

China's Outward-oriented Internationalization Pathways to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs)

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Abstract: MOOCs' outward-oriented internationalization is significant in higher education and international diplomacy. In higher education, MOOCs serve as educational products to provide for global learners, thereby enhancing the international reputation of the institutions that provide high-quality MOOCs. Regarding international diplomacy, MOOCs can serve as a digital diplomatic tool to promote Chinese culture and as international public goods free to global learners, showcasing a responsible China's image. China is exploring the pathway to outward-oriented internationalization of MOOCs for the global promotion of these courses. MOOCs' outward-oriented internationalization needs to initially remove language barriers. On this basis, MOOCs for different disciplines should be provided. China mainly adopts three pathways to pursue the outward-oriented internationalization of MOOCs: offering MOOCs and accompanying platforms for introducing Chinese language and culture to foreign learners, provision of Chinese universities' MOOCs on overseas platforms, and internationalization of Chinese all-discipline MOOC platforms.

1. Introduction

Since 2012, massive open online courses (MOOCs) have emerged worldwide with an increasing number of learners, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In China, a "university-led, government-supported, and socially-engaged" approach has been adopted to gather various resources in building MOOCs and their platforms since 2013. In 2015, the guiding policies released by the Chinese government stated that universities should actively promote high-quality Chinese MOOCs to the world, indicating the government's expectation of developing the outward-oriented internationalization of Chinese MOOCs. By the end of February 2022, China has developed dozens of MOOC platforms, offering nearly 50,000 courses, with over 800 million enrollments.^[1] Currently, China's MOOCs and their platforms primarily serve domestic learners, while the pathway to global learners and outward-oriented internationalization is still being explored.

2. Theoretical reference

2.1. Digital Diplomacy

The use of the Internet for the domestic or cross-border promotion of culture and education has become normal in the information age. Cultural and educational content is inevitably intertwined with ideological elements. This form of web-based cultural and educational promotion has given rise to "Digital diplomacy" in the new era, which has a greater impact than traditional public diplomacy. Digital diplomacy relies heavily on social media, as diplomatic participants use it to engage in "dialogue" or communicate with foreign audiences. Even diplomatic participants from countries lacking hard power (e.g., military and economic force), can enhance their influence by using social media.^[2] Rapid and intensive exchange of ideas and opinions on social media platforms can greatly affect public opinion. Most social media platforms rely on content-sharing and redistribution principles, employing a "many-to-many" knowledge-sharing model.

MOOCs inherit some characteristics of social media. For example, MOOC learners have their personal accounts, and the learning management systems record their learning progress and interests. Besides, almost all MOOCs have discussion forums that allow learners to share and exchange information. The virtual communities within courses form mechanisms for self-organization and self-management. Unlike social media, however, current MOOCs are mostly constructed based on a "one-to-many" knowledge dissemination model. Learners in MOOCs play opposite roles compared to users in other types of social media. Each participant (student) in a course must follow the learning procedures and rules the course designer (instructor) sets. More importantly, instructors can obtain feedback from learners and supervise any individual or group activities within the course. These characteristics make MOOCs a unique tool for digital diplomacy. In other words, course designers can not only disseminate ideas and perspectives through course content but also track the degree of learners' acceptance of these thoughts.

2.2. Nature of MOOC Products

Initially, the "openness" of MOOCs had two meanings: first, they were "free" to everyone, and second, they were "accessible to anyone, anytime, anywhere." The "free" aspect made online open courses non-exclusive, and the "anyone, anytime, anywhere" aspect made them non-competitive. The latter depended on technological and organizational factors. Through Internet technology, MOOC platforms could eliminate or reduce the student scale limitations of traditional higher education, allowing each MOOC to attract thousands of students with the minimal marginal cost of teaching additional students. Free MOOCs exhibit characteristics of public goods. However, as MOOCs have evolved, MOOC platform are managed in various business models, and some MOOCs now require payment. For example, most courses on the Udacity platform are fee-based, with only a few introductory courses for free. Such online educational services provided by these MOOC platforms fall into the category of private goods.

