

The Chinese Century? The Challenges of Higher Education

William C. Kirby

Abstract: One can find in any airport kiosk books that proclaim ours to be “the Chinese century.” We have titles such as “The Dragon Awakes,” “China’s Rise,” “The Rise of China,” and “China’s Ascent,” to name but a few. But to rise is not necessarily to lead. What constitutes leadership? In higher education, China is building the fastest growing system – in quality as well as in quantity – in the world. The foremost global powers of the past four centuries all offered models in the realms of culture, ideas, and education. This may be said of seventeenth-century France under Louis XIV; of the Qing during the Qianlong reign of the eighteenth century; of Britain and Germany in the nineteenth century; and of the United States in the twentieth. China now aspires to educate global elites. For the twenty-first century, then, are Chinese universities poised for global leadership?

WILLIAM C. KIRBY, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2005, is the T. M. Chang Professor of China Studies at Harvard University and the Spangler Family Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. He is a Harvard University Distinguished Service Professor, and the former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. His recent publications include the edited volumes *The People’s Republic of China at 60: An International Assessment* (2011) and *Prospects for the Professions in China* (with William P. Alford and Kenneth Winston, 2011). His latest book is *Can China Lead? Reaching the Limits of Power and Growth* (with Regina M. Abrami and F. Warren McFarlan, 2014).

On Sunday, April 21, 2013, a crowd gathered at the Great Hall of the People in central Beijing to inaugurate a new college at Tsinghua University. Letters from Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Barack Obama were read aloud, followed by video testimonials from past and present American secretaries of state: Henry Kissinger, Colin Powell, and John Kerry. Together with Vice Premier Liu Yandong, who hosted the meeting, all identified the founding of Schwarzman College at Tsinghua as a landmark in the history of U.S.-China relations and in the ascent of Chinese universities. The vision of Tsinghua and of the new college’s benefactor, American businessman and philanthropist Stephen A. Schwarzman, was to build a residential college that would house and educate, in China, the global leaders of the twenty-first century. Schwarzman College and its resident Schwarzman Scholars program would match in ambition and endowment the Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford University, which for more than a century have been committed to educating those with “potential for leadership.”¹

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The dynamic new president of Tsinghua University, Chen Jining, noted that the new college and program were part of Tsinghua's long history of internationalization. But whereas the university once prepared Chinese citizens to study in the United States, Tsinghua was now to be the educational destination of top postgraduate students from America, Europe, Asia, and beyond.

Today, Tsinghua University is one of China's two leading universities and one of the world's elite schools in terms of admission. China and the world of Chinese higher education have come a long way since Tsinghua was founded in 1911, the *xinhai* year of the Xuanton Emperor (that is, the last year of the last emperor of the last imperial dynasty). The history of Tsinghua mirrors the story of higher education in modern China.

Founded by the Qing court as *Tsinghua xuetaang* (Tsinghua Academy) near the site of the *Tsinghua yuan*, an imperial garden of the eighteenth century, Tsinghua began as a preparatory school for students selected to study in the United States. At the urging of then-president of the University of Illinois, Edmund J. James, the U.S. government remitted a portion of Boxer Indemnity funds for the education of Chinese in the United States and the establishment of Tsinghua. China, James argued, was on the edge of revolution. "The nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation," he wrote, "will reap the largest possible returns in moral, intellectual, and commercial influence."² In its first decade, Tsinghua built up an American-style campus – its Jeffersonian grand auditorium inspired by the auditorium at Urbana-Champaign – to prepare its students for study in America.

By 1925, Tsinghua was itself a college of liberal arts and sciences and home to China's leading Institute of Chinese

Studies, the *Guoxueyuan*. Its famous "four tutors" – Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, Chen Yinque, and Zhao Yuanren – added international and scientific dimensions to the study of Chinese language, literature, linguistics, and archaeology. Tsinghua's history department, founded in 1926, was chaired for its first decade by Jiang Tingfu (T. F. Tsiang), who revolutionized the study of China's modern international relations. John K. Fairbank, a pioneer in modern Chinese studies in the United States, learned his Chinese history from T. F. Tsiang at Tsinghua.

