

William C. Kirby

*on Chinese, European
& American universities*

In North America and in Europe, the past three decades have seen an unprecedented expansion of higher education and, in the most recent time, efforts at reform and restructuring.¹ My own university, Harvard, has overhauled its undergraduate curriculum in a comprehensive fashion for the first time in thirty years. European universities have witnessed even more thoroughgoing changes in the structure of undergraduate education. But perhaps nowhere on

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earth have recent decades seen more revolutionary change in higher education than in the People's Republic of China. Thirty years ago, Chinese universities were just reopening after the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution. Today they are poised for positions of international leadership in research and education.

The case of Wuhan University, arguably China's oldest modern university, illustrates the dramatic changes the Chinese system of higher education has undergone in the past century. Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei have long been important centers of commerce, scholarship, and political leadership. It was the great reforming Governor-General Zhang Zhi-dong, who founded in 1893 – five years before Peking University began – the "Self-Strengthening Institute" that would become Wuhan University. That university would be a witness to central events of China's twentieth century: it was in Wuhan that the revolution that overthrew the Qing dynasty in 1912 began; Wuhan hosted one of the two contending Nationalist governments in 1927, and the retreating government of Chiang Kaishek in 1938. In the early People's Republic, Wuhan became a great industrial sector. Today, western Hubei, upriver from Wuhan, is home to the largest engineering project in world history, the Three Gorges Dam (and even a "Three Gorges Dam University").

Wuhan University had a strong history of growth before 1949. It was then nearly destroyed during the Cultural Revolu-

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tion. Today it is a great, comprehensive university, with a faculty of nearly 3,500, teaching a student body of 30,000 undergraduates and 17,000 graduate students; it confers doctoral degrees in 143 subjects – more than Harvard University offers.

Wuhan University's renewal and expansion is part of a much larger story of contemporary higher education in China. For China is experiencing a revolution in mass higher education that dwarfs that of the United States in the 1950s and that of Europe in the 1970s. This is a revolution that began in the final years of the twentieth century and is still gathering strength.

This is not the first educational revolution in modern China. A little more than a century ago, China underwent a similar, perhaps even more seismic shift in educational institutions, when, with the end of the old examination system, the existing structure of local schools, academies, and directorates of study – all linked to the civil service exams – was displaced by a new system of public and private institutions.

At that time, China developed one of the more dynamic systems of higher education in the world, with strong, state-run institutions (Peking University, Jiao Tong University, National Central University, and at the apogee of research, the Academia Sinica), accompanied by a creative set of private colleges and universities (Yenching University, St. John's University, and Peking Union Medical College, to name but a few). Sadly, all this would be swept away in the late 1950s and 1960s, yet the traditions and memories of excellence remained, and they have helped to fuel more recent efforts.

Simply in terms of numbers of students educated, the more recent changes are more dramatic than even the great

postwar expansion in the United States or the growth of mass-enrollment universities in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1978, after a decade of mostly closed universities, Chinese universities enrolled approximately 860,000 students. This number increased very gradually until 1996, with enrollment then of about one million. In the late 1990s the government decided to accelerate greatly the pace of expansion, and by the year 2000 as many as six million students were enrolled in Chinese universities.

In the seven years since then, the overall official numbers – counting all kinds of institutions – have risen dramatically. According to the ambitious Eleventh Five-Year Plan of the Ministry of Education, higher-education enrollment was scheduled to reach twenty-three million by 2005 and thirty million by 2010. There are at present more than twenty-six million students in institutions of higher learning. By contrast, the United States had approximately thirteen million undergraduate and two million graduate and professional students in 2000, with undergraduates projected to rise to perhaps fifteen million by 2010.

China clearly is moving toward mass higher education. The gross enrollment ratio of eighteen to twenty-one year olds is presently set to be at 15 percent, having been in the low single digits for most of the history of the People's Republic. By 2020, China aims to enroll as much as 40 percent of young adults in colleges or universities.

A once-small teachers' college in Shantung province, Lin Yi Normal University had 3,500 students in the year 2000. It now has 35,000. This growth is clear not only in public universities but in the rapidly growing number of private universities. Outside the ancient city of Xi'an, Xi'an International University

(*Xi'an waishi xueyuan*) did not exist fifteen years ago; today it has 36,000 students. To put it in another light, that of physical space, the 'square meterage' of Chinese universities has more than tripled in the past seven years. In the realm of graduate study, China now turns out, annually, more PhDs than any other country in the world.