2.3. Outward-oriented Internationalization of Higher Education

The internationalization of higher education can be divided into "inward-oriented internationalization" and "outward-oriented internationalization." "Inward-oriented" refers to learning foreign knowledge, culture, higher education models, and norms through the internationalization of higher education. "Outward-oriented" refers to introducing these contents from the domestic environment to the world.^[3] Owing to MOOC's open characteristic, learners from anywhere in the world can study courses offered on MOOC platforms as long as they have

internet access. Therefore, MOOCs have an inherent "internationalized" attribute. Generally, MOOCs are considered a driving force for transforming higher education. However, there is also an important motive for universities to offer MOOCs, which is to attract more overseas learners than traditional cross-border education and thereby enhance the international reputation of the universities. To enhance the international influence of Chinese higher education, Chinese universities are shifting from primarily serving domestic learners to balancing the service between domestic and global learners. In addition to introducing foreign MOOCs, they also promote high-quality Chinese courses to international audiences.

3. Pathways to Outward-oriented Internationalization for Chinese MOOCs

As Chinese is not a universal language like English, the primary challenge for the outward-oriented internationalization of Chinese MOOCs is to remove the language barrier for global learners. Two main approaches to address this issue are offering Chinese language courses and courses taught in English or other foreign languages. On this basis, MOOC platform will provide various disciplines or major courses according to the needs of foreign learners. Moreover, many domestic and foreign MOOC platforms have collaborated with global universities to develop MOOCs, enhancing their internationalization level.

3.1. Offering MOOCs and Accompanying Platforms for Introducing Chinese Language and Culture to Foreign Learners

Table 1: Number of Courses for Each Module on the "Chinese Plus" Platform by December 2023

Module	Examples of Courses	Number of Free Courses	Number of Paid Courses	Total Number of Courses
Chinese Language Learning	"K-12 Chinese Language Learning", "Adult Chinese Language Learning", "Chinese Language Learning for Specialized Skills ", etc.	103	39	142
Chinese Language Examinations	"HSK Examination", "YCT Examination"	17	15	32
Chinese Culture and Contemporary China	"Contemporary China", "Chinese History", "Chinese Civilization and Art", "Chinese Classical Literature", etc.	77	14	91
Teacher Development	"Chinese Language Teaching", "Academic Development", "Cultural Literacy", "CTCSOL Examination", "Minority Language Training", etc.	17	83	100
Chinese Language+ Vocational Education	"Vocational Chinese Language Learning", "Vocational Education"	19	1	20

MOOC platforms are specifically designed to provide courses about the Chinese language and culture for foreign learners, such as "Chinese Plus (<https://mooc.chinesecio.com/>)." It was launched in March 2020 to help learners who could not attend school due to the Covid-19 epidemic. The platform was jointly developed by Chinese language teaching institutions in Japan, the United Kingdom, Thailand, and other countries, and received technical assistance from several educational technology companies.^[4] It provides online teaching and educational support for schools, institutions, teachers, and learners engaged in international Chinese education. The MOOCs on this platform are categorized into five modules: "Chinese Language Learning," "Chinese Language

Examinations," "Chinese Culture and Contemporary China," "Teacher Development," and "Chinese Language + Vocational Education", catering to the diverse learning needs of different learners. By the end of December 2023, this platform has offered a total of 385 courses, with 233 courses available for free and 152 courses requiring payment. Most courses focused on children's Chinese language and culture learning are free, while courses targeted at international Chinese language teachers are mostly chargeable. Table 1 shows the number of courses for each module.

In addition, there are MOOC platforms provided by Chinese universities and joint education technology companies that offer courses in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL). Platforms such as "xuetangX," "iCourse," "Huawen MOOC," and "Zhihuishu" mainly target foreign students and are open to learners from the general public. Among them, "iCourse" and "xuetangX" have the highest number of learners. Table 2 presents the most popular TCFL courses offered by these two platforms.