With the establishment of the National Government in 1928, Tsinghua became National Tsing Hua University and the following year inaugurated its graduate school. By 1935, Tsinghua's ten graduate departments counted for one-third of the graduate departments across China. It was a comprehensive university by 1937 and a leading player in a vibrant mix of institutions (public and private, Chinese and foreign) that included Peking University, Jiao Tong University, National Central University, and the Academia Sinica, accompanied by private colleges of high quality such as St. John's University, Yenching University, and Peking Union Medical College. All this made Chinese higher education one of the most dynamic systems in the world in the first half of the twentieth century.³

This period of development ended in 1937, when the Tsinghua campus was occupied by Japanese troops. In 1938, many of its faculty and students marched with the National Government to the interior, where Tsinghua became part of National Southwest Associated University (*Lianda*) for the duration of the war. The university's return to its campus in 1946 would offer only a short respite before the onset of civil war and the Communist conquest of China. In December 1948, Tsinghua's longtime president, Mei Yiqi, left Beijing.

In 1956, he became president of a renewed and distinguished National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, leading part of a divided Tsinghua in a divided China.

After the establishment of the People's Republic on the mainland, Tsinghua, like most institutions of higher learning, was Sovietized. It became a polytechnic university to train engineers. The schools of sciences and humanities, agriculture, and law were all abolished, and their faculty members were dispersed to other institutions. This reorganization positioned Tsinghua for leadership during the First Five-Year Plan (1953–1958), when it trained many of China's subsequent elite, but the relentless politicization of universities under Mao Zedong first weakened, and then nearly destroyed, Tsinghua. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Tsinghua became a prominent battleground for factional and ideological strife at the national level. It reopened fully only in 1978.⁴

Over the subsequent decades, Tsinghua's agenda was tied closely with that of the era of "opening and reform." The university received bountiful government investment and rose to lead China in engineering and science. It established a series of professional schools, one of which, the School of Economics and Management, has become the most selective school in the world for undergraduate admissions. Tsinghua's graduates have come to dominate the Chinese leadership elite, counting among them Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.⁵

Today, Tsinghua has reestablished itself as a comprehensive university. A School of Humanities and Social Sciences was established in 1993, and in 2012 it was divided into separate schools. Tsinghua's Law School was reestablished in 1995. In 1999, the former Central Academy of Arts and Design became part of Tsinghua, as did Peking Union Medical College in 2006.

In November 2009, Tsinghua reopened its famous Institute of Chinese Studies. The Tsinghua School of Economics and Management began to lead the university in reforming its general education curriculum. And at the university's one hundredth anniversary in 2011, a magnificent New Tsinghua Academy (*Xin Tsinghua xuetang*) was dedicated not to the fields of engineering, science, and technology, for which Tsinghua has been best known in recent decades, but to the performing arts.

President James of the University of Illinois was convinced, in 1907, that "[e]very great nation in the world will inevitably be drawn into more or less intimate relations" with a rapidly changing China.⁶ He imagined a world where China learned from others, not the other way around. But he also conceived of a China that would rise because of its international educational alliances. During his time there was a robust market for books concerned with the "rise of China." They had familiar titles: *The Dragon Awakes*; *China Awakened*; *Sun Yat Sen and the Awakening of China*; *Rising China*; and an unusual entrant, published in 1904, *New Forces in Old China: An Unwelcome but Inevitable Awakening*.⁷

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, one can find in any airport kiosk books that now proclaim ours to be "the Chinese century." We again have titles such as *The Dragon Awakes*; *China's Rise*; *The Rise of China*; *China's Ascent*; *As China Goes, So Goes the World*; and, most forcefully, *When China Rules the World*.⁸ A cynic might note that this is why being a foreign China specialist is so easy: all the books being written today were composed a century ago. A more forgiving observer might look at the history of Tsinghua and conclude: China is in ascendance today, and it has been rising for a century.

To rise is not necessarily to lead. What constitutes leadership? The foremost political and military powers of the past four

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centuries all set standards or offered models – regionally or globally – in many dimensions, including in the realms of culture, ideas, and education. This may be said of seventeenth-century France under Louis XIV; of the Qing during the Qianlong reign of the eighteenth century; of Britain and Germany in the nineteenth century; and of the United States in the twentieth. Tsinghua now aspires to educate global elites. For the twenty-first century, then, are Chinese universities poised for global leadership?

