in the USA, the former Soviet Union, Canada, the UK, Australia and Italy (Liang & Zhao, 1996), and established institutional relations with four of them. During this period, SCNU convened, independently or collaboratively, four international conferences, and sent 113 faculty abroad to study for postgraduate degrees and/or for academic visits. SCNU academic staff (161) went overseas to give academic lectures or conduct collaborative research and to attend conferences (78).

These exchanges continued to increase in the Eighth and Ninth Five-Year Plans. From July 1991 to March 1995, SCNU received 105 visitors from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, 190 other foreign visitors (including 69 participants of an international conference held at SCNU), as well as World Bank researchers. Some visitors expressed interests, or took away with them the interests of SCNU, in mutual institutional/departmental collaboration of various kinds. At the same time, while these should certainly be applauded, most of them have remained only on paper.

Meanwhile, SCNU continued to send its staff abroad to attend conferences and conduct collaborative research. The number, however, was by no means substantial. From 1991 to 1993, SCNU sent two to Macau, three to Hong Kong, and 11 to foreign countries. Most of them were sent for conferences. There were significant imbalances among various countries: five of the 11 academics attended US conferences.

After years of efforts, SCNU has extended its external contacts to many parts of the world still with huge imbalance between affluent regions such as North America, Europe and Oceania and economically less developed areas including Africa, South America and many parts of Asia. Institutional agreements for educational collaboration and exchange have been established with universities in a variety of countries. Despite the fact that SCNU is only a provincial institution, its partners in international cooperation emphasise overwhelmingly on the major research universities in major developed countries particularly in the USA. This is directly linked to the aforementioned understanding of internationalisation, and often leads SCNU to an awkward position: while this can help SCNU improve its academic strength in some areas to certain extent, it largely fails to assist SCNU to fulfil fundamental tasks bestowed upon it by virtue of its position within the system and determined by its actual capacity.

SCNU has tried various means to establish links with foreign institutions, international organisations and associations. By such means SCNU can strengthen its collaboration with international organisations, attract foreign students/scholars, get in touch with foreign institutions, and even raise educational funds. Overseas alumni, for example, have been an efficient way to introduce expertise, update syllabus and improve library and research facilities.

International communication is gradually coming to play an increasingly important role in the operation of SCNU. In addition to its contribution to teaching and research, it is also becoming more evident in the management of the University. Funds from overseas constitute a certain amount of research funds, and a substantial proportion of overall donations (Liang & Zhao, 1996).

Conclusions

The practice of SCNU reveals that the implementation of internationalisation in a provincial university is fundamentally restricted by its local conditions, which may embrace financial resources, university members' perspective, institutional role within the higher educational system, and institutional policy orientations. It demonstrates that provincial institutions are often in an awkward position to implement internationalisation, and are therefore not achieving their goals. Implementing internationalisation is thus even harder for provincial institutions, with comparatively weaker teaching and research strengths, and meagre financial resources.

The difficulty has been caused first by a one-sided understanding of internationalisation which emphasises the accomplishment of world-class research to a similar degree in all universities, despite an unwritten understanding that there should be a national division of labour. Secondly, there is a determinist element in Chinese higher education that puts a particular model of institution at the top and creates conditions that offer almost insuperable barriers to lower-ranked institutions emulating the higher ranked. This is aggravated by the still highly centralised administration. The question that needs to be asked of the system is how do the institutions with less social prestige define a role for themselves that allows them to focus on achievable goals.

SCNU has its strengths, however, of which its post-doctoral centre stands out. But this only underlines that internationalisation is clearly related to perceived research level, not only nationally, but particularly internationally. Another comparatively successful example is its offshore educational provision in Macau. These two examples indicate, from opposite extremes, that although provincial universities might exploit their strong points, they should fundamentally base their practice on their own circumstances, and identify appropriate targets without blindly 'moving with the tide' (Currie & Newson, 1998).

To a degree, SCNU is much better positioned to establish international links compared to many other Chinese provincial universities. Guangzhou's proximity to Hong Kong and Macau is a distinct advantage over universities in other provinces. While visitors from Hong Kong can easily have a one-day visit to Guangzhou, foreign scholars often visit China via Guangzhou. This advantage, however, has not been well integrated with SCNU's own agendas.

Equally regrettable, SCNU has not established steady substantial exchange programmes with many of its foreign peers with similar roles in their higher education systems, and has not collaborated with overseas colleagues and institutions in educational studies (one of SCNU's strongest academic foci). These failings, however, are not peculiar to SCNU. They are common among other Chinese provincial universities, and in many universities in other developing countries (Knight & De Wit, 1997).

On the other hand, SCNU has made considerable achievement within a short period of time. As one interviewee summarised:

In general, great changes have taken place in our University in the past two decades. For example, 20 years ago, except for the elderly who returned to

China before the 50s, there were no young or even middle-aged returned students. There was no opportunity to go out or to introduce foreign expertise at all. As for the current condition for research, it is of course far from satisfactory, but is certainly much better than what it was 20 years ago. Other areas such as research funds and the perspectives of our teachers have also progressed a lot. Many of our teachers have obtained some overseas experience during this period. Although only a few have obtained foreign degrees, a considerable proportion have visited foreign countries for a short period of time, gone abroad to attend international conferences, or begun to communicate with foreign colleagues. (Interview SCNU/8)

The practice of SCNU underscores the idea that changes attributed to globalisation are modified and fashioned by the particular circumstances and choices of local institutions. It reveals how factors in particular situations shape the particular forms that globalisation takes in specific institutions and provide the basis for resistance and countervailing tendencies. It demonstrates that higher education internationalisation is based on local circumstances within an international context, and relies on this base to respond to external forces. This reminds us of the shortage of empirical studies in higher education internationalisation literature, which as De Wit (1999) criticises, often ignore the links between the international and the local environment.

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