Table 2: The most popular TCFL Courses on "iCourse" and "xuetangX" by December 2023

MOOC Platform	The Most Popular Courses	Host Institution	Total Enrollment	Chinese Proficiency Requirements
iCourse	Fascinating Chinese	Huazhong Agricultural University	71231	Basic Chinese knowledge
iCourse	Elementary Chinese Grammar	Beijing Language and Culture University	48233	Elementary level
iCourse	Short-term Chinese Grammar Threshold	Beijing Language and Culture University	27078	Learners with over 300 hours of Chinese learning experience
iCourse	Chinese Characters and Traditional Chinese Culture	Dalian University	22627	Basic knowledge of Chinese and Chinese characters
iCourse	Hello, Chinese (Intermediate)	Shanghai Jiao Tong University	18963	Intermediate level
xuetangX	Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language	Tsinghua University	80423	Beginners of Learning Chinese
xuetangX	Elementary Spoken Chinese	Beijing Normal University	15557	Elementary level
xuetangX	Smart Chinese - Introduction to Chinese Culture	Beijing International Studies University	11759	Advanced level
xuetangX	Elementary Chinese Grammar	Beijing Language and Culture University	9687	Elementary level

3.2. Provision of Chinese Universities' MOOCs on Overseas Platforms

By December 2022, over 200 high-quality MOOCs from more than 20 universities in China have been successively released on famous online course platforms in countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and South Korea.^[5] Among these platforms, Coursera has the most collaborations with Chinese universities, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and Fudan University. Peking University has the highest number of courses on Coursera, with over 60 courses available. It offers a majority of Chinese language courses, as well as some science, engineering, humanities, and social sciences courses. Peking University's "Chinese for Beginners" course has attracted learners from over 200 countries and regions, with two million course visits. It was also listed as one of Coursera's top 10 most popular MOOCs in 2018. Currently, the course has 1,277,940 registrations, 18,930 ratings, 5,295 comments, and an average rating of 4.8 out of 5.^[6] The course offers subtitles in 20 languages,

including English, French, German, Vietnamese, Thai, and Arabic. Apart from Coursera, Peking University and Tsinghua University have also collaborated with edX to offer MOOCs. Nankai University and Shanghai International Studies University have partnered with FutureLearn to offer MOOCs.

3.3. Internationalization of Chinese All-discipline MOOC Platforms

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many students could not attend classes on campus and had to engage in online learning from home. In April, with the support of the Chinese Ministry of Education and the China National Commission for UNESCO, the international versions of two major Chinese MOOC platforms, "xuetangX" and "iCourse," were launched. These platforms provided free, high-quality online courses with English and other languages as the instructional language to learners around the world, contributing to global higher education and the fight against the pandemic. xuetangX, for example, offered 109 fully English-taught online courses to learners worldwide.^[7] xuetangX mainly provides top-notch courses from Chinese universities. Initially supporting courses in Chinese and English, xuetangX plans to gradually expand its languages to Russian, Spanish, French, Japanese, and more. By December 2023, xuetangX has offered over 400 English-taught courses. Figure 1 is a screen capture of xuetangX page.