Without question, China today is leading simply in the scope and ambition of higher education. In 1978, after a decade of mostly closed universities, Chinese universities enrolled approximately 860,000 students. This number increased gradually until 1990, with enrollment of about two million at that time. In the 1990s, the government accelerated the pace of expansion, and by the year 2000 as many as six million students were enrolled in Chinese universities.

Since then, the overall official numbers – counting all types of institutions – have risen dramatically. There are at present more than thirty million students in Chinese institutions of higher learning. In 1998, Chinese colleges and universities graduated 830,000 students annually; by 2010 the number was six million. Today China graduates more university students than the United States and India combined. In 2000, China had approximately half the number of university students as the United States; now it has more than twice the number. According to China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010), 20 percent of China's working-age population (ages 20 – 59) will have a higher education degree by 2020. (In the 2010 census, 28 percent of the U.S. population reported a higher education degree.)

In 2000, there were 1,041 colleges and universities in China. A decade later there were more than twice as many: 2,358. From 1999 to 2009, Chinese institutions of higher education hired nearly 900,000 new, full-time faculty members.

For most of the history of the People's Republic, higher education was an opportunity afforded to the very few. Now China is moving toward mass higher education. The gross enrollment ratio (college participation rate) of 18- to 22-year-olds was 3 percent in 1999; it was 24 percent in 2009. By 2020, China aims to have 40 percent of young adults in this age cohort enrolled in colleges or universities.⁹

For all this expansion, land and capital have been made available by a variety of means. The result has been a quadrupling in the square acreage of Chinese universities since 2000. Old universities have built stunning new campuses. Zhejiang University, which was founded in 1897, houses its now-nearly sixty thousand students across three large campuses. Chongqing University, established in 1929, has opened beautifully landscaped new university grounds as part of an eight-university *daxuecheng*, or “university city.” Until recently, higher education institutions had been concentrated in but a few areas, Beijing and the lower Yangzi region chief among them. Today, cities and provinces never known for higher education compete to found, build, and expand colleges and universities – often within new science and technology zones – as part of their competitive strategies for growth, development, and prestige.

This surge has been accompanied by a diversification of institutions. Private colleges and universities (*minban xueyuan*) have grown much more rapidly in number than public institutions and now account for between 15 and 20 percent of enrollments and nearly 30 percent of all higher education institutions. In Xian, entrepre-

neurs worked with local officials to make Xian China's capital of private higher education. Xian International University (*Xi'an waishi xueyuan*), founded in 1992 as an examination prep center, is now one of China's largest private universities, with a student body of 34,000. Its graduates enjoy better job placement rates than those of Peking or Tsinghua Universities. Unlike university presidents the world over, Xian's president, Huang Teng, does not worry about his tenure: he owns 55 percent of the university. President Huang is looking to establish branch campuses elsewhere in China and in North America.¹⁰

Large companies are also getting into the higher education sector. Alibaba's Taobao unit has plans for a "Taobao University," first to train e-business owners, managers, salesmen, and professionals, and in time to extend business education to more than one million online students seeking the skills to start and sustain small- and medium-sized businesses. Taobao University also expects to enroll some twenty thousand students "offline," that is, in person.

Sino-foreign universities, such as the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, have brought higher education and research centers to cities outside the plans of the Ministry of Education. At the same time, many public universities have established "independent" universities that operate as full-time extension schools and generate significant revenue. In short, this is a time of expansion, outreach, and experimentation in Chinese higher education. These developments in China have promoted cooperation and competition across the realm of "Greater China": Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore all compete with Beijing and Shanghai to be the educational center of the Chinese-speaking world.

Unlike the growth of American universities in the 1950s and the extraordinary expansion of European institutions that began in the 1970s, the development of

higher education in China has been elitist as well as massive. In 1995, the Ministry of Education launched the "211 Project" to enhance the quality of about one hundred universities. It was followed in 1998 by a "985 Project" to support thirty-nine elite universities, of which nine – China's so-called Ivy League – would be developed as "world class" institutions (*guoji yiliu daxue*), defined as cradles of high-level, creative researchers; frontiers of scientific research; forces of transformative research and innovation; and bridges for international exchange. To that end, Chinese central, provincial, and local governments, supplemented by university foundations and private philanthropy, have provided enormous revenues to the leading institutions, well outspending the (very significant) rewards given in recent European competitions, such as the *Exzellenzinitiativ* in Germany. One national effort focuses on the recruitment of overseas talent. The "Thousand Talent Program" began in 2008 to recruit leading overseas Chinese faculty and researchers; by 2012 it had "brought home" more than two thousand. The program was supplemented in 2011 by a "Thousand Foreign Experts" initiative that offers globally competitive incentives and research support for international scholars being recruited by Chinese universities.

