

Chinese Universities on the Global Stage: Perspectives from the Recent Past

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It is notable how America's public universities, whatever the research prowess, no longer impressed Chinese prospective students and their families as much as they did in the past. There are a variety of reasons for this shift. In 2011, Tsinghua University and Peking University, the two most prestigious schools in the People's Republic of China (PRC), surprised many by rising to the top tier of several of the world's notable charts of university rankings.¹ Beyond the "Big Two" or "TsingBei," scores of other Chinese universities similarly positioned on these charts outperform institutions in Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in influence and resourcefulness. Between 1990 and 2022, Chinese universities conferred over 240 million degrees to supply the skills for all lines of services and productions that powered China's economic transformation. They also sent numerous degree-holders internationally to hundreds of universities as graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, faculty members, and directors of research enterprises. Chinese participation in the world of universities, notable both for its quantitative and qualitative contributions, is changing conversations in multiple domains of competitive pursuits. Within the country, university enterprises, as in the cases of Tsinghua and Beida in Shenzhen, are seeding entire sectors of industry and supercharging the development of metropolitan centers.

The significance of China's universities is undeniable, yet the challenges they face are complex. The pursuit of excellence and productivity takes place under the close management of the world's longest-governing Communist Party. Any assessment of present-day Chinese universities can hardly take place without due consideration of elements of politicization and instrumentalization. The questions many observers have asked include: Is it possible for China's universities to achieve excellence without academic freedom and autonomy? How can Chi-

universities, my own included, in that process? And how sustainable are the interaction and development pathways to future challenges? I track three sets of issues

tional experiment associated with the Mao era, which in turn was a radical departure from its immediate pre-1949 past.

In the 1950s, the PRC dismantled an elitist system of Western-inspired education that took shape in the 1920s. That earlier system, which drew on private resources and contained elements of professional self-governance, was denounced as feudal and bourgeois. The PRC embraced the Soviet model, assigned administrative ranks to all schools under a central commission of education, and incorporated its wartime mobilizational experiences of the 1940s into the pedagogy. In the late 1960s, the Party sought to further indigenize “expertise” at a grassroots level and improve equity of access to school education. It oriented the system to focus on pragmatic skills that broke down the walls of the classrooms. For college admissions, Party loyalty and biographical elements— social categories such as worker, peasant, and soldier— took the place of entrance examinations.

The reinstatement of the gaokao in 1977 initiated a decisive swing back in the direction of an elite education of competitive performance based on scholastic merit. In 1979, the state announced a nationwide one-child policy that reduced the number of school-age children. It allowed many village schools to close, establishing instead a new category of highly selective key-point schools and setting in motion mechanisms that funneled the brightest and the most competitive— those who excelled in exam-taking— out of the hinterland into bigger towns and even bigger cities.

Higher education went through major structural changes during the post-Mao transition. Taking expert advice from the World Bank, China created fewer yet bigger institutions of more integrated learning. Its schools of engineering re-oriented toward Western models of STEM studies. The very creation of business schools and economic studies involved unprecedented partnerships between Chinese reformers and Western economists. The re-Westernization of China’s higher-education systems was a top-initiated enterprise that reoriented and certified a better-informed few over the less-informed many.

Study missions headed out to Europe and America at this time. Hao Keming of Peking University led one such mission. She spent a week in Bavaria in the late 1980s, and subsequently became an energetic promoter of the organizational features of a “German model,” which she used to push for the transformation of China into “a society of lifelong learning.” This concept gained saliency as the reforms took hold, only to be eclipsed by American models of liberal colleges in the early twenty-first century.³

Out of the heady days of the 1980s, several strands of thinking emerged that shaped China’s higher education in the following decades. To put it simply, the higher-education system pursued two strategies that would allow it to acquire two functions. In the words of Zhou Ji, minister of education from 2003 to 2009, one function of China’s universities is economic. Schools must serve as an instru-

ment to “transform the world’s most populous country into a dynamic one with rich human resources.”⁴ Under the new economy, schools are responsible for upgrading China’s pool of “labor” ().

heavily on state funding while, generous as it was, government funding accounted for less than 10 percent of the large pool of available income at the nation's top schools in Beijing. Much of the additional income for the latter came from extra-bureaucratic sources, marketized or philanthropic. Data such as sizes of class, faculty-student ratio, and per-student educational expenditure all point to overlapping patterns of disparity. This meant that students in second- and third-tier schools actually took on a higher share of the financial burden through tuition payment for their less well-resourced education.

The Party doubled down in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to marketize the economy and to build China into an “innovation nation” of science and technology. In 1993, the State Council released the Party's blueprint to “reform and develop” the entire system of education. In the same year, Tsinghua and Peking University (PKU

For Berkeley, the old way of dealing with international collaboration— ad hoc, decentralized, research-centered, and contingent on the networks and projects of entrepreneurial faculty leaders— appeared inadequate. This inadequacy was evident when Tsinghua University arrived in 2010 for a “Tsinghua Week at Berkeley,” a first leg of Tsinghua’s cross-country tour of the United States.

When a delegation of over one hundred people from Tsinghua, led by its president, announced their plan to visit in 2010, there were no central administrative offices at Berkeley designed to receive such a large-scale visit. The program of “Tsinghua Week,” when it finally came together, was unprecedented in scope and reach within campus memory. The programs brought together top administrators and Chinese diplomats for public-facing media events. They also included field-specific panels and workshops of faculty members, as well as student presentations across the campus. The planning for the event brought into sharp relief the differences in internal organization and communication between Tsinghua and Berkeley. It underscored the contrast, indeed, between Tsinghua’s top-down, centralized administrative organization, and Berkeley’s bottom-up, faculty-centered approach to governance.