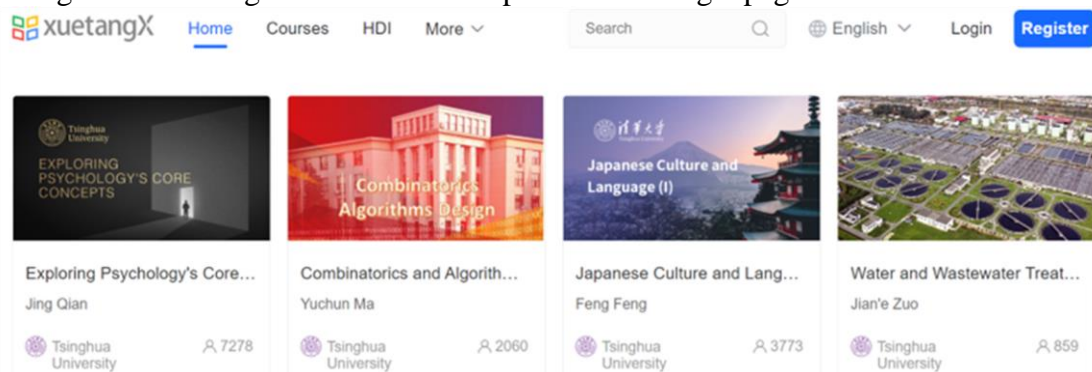


Figure 1: xuetangX Page

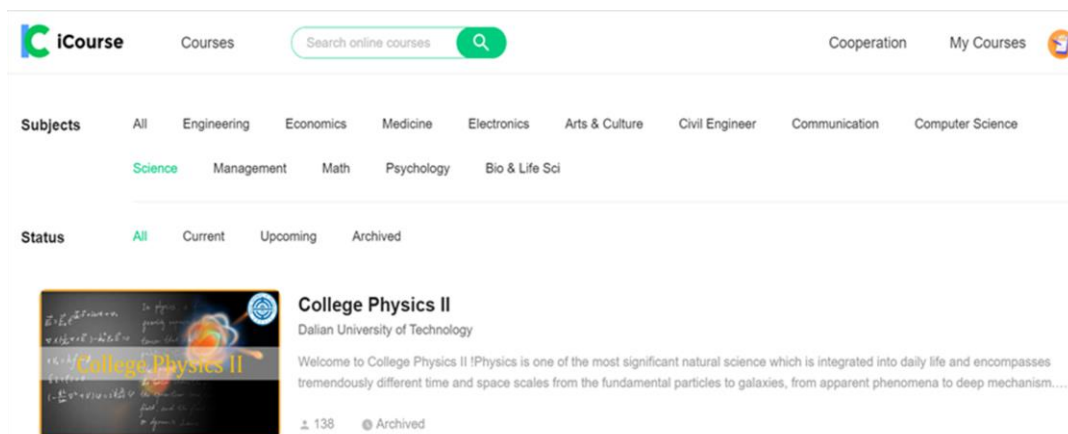


Figure 2: iCourse Page.

iCourse is an online education platform that gathers excellent courses from top Chinese universities such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University. The first batch of 193 English courses covers 8 disciplines, including medicine and epidemic prevention, economics and development, natural science, arts and design, engineering and technology, intelligent virtual simulation experiments, agriculture and ecology, and future-oriented innovation

and entrepreneurship.^[8] The platform mainly provides online teaching services for foreign university teachers and students, overseas Chinese people, and global learners. The main language of iCourse is English, and other language versions will be launched successively, mainly providing online learning, course management, learning certification, and data analysis services.^[9] By August 2023, iCourse has released nearly 450 English-taught courses. Figure 2 is a screen capture of iCourse page.

4. Conclusions

From the internationalization perspective of Chinese online open courses, whether Chinese or overseas MOOC platforms, the courses offered to global learners are mostly Chinese language and Chinese culture MOOCs. These popular courses enable global learners to better understand Chinese culture and thoughts, serving as a tool for digital diplomacy. Chinese universities also provide many STEM courses for global learners, such as computer science, aero-space, soil mechanics, mechanical engineering, and materials science. Apart from disseminating course knowledge, these courses also showcase the development of Chinese science and technology and the achievements of China's modernization. Moreover, among the three pathways, the internationalization of Chinese MOOC platforms is a more efficient way to gather resources from Chinese universities and promote the internationalization of MOOCs. The platforms standardize the construction of MOOCs, accelerating and facilitating the outward-oriented internationalization of Chinese higher education.

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