With this significant national investment and international recruitment, Chinese universities have risen steadily in international rankings. In the 2012 – 2013 QS World University Rankings of more than eight hundred institutions, Peking University and Tsinghua University were numbers 44 and 48, respectively. In the 2012 – 2013 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings of the top four hundred universities worldwide, they ranked 46 and 52, respectively. As I have written in an essay published in an earlier issue of *Dædalus*,¹¹ there is much stupidity to the rankings

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game. Rankings rank only what can be measured. They emphasize research publication in select international journals, and they studiously ignore teaching, education, and curriculum. One criterion, citation indexes, may be important in economics but unhelpful in the humanities. International rankings focus on major research prizes, and universities glory in having on their faculty Nobel laureates, taking credit for work often done decades earlier at another university. (At the University of California, Berkeley, Nobel laureates receive the ultimate prize: a dedicated parking space marked “NL.”)

Yet the rankings do show, however imperfectly, the shifting tectonic plates of global leadership in higher education. Had rankings such as those issued by Shanghai Jiaotong University, read today by deans and presidents around the world, existed a century ago, perhaps eight of the world’s top ten universities would have been German. Harvard University, which ranks very well at the present, would not have been in the top ten, perhaps not in the top twenty; it became a research university worthy of the name only in the late nineteenth century by emulating the practices of the University of Berlin. Today, at least according to the QS rankings, Peking University and Tsinghua University outperform *every* German university. Times change.

China, then, is home to the world’s fastest growing sector – in quality as well as quantity – of higher education in the world. This explains the rush of foreign universities to establish, or reestablish, a presence in China; and it helps us understand why Chinese universities are exploring international models of “general education” as they seek to educate and graduate future leaders.

As we have seen in the case of Tsinghua, the important role of foreign universities in China is not a new phenomenon. Rather,

it is a permanent feature of modern China’s educational landscape. China’s oldest modern university, Wuhan University, was founded in 1893 as a “Self-Strengthening Institute” with European advice. Before 1949, China’s state universities were created largely on German models, while many of the leading private colleges were supported and advised by American institutions. Every major university from the Republican era bears architectural witness to that vibrant period of educational partnership. In the 1950s, all Chinese universities were reorganized on Soviet patterns during a decade of vigorous Sino-Soviet exchange. Since 1978, and especially since 1998, there has been widespread experimentation in Chinese higher education, much of it in the context of new international partnerships.

Nearly every leading American university today believes that it needs to have a “China strategy” and to be somehow involved in the rapid growth of higher education in China. This has given rise to a healthy set of experiments and alternative models of engagement. Columbia University and the University of Chicago have opened an office and a center, respectively, in Beijing. Stanford University has built a courtyard center within the campus of Peking University. New York University has established NYU-Shanghai as a vertical university (that is, in a high-rise) as part of its global network and in partnership with one of China’s most creative universities, East China Normal University. The Harvard Center Shanghai – the only university-wide center for Harvard outside the United States – promotes research, student internships, conferences, and executive education in China. Duke University’s two-hundred-acre residential campus in Kunshan, China’s richest and most entrepreneurial town, located just west of Shanghai, will open its doors in late 2014 as Duke Kunshan University.¹² It is without

question the most ambitious international educational enterprise in China since the days of Yenching University (the present-day site of Peking University). In these ventures, the Americans are joining other Sino-foreign institutions, such as the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, and the hugely successful China Europe International School of Business, a joint venture with the European Union that ranks regularly as the top business school in China and among the top twenty-five worldwide.

Opportunities for foreign universities in contemporary China exist everywhere, but perhaps especially in three realms. First, the over-centralization of Chinese research universities in Beijing and the greater Shanghai region has led other cities to be highly entrepreneurial in recruiting international partners. Second, the Chinese government has committed to stunning levels of investment in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) and to international partnerships in these realms. Third, leading Chinese universities are developing American-style programs of general education and in the process have sought international advice, support, and models.