Unlike the American expansion of the 1950s and the European growth of the 1970s, this growth has elements that are also self-consciously elitist, with the aim of building a significant number of world-class universities. These are defined in China as being cradles of high-level, creative researchers; frontiers of scientific research; forces capable of transforming research and innovation into higher productivity; and bridges for international and cultural exchange. To that end the Chinese government and many other sources are providing enormous revenues to the leading institutions. Individual winners of recent competitions among universities have been each given several hundred million dollars to expend over the next five years; and runners-up have received funds equivalent to those given to winners in recent European competitions.

Beyond this, the leading Chinese universities have tapped private, philanthropic, and foundation sources for substantial streams of income. Like leading American state universities, such as the University of California at Berkeley, or the University of Michigan, the most prominent Chinese universities know that they will soon be in a position where only a quarter or less of their budget will come from the state; the rest will have to be raised elsewhere. However these budgets are put together, it seems certain that within ten years the research budgets of China's leading universities will approach those of leading American

and European universities, and that in the realms of engineering and science, Chinese universities will be among the world's leaders.

This is a welcome challenge to American universities – a challenge for both competition and cooperation. Although in the latter part of the twentieth century, American universities were, as a group, among the strongest in the world, there is no reason to imagine that this is a permanent condition. After all, about a century ago – just when China was abandoning the ancient examination system that as late as the eighteenth century had helped to make China (at least in the West) an ideal of educated, enlightened leadership – almost all of the leading universities in the world were German, based on the great nineteenth-century reforms of German higher education. Yet, now, at least according to a recent ranking of universities worldwide by Shanghai Jiao Tong University – a ranking taken seriously by deans and presidents the world over – German universities do not dominate. Indeed, according to the Shanghai rankings, not one of the top fifty was German.

There is a real silliness to this rankings game. What is ranked often has little to do with education, as distinct from research. One criterion, citation indexes, varies in value depending on the discipline: they are extremely important in economics and much less useful in history; helpful in chemistry and chemical biology, and without any merit whatsoever in Celtic. All of the international rankings also focus on research prizes, such as the Nobel Prize, and universities glory in having on their faculty Nobel laureates, taking credit, in these rankings, for these noble scholars, even though the work that gained them a Nobel Prize may have been given for work done decades earlier, and at another uni-

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versity. Even those who try to measure the quality of undergraduate education often use student/teacher ratio, which is an inadequate way of assessing comparatively successful teaching.

But the broader point in this discussion of rankings is that nothing is permanent in the world of learning. All of us have progressed by learning from one another. Take again the case of Harvard. Harvard was founded in 1636, that is, in the late Ming dynasty. It is a measure of Harvard's parochialism that no one in Cambridge, Massachusetts, knew that Harvard was founded in a cultural and economic backwater of a Europe that was itself 'underdeveloped' in comparison to either the Ming or early Qing. Harvard became a decent college by copying the norms of British institutions, but even those could hardly compare with the sophisticated Confucian learning of the great Donglin Academy and other institutions of the late Ming and early Qing. It grew to become a university worthy of the name only in the late nineteenth century by copying the policies and priorities of the great German research universities.

Today, particularly in an era of mass higher education, American and European universities share with our Chinese colleagues many of the same challenges:

- How do we extend the promise of higher education while maintaining quality?
- How do we keep institutions from replicating themselves in academic appointments, and how do we ensure that they will be open to talent and ideas from all sources?
- How do we value *teaching* as well as research in an era in which almost all of the rewards, professionally, are in

research? In fact, teaching can be beneficial to research: places with good students, who are empowered to learn and to challenge the best faculty, consistently outperform stand-alone think tanks and academies of advanced study.

- How do we promote opportunity, by recruiting and funding the very best students from all financial, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds; and how do we ensure greater levels of access and fairness in the admissions process?
- How do we ensure that colleges and universities have the capacity to engage in what in China would be called self-criticism: to question their organization and their curriculum? It is important that in every generation we review what and how we teach; and that every generation of faculty have the opportunity to define what it believes students need to know in our time.
- How do we ensure that – even though our universities will still be based in a home country, with national responsibilities – we also fulfill our international responsibilities, training students who will be citizens of the world?

Finally, beyond these concerns, we need always to ask: Why do we have higher education at all? Here our debate goes back minimally to those of the nineteenth century between proponents of the Humboldtian ideal of *Bildung* (the education of the whole person) as distinct from *Übung* (more practical training), differences that we might phrase in Chinese as being between a broad conception of *jiaoyu* and a narrower, repetitive one of *xunlian*.