The following year, Berkeley conducted a “return visit” to Beijing, participating in Tsinghua’s high-profile centennial celebration. Interest in academic partnership with China varied from field to field. Broadly speaking, engineering led the way. Professional schools showed interest to expand brand recognition for their related services. Environmental, social, and health researchers sought access to China’s vast stores of data. As always, China scholars saw China both as a site and a subject of study. Student interest was robust, thanks to the prospect of

dynamics of change? Once again, there was a notable lack of symmetry between the two sides.

Guided by top-down strategic visions of purpose and priority, Tsinghua did not always respond with equal enthusiasm to Berkeley-initiated proposals for collaboration. Disciplined and incentivized by state-classified criteria of research merit and performance recognition, its faculty members simply had little time to spare either for networking or exploratory conversations beyond the scope of the formally organized, scheduled, funded, or assigned projects. The contrast between the two attitudes is suggestive of the larger issues.

When Peking University joined the international conversation with Berkeley, it brought a notably different line of inquiry. In contrast to Tsinghua and its drive to improve global prestige and learn to economically leverage its advantages in engineering and science, PKU focused on issues of university governance and educational effectiveness. To a certain degree, this institutional emphasis aligns with PKU's history as a producer of statecraft knowledge and a critic in loyal opposition.

In this tradition of policy advice and dissent, PKU pursued in-depth conversations about the University of California system and its place in Californian common good. It funded junior administrators to study the making of "excellence" in American universities. At Berkeley, these visitors studied a whole range of op-

when the empire, on the brink of bankruptcy, turned to Western means to help its survival. China today, in contrast with the 1890s, proclaims its supreme cultural confidence and sovereignty vis-à-vis the West. But when the dichotomies of “China versus the West” are mapped over the disparities between the provincial versus the metropolitan areas, the interior versus the coast, or the “elite versus the masses,” the bundled issues allowed critics to make a much larger case about cultural authenticity and social equity. These criticisms, already in evidence in the 1990s, supplied ground-level support for an ideological swing to the left in the late 2010s. Under President Xi Jinping, they contributed to reassessments of China’s Western-leaning orientation during the Reform decades.

Wu Daguang, former vice president of Xiamen University, for example, warned in a series of recent essays published online about the “deep water” ahead in the next phase of educational reform. Wu argues that to produce the next generation of high-caliber human “talent” ready for the postpandemic world order, universities must reorient themselves toward China’s past, the country’s grassroots, and

ENDNOTE

¹ On the rise of Chinese universities in global rankings, see Jia Song, “Creating World-Class Universities in China: Strategies and Impacts at a Renowned Research University,” *Higher Education* 75 (4) (2018): 729–742, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0167-4>. For more on Tsinghua University specifically, see Rui Yang and Anthony Welch, “A World-Class University in China? The Case of Tsinghua,” *Higher Education* 63 (5) (2012): 645–666, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9465-4>.

² Recent scholarship on contemporary Chinese higher education that I consulted for this essay includes but is not limited to the following: Joel Andreas, *China’s New Universities: The Rise of a World-Class System* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Daniel A. Bell, *China’s New Universities: A New Model of Higher Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023); Susan Greenhalgh and Li Zhang, eds., *China’s New Universities: A New Model of Higher Education?* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020); Zachary M. Howlett, *China’s New Universities: A New Model of Higher Education?* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2021); Jennifer Hubbert, *China’s New Universities: A New Model of Higher Education?* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019); and Qingjia Wang, “Crisis Management, Regime Survival, and ‘Guerrilla-Style’ Policy-Making: The June 1999 Decision to Radically Expand Higher Education in China,” *China Journal* 71 (1) (2014): 132–152, <https://doi.org/10.1086/674557>.

³ Hao Keming, “Lianbang Deguo Jiaoyu de Kaocha ji qi Qishi” [Report and Insights from a Study Tour of Education in the Federal Republic of Germany] in Guojia Jiayu Fazhan Yanjiu Zhongxin [Center for Research on National Educational Development], ed., *China Daily* [Research Newsletters] 15 (1990); and Ji Mingming, “Zhongshen Xuexi de Lilun Tansuo yu Chuangxin: Chongdu Hao Keming de Kuajin Xuexi Xing Shehui” [Theoretical Exploration and Advancement of Life-Long Learning: Re-Reading Hao Kaoming and Her Work on Advancing into a New Society of Learning], *Beijing Daxue Jiaoyu Yanjiu* [Education Review, Peking University] 12 (1) (2014): 172–182.

⁴ Zhou Ji, *Higher Education in China*, trans. Foreign Language Teaching & Research Press, Beijing (Chicago: Thomson Learning, 2006), xiii.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sources consulted in this and the following sections include, in addition to *ibid.*, Chang Tongshan and Wenli Li, *China’s New Universities: A New Model of Higher Education?* [From :0owing(S)/MCID 876 BDC BT9.5 09734u 7.6 83.52 311s 368.01 Tm()]TjETEMC /P King (en-

⁸ In addition to the gaokao, which produced scores, TsingBei introduced qualitative criteria of their own to further differentiate among the qualified applicants. An applicant's chance of getting into Tsinghua in 2012 was about 1:3,000.

⁹ Zhiwen Chen, *四十年的变迁* [Forty Chats on Changes in Chinese Higher Education] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2020).

¹⁰ In the 2015–2016 academic year, 328,547 students from the People's Republic of China enrolled in institutions of higher education in the United States, which was 31.5 percent of all international enrollees from that year. (Place of hOr)TjETEMC /P 4