Chinese universities have long had general education (*tongshi jiaoyu*) programs of a certain sort: for example, required classes (*bixu ke*) in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. And like required courses everywhere, students loathe and endure them. Over the past decade, however, mainland universities, together with those in Hong Kong and Taiwan, have competed to introduce general and liberal education programs that open opportunities for learning across the humanities and social sciences.

The idea of a “liberal education” is a concept of German origin that has now established its deepest roots in North America.

It means the education of the whole person, not just training the specialist, with the aim to ensure that graduates are curious, reflective, and skeptical learners – people with the capacity for innovation and lifelong learning. Just as many American educators believe (not wrongly) that young Chinese students are better educated in math and science than their American counterparts, many Chinese educators believe that it is the West, and particularly the Americans, who are “innovative” and “creative thinkers” while the Chinese people (somehow despite all their ancient inventions and modern revolutions) remain “traditional,” “rule bound,” and “rote learners.” For this some blame the tortured path to university admission through the *gaokao*, or “higher examination,” with its modernized version of what the Japanese scholar Ichisada Miyazaka once called “China’s examination hell.”¹³ How can students so completely focused on test scores in order to enter university possibly be innovators when they get there?

Famous American colleges and universities pride themselves on their “core,” or general education, programs, which they contend produce “leaders” who are broadly educated to take on the world. None seems content to pursue the presumably larger market of followers. Presidents of Chinese universities have taken their American counterparts at their word and have devoted enormous effort to craft curricula for general and liberal education in a Chinese context. When Harvard College replaced its Core Program with a new General Education Program in 2006, its many curricular reports and recommendations were read at least as carefully in Beijing as they were in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Leading American institutions believe that for a truly liberal education, a study of the humanities is essential. Despite –

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or because of – a century-long obsession with engineering, this view is shared increasingly today in China’s premier universities. The expansion of general education in Chinese university curricula may take place in new institutions (for example, Fudan College as the liberal arts college within Fudan University) or it may be embedded in distribution requirements. Either way, it is a sign that pacesetting Chinese universities believe that China’s next generation of leaders should be broadly educated in the humanities and social sciences as well as in the sciences. In 2001, Peking University inaugurated the Yuanpei Program (now Yuanpei College), named for Peking University’s famous German-educated chancellor of the early twentieth century, the philosopher Cai Yuanpei. This was part of a broad reform of undergraduate education to foster “a new generation of talented individuals with higher creativity as well as international competence so as to meet the needs of our present age.” Tsinghua University’s School of Economics and Management, under the leadership of Dean Qian Yingyi, who received his doctorate at Harvard and holds a professorship at UC Berkeley, has implemented one of the most imaginative programs in liberal arts and general education to be found in any Chinese university – and this in a professional school. Renmin University in Beijing, founded as the “People’s University” on a Soviet model, now houses several of China’s leading centers for classical studies and Chinese history.

This is a time of investment, growth, experimentation, and internationalization in Chinese higher education. We have discussed many of its strengths. What are the weaknesses?

Given the size and diversity of the higher education sector in China, it is not surprising that there is a gulf between those who oversee Chinese universities (the cen-

tral government and the party-state at various levels) and those responsible for their day-to-day operation. “Education is the cornerstone of national rejuvenation,” according to the preamble of China’s 2010 National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development. From the central government’s perspective, education takes as its goal the building of *national* strength, developing talent for the collective good, not primarily for individual merit. This viewpoint is in obvious tension with programs of general education at top Chinese universities that aim, like their American counterparts, also to liberate and educate the *individual* to be a critical thinker and an active citizen.

If the central government sees education as serving national strategies, making the best strategic use of the enormous funding now coming from all levels of government, the local and provincial officials who are the main funders of universities often have a short-term, utilitarian viewpoint. They seek to spur economic growth; to enhance the job opportunities of people in their late teens and twenties; and to take advantage of the cheap credit offered by state banks for the expansion of higher education.