There is no one right answer for every time and place, but one American tradition has been a commitment to the idea

of *liberal education*: educating the whole person, and not just training the specialist. We want to ensure that our graduates are curious, reflective, and skeptical learners: people with the capacity for lifelong learning (as their first job will surely not be their last); who can develop multiple perspectives on themselves and the world; and of whom we can say, when they graduate, that they are truly independent of mind. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this ideal, which is of German origin, has become a distinctive goal of an American undergraduate education.

We at Harvard have just renewed our commitment to this cornerstone of undergraduate education. In the spring of 2007, the Harvard faculty approved a new General Education curriculum for Harvard College, after several years of drafting and seemingly endless discussion. When it passed with near-unanimity, I reminded my colleagues of that 1924 debate in the Chinese Communist Party about joining the Nationalists in the first United Front. The minutes of that meeting were recorded thus: “The resolution passed unanimously, even though many comrades were opposed.” (I was also reminded of a conversation with the president of a leading Chinese university. When I asked how his faculty would vote on a set of proposed reforms, he responded: “Vote?”)

Even if decisions are taken in different ways, if activities at Harvard and at leading Chinese universities are any guide, one commitment we share is something that is counterintuitive in an age increasingly dominated by science and technology and by pressures for ever-earlier and ever-greater specialization. That is, our commitment, or recommitment, to a *general* as well as a specialized education, and to the *humanities* as part of the core of an undergraduate education.

It is worth noting that European universities appear to be adopting some of the formal structures of perceived international models, such as the U.S. baccalaureate. Many of the ideals of what has become known as the Bologna Process have the promise in time of making higher education in Europe a continental-wide enterprise, with mobility not only of students but also of faculty and staff. That will be critical in competing, and in cooperating, with continental-sized systems of higher education in the United States and in China.

But while there is some emulation of the current American concept of the baccalaureate, European universities appear less interested as yet in the educational values that have defined the B.A. in many American colleges, which stress a broad undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences. If one looks at the documents of the Bologna, Prague, Berlin, Bergen, and other meetings, there is enormous attention paid to research, to funding, and to math, science, and technology, and precious little to teaching, to citizenship, and to valuing the broad and deep education of the next generation of Europe’s citizens. The “key competences” for lifelong learning recommended by the European Parliament in 2006 quite appropriately include language learning; information and communication technologies; and math, science, and technology. But where are the humanities? Where is the multidisciplinary study of other cultures and religions? Where is education in moral reasoning and philosophy? Where, even, are the ‘harder’ social sciences?

There will be many further discussions of these issues, because the quality of education is not one simply to be measured in technical or vocational courses, nor in incomes earned in euros,

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dollars, or renminbi. It is measured in people, and their ultimate contribution to society.

What is encouraging about Chinese higher education today is the independent understanding that the general education of China's students – in the arts and humanities as well as the sciences and social sciences – will be as important to their, and all of our, futures, as will be their specialized, professional training. 'General education' (*tongshi jiaoyu*) is now the cornerstone of curricular reform in leading universities throughout the People's Republic, as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thus, today, all Peking University students, even in the Guanghua School of Management, have to take a selection of courses that may include literature, philosophy, and history. In addition, a focused liberal arts curriculum has been established in the new Yuanpei Program, named for Peking University's famous German-educated chancellor in the early twentieth century, the philosopher Cai Yuanpei, who was an admirer of Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Chinese educational leaders, at least in the elite institutions, believe that they need to do this, in part because, in China, as in the United States, all the pressures are in the opposite direction: on the part of students, who too single-mindedly pursue their careers, and on the part of faculty, whose careers and interests are ever more specialized – leading to a situation in which students and faculty interact on ever narrower ground.

It would be nice, as Henry Rosovsky, one of my predecessors as dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences once declared, if it were true that precisely what the faculty wanted to teach was exactly what the students needed to learn. But that has never been the case, and it is

the job of universities to ensure that our students learn broadly, from the best faculty, how to think, reflect, and analyze, and that they become the critical thinkers and problem solvers of the next generation.

For this, a study of the humanities is essential. China's educational leaders increasingly share this view. Perhaps this is because they know, better than anyone else, what life can be like in the absence of the humanities, and in the absence of a liberal education. For that is part of the history of China's twentieth century.

What happened in China in the past century is all the more remarkable because China is the world's longest continuous civilization, with the longest continuing sets of philosophical and literary traditions. The study of that tradition defined not only what it meant to be a scholar, but also what it meant to be powerful. The Qing educational and examination system brought the most learned men in the realm into the service of the state – not because they had been trained in statecraft or tax collection, but because they had deeply studied what we would today call the 'humanities': because they had studied, memorized, chanted, and metaphorically consumed the classics, and they would, in office, act according to the principles of human behavior that the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and other great works set out.