If there is a “China model” for universities, it is not a particularly socialist one. As the historian Zhang Jishun, the former party secretary of East China Normal University, has argued, just because enrollments have grown does not mean that access and equity have increased in equal measure. Take the case of tuition. There used to be none in Chinese universities. In 2000, the standard tuition at public universities was RMB 5,000 per semester. By 2012, it ranged from RMB 16,000 to 27,000, with an average annual cost of US\$4,500. This figure is not high by American standards, but it is about 150 percent of the disposable income of rural residents. And in private Chinese universities, tuition can be many times higher. This has led to

a situation in which the poorest students often end up at private universities, which are the most expensive, while wealthier and well-connected students have much better access to elite public institutions, which are among the least expensive.

We can see this in statistics of rural students attending Chinese universities. Nationwide, about 50 percent of university students hail from rural families (with a generous definition of what constitutes a rural family), but at the elite universities such as Peking and Tsinghua, only about 20 percent of the student body is made up of students from rural areas. Even in an age of greatly expanded university admissions, the army and public security jobs offer better means of social mobility for China's rural and poor than do China's mass universities.

Urban-rural educational inequality, as Martin Whyte points out in his essay in this issue, can be measured directly in regional terms. In recent years, the gross enrollment ratios of college-age students in Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai all surpassed 50 percent. This is much higher than the national ratio of 24 percent. Indeed, Shanghai is already above 60 percent. But in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Tibet, the (unlikely and unrealized) goal is for a gross enrollment ratio of 15 percent. In higher education, the disparity between regions is not decreasing, but increasing.

Finally, take the case of examinations and admissions. The *gaokao* persists, as did the old imperial examinations, because it has the appearance of rewarding merit and is one of the few national institutions that people believe is fair and honest. In principle, only the best, determined by competitive examination, are admitted. But the limitations of the *gaokao* have long been known, and elite universities are the leaders in setting patterns for alternative portals of entry: through additional tests, interviews, "Olympic" style prizes, and

other mechanisms that privilege those of means and of position who went to the best schools. William C. Kirby

In short, despite the ever-larger numbers of applicants and students, there is growing inequality of opportunity in China's institutions of higher education. The prospect of higher education has been extended to China's new and urban middle class, but for the poor and the rural, opportunities remain limited.

Perhaps the greatest challenges to the rise of Chinese universities lie in the realms of governance and politics. The hierarchical governance structures of Chinese universities leave many decisions to a very few people. Chinese universities are overseen by party committees, and the university party secretary normally outranks and frequently outflanks the president. (A few extraordinary party secretaries are key to their universities' success, but as a rule this system of parallel governance limits rather than enhances the flow of ideas.) Few party secretaries – like few presidents of American universities – look favorably upon the prospect of unbridled faculty governance of universities. But the freedom of faculty to pursue ideas wherever they may lead is essential for sustained innovation in universities. Where, after all, do the best ideas come from in universities? Deans and presidents everywhere must make decisions and set priorities. In practice, however, many of the best ideas – those that deans and presidents will be compelled to support on their intellectual merits – will come up from the mistakenly named "bottom": that is, from faculty at the top of their fields. Having an institutional structure to support this well is rare anywhere, and in Chinese universities today it is rarer still. By any comparative measure of leading international universities, faculty in Chinese institutions have little role in governance. It was not a good sign when China's Vice President (now President) Xi

Jinping visited China's leading universities in June 2012 to call for increased party supervision of higher education.

This leads to a final challenge: can "world class" universities – however they are defined – exist in a politically illiberal system? Perhaps; but perhaps only with some significant degree of autonomy. German universities in the nineteenth century had many political pressures, but they were the envy of the world in part because they also had traditions of institutional freedom that fostered and (at times) protected creative thinkers. China's universities today boast superb scholars and some of the world's best students. But these students are also forced to sit through required courses in party ideology, and they learn a simplified book version of the history of their own country. Despite new programs of general education, in the realm of politics and history the distance between what students have to learn in order to graduate and what they know to be true grows greater every year. This is why, in 2012, when students in Hong Kong were faced with the prospect of enduring "patriotic education" as taught in mainland China, they took to the streets.

Can China lead in the global competition of universities? The question of potential Chinese leadership in this area, as in many others, is a comparative question. Who leads whom? As we have seen, in international rankings the American system appears to be the most formidable. But that would not have been the case a century ago, and there is no reason to assume that the United States will remain in a leadership position without constant reform, reinvestment, and reinvention.

American universities face big challenges. The great public systems of higher education in the United States have undergone a process of slow-motion self-destruction over the past decade. The Uni-

versity of California system, once the best system of public higher education in the world, has been weakened and made increasingly dysfunctional due to the state of California's budget problems. As that system declines, leading private universities – the Stanfords and Harvards, for example, which compete with the University of California for faculty and graduate students – may in turn be less challenged. A major test for any institution – Chinese or American – is not how good it can be when the money is pouring in; it is how the institution reacts and adapts when it stops. This has been a major trial for American universities, private and public alike, after the U.S. financial meltdown of 2008. Someday, surely, it will be a challenge for Chinese universities as well.

In terms of governance, it is easy to criticize Chinese universities for the party committees that oversee and limit them. American and European universities generally accord their faculty a large role in management and an extraordinary degree of academic autonomy. But there can be political interference from legislatures and statehouses in the working of American public universities as well. And how much transparency to the public is there, really, in the governing boards of America's leading private universities?

American universities have devoted enormous funds and equal amounts of rhetoric in recent years to extending the reach of a Yale or Michigan education to the least advantaged, in financial terms, in the United States. The jury is still out, however, as to whether or not they are succeeding. At present in the United States, as in China, the major beneficiaries of elite higher education remain the (already) well educated and well connected.

For the moment, however, American universities still enjoy their hour in the sun as the innovative places to educate leaders. After all, actual Chinese leaders

send their children to American universities, and in increasing numbers. In the 1920s and 1930s, China's most powerful man, Chiang Kai-shek, sent his sons to study in the leading (if quite different) institutions of his day: in the Soviet Union (Chiang Ching-kuo) and in Germany (Chiang Wei-kuo and Tai An-kuo). Today, the sons and daughters of Chinese political leaders study in many American colleges and universities. Applications to American universities from China have risen tenfold in the last decade. It used to be that the Chinese students who went abroad for undergraduate study were those who could not get in to leading Chinese universities. Today, even Peking University and Tsinghua University – the most prestigious and connected of institutions – lose students to top universities in America, Britain, and Hong Kong.

Can the twenty-first century nevertheless be “the Chinese century” in higher education? It is telling that this is not a question that could have been asked, and taken seriously, even a decade ago.¹⁴ But China's growing strength in higher education is not simply the result of the extraordinary efforts and expenditures of recent years; it has been a century and more in the making. If the past is any guide to the future, Chinese universities will not

rise and thrive simply on their own, but in cooperation (and now competition) with leading universities worldwide. Even as the Chinese people expand their study abroad, the world is coming to China. The U.S. government has set a goal for one hundred thousand American students to study annually in China, balancing in part the nearly three hundred thousand Chinese citizens who study in the United States.

We do know this: the rapid increase in the scale of Chinese higher education and the rankings of elite Chinese institutions is unmatched anywhere. China's challenges – in access, equality, and governance – are the shared problems of higher education everywhere. The leading American universities have rushed to establish locations and partnerships in China. In three years, Schwarzman College will open at Tsinghua University, where it will seek to attract the best young talent in the world to study at an institution originally designed to send Chinese students away for their education. As the Rhodes Scholarship for the twenty-first century, it will endeavor to educate scholars from around the world who have “potential for leadership.” Surely Chinese universities, too, have the potential for leadership.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Keith Bradscher, “\$300 Million Scholarship for Study in China Signals a New Focus,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2013; and “Oxford and the Rhodes Scholarship,” <http://www.rhodes-scholar.org> (accessed June 2013).
- ² Edmund J. James, “Memorandum Concerning the Sending of an Educational Commission to China” (1907), cited in Mary Brown Bullock, “American Exchanges with China, Revisited,” in *Educational Exchanges: Essays on the Sino-American Experiences*, ed. Joyce K. Kallgren and Denis Fred Simon (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1987), 26.
- ³ See Qian Yingyi and Li Qiang, eds., *Lao Qinghua de shehui kexue [Social Sciences in Old Tsinghua]* (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2011).
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- ¹¹ William C. Kirby, “On Chinese, European, and American Universities,” *Daedalus* 137 (3) (Summer 2008).
- ¹² William C. Kirby, Nora Bynum, Tracy Yuen Manty, and Erica M. Zendell, “Kunshan, Incorporated: The Making of China’s Richest Town,” Harvard Business School Case 313-103 (2013).
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