There has seldom been a higher academic ideal: good people embarking on the living study of great books in order to do good work in society. (In the United States we sometimes have trouble imagining a society where the best people go into government.)

This was the ideal, of course never fully realized in practice, and the ordeal of studying to be a scholar-official was a tortuous one. And there were limits to this system: the absence of the study

of mathematics, of science, of practical affairs, did not mean that the Empire was thereby better governed. Their absence arguably contributed to the Empire's feeble capacity, in the nineteenth century, to respond to a militarized, industrialized, and otherwise energized West, in a series of humiliations that would spell the end of a two-thousand-year-old imperial tradition.

The Qing fell in 1911, but for our purposes the more important date is 1905, when the ancient examination system was ended overnight, and not replaced. From that date – and particularly under Republican and Communist regimes – China would be governed not by a civil service chosen for its proven capacities in moral reasoning, but largely by exemplars of that most dominant and successful Western export – the modern, professional military – in the direct service of another Western export that would not be particularly sympathetic to humanist discourse – the Leninist state.

From 1905, for understandable reasons, Chinese education at all levels would begin to drift strongly toward the study of those subjects that would bring about a return to *fu qiang* ('wealth and power') – primarily mathematics, science, and engineering. Within a decade of that date, the moral foundation of both Chinese government and culture, Confucianism, would come under a withering attack, leaving a void in the realm of human and social values. By 1949, when the mainland fell to the Communists, less than 10 percent of graduates of Chinese public universities graduated with degrees in humanistic disciplines. The Communists then took that number to the vanishing point.

In the absence of the humanities, there were arguably two dominant themes in education. One, by no means limited to

China, was the belief that in an age of science one could quite literally engineer a bright future, a new people. This was the dream of Chinese leaders from Sun Yatsen onward: a government of technocratic expertise, capable of 'reconstructing' China with roads, railroads, and dams – a government of huge ambition, as seen in the Three Gorges Dam project, first conceived by Sun Yatsen in the 1920s, and now built by the governments of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Today, every recent member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the People's Republic of China – the nine or more men who run the country – has training in engineering. The term, 'technocracy' has been translated into Chinese as 'the dictatorship of the engineers.' There is perhaps no more fitting description of the contemporary government of the People's Republic. Of all the world's governments in the early twenty-first century, only China's has the engineering imagination, political will, and financial resources to complete a project of this scale and to relocate inhabitants in its way. This and other great infrastructure projects – highways, subways, airports, and more, on a scale unmatched anywhere – are the result of an engineering state unleashed and unchecked.

A second belief of the twentieth century was that 'culture' and the arts were to be firmly subordinated to the purposes of the developmental state. Under Chiang Kai-shek's New Life Movement and Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, the humanities were mobilized for the purposes of the state. As Mao Zedong put it, literature and art were to be defined as "the artistic crystallization of the political aspirations of the Communist party." (As the twentieth-century writer Lu Xun once observed: all art may be propaganda, but not all propaganda is art.)

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Chinese history in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century shows what dislocation can ensue when a civilization loses its cultural foundations, its moral compass, on a relentless quest for wealth and power. In that quest, China imported all sorts of Western ‘isms’: scientism, militarism, Leninism, chief among them; and it denigrated nearly every aspect of a civilization that, just a century earlier, was the most sophisticated and accomplished on Earth.

Today, a more self-confident China is beginning to explore its past and make that past part of its modern education. There are many signs of a new cultural pluralism in contemporary China, and of a willingness to imagine and build institutions of learning that are at the forefront of science and technology and yet also honor and promote the humanities. Surely it is a positive sign that statues of Confucius are replacing statues of Mao – even though their works may still be equally unread.

Perhaps the most important revolution in Chinese higher education today will not be its size and scope, but the fact that, even under the leadership of engineers, leading institutions have come to understand that an education without the humanities is incomplete. This is a recognition that in an age still, perhaps necessarily, consumed with ‘wealth and power,’ that as countries vie for power and individuals seek to accumulate wealth, an education that stresses the values that make for a strong, and even harmonious, human community are more important than ever.

Just weeks before he was assassinated, President John F. Kennedy captured the essence of the humanities in a speech at Amherst College. He spoke about poetry, but his idea applies to all the creative disciplines:

When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations.

When power narrows the areas of man’s concerns, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses, for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.

In addressing the challenges facing higher education in China, Europe, and the United States in this era of reform and renewal, I mean to speak of our collective human experience. After all, as the Chinese phrase *shu tu tong gui* reminds us: “We have myriad paths, but our ends are one.”