

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

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Institutional reforms in higher education in China have produced impressive results both in the quality of scholarly work and the quantity of degree-holders. The higher-education system effectively complemented China's stellar economic transformation in the post-Mao decades. But it has yet to earn unalloyed admiration in the world of universities. This essay draws on my research as a historian of modern China and my time as faculty adviser on China engagement at the University of California, Berkeley. I argue that the rise in eminence of Chinese universities is about the system becoming more Western-oriented, more elitist in ethos, less overtly top-down in directives, and more techno-bureaucratic in means. The university system is also reaching an inflection point thanks to tension between ideologized cultural nationalism and headwinds on the course of further techno-professional internationalization.

Roughly a decade ago, I attended a luncheon in Shenzhen to celebrate the opening of a research joint venture. During the event, I was seated next to one of the city's leaders. To make conversation, I asked about his family and learned that he was the father of a high school senior applying to undergraduate programs in America. Since I was at the luncheon as a representative of the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), I asked if his son would consider applying there. He responded no: Berkeley did not rank high enough as a dream school for world-shopping Chinese families. There was no ivy on the outside of its buildings or cathedrals on its campus: neither the charm nor the prestige of the world's best established schools. There were no gleaming new buildings either, only dated infrastructure that compared poorly with China's state-of-the-art university campuses. Above all, there were "too many Chinese people" on its campus to make Berkeley attractive to an ambitious Chinese applicant. I found this last point particularly intriguing. The admissions practice at UC Berkeley had produced one of the most inclusive student bodies among America's major institutions. For many Chinese parents, however, the practice apparently translated into a negative reputation for its lack of exclusivity ("too easy to get in") and social glamour ("not much money") in student life.

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 Chinese systems of higher education, within the context of developmental economies, be a case of unalloyed success? Meanwhile, from the viewpoint of a historical researcher, sources about the operations of China's universities are rich, in both English and Chinese, and perspectives are diverse. From across several continents, many individuals have engaged substantively with Chinese universities. How might a history of China's higher education of the most recent past look? How does one do justice to the range and depth of the empirical data? How does one make sense of the subject without jumping immediately to predictable conclusions?

This essay grows out of my observations over the past two decades as senior faculty adviser for China engagement at UC Berkeley. It also draws on my study of China's modern history that views China's higher education as a component of the contemporary history of the country.

What does it mean, from a historical perspective, that China's modern universities have gone through those specific transformations in funding models and international connections in the recent decades? What are the roles of Western

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 that recur in that history. My observations of international engagement are filtered through three discrete projects and communications.

First, there is the question of “China” and the “West,” about whether the norms and practices are more “Chinese” or “Western,” or adequately attentive to China’s unique experiences and circumstances. There are several variations to this pair of dichotomies, including formulations that critique the boundaries and dissolve the tension between the binaries. Beyond the classification of knowledge and the organization of learning, the contests between China and the West inform differing priorities in educational policies and aspirations.

Second, there are issues of “control or autonomy,” struggles that most notably unfolded between universities and a succession of ministries of education in the twentieth century. One way to think of this recurrent conflict is to say that it came to a definitive end in the 1950s in favor of the state over society. Upon the founding of the PRC, all colleges and universities became state entities under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education. State control in the twentieth century usually meant a heightened degree of “Partification” (in other words, Party control) over political education and academic administration.

A third question concerns “the elite or the masses,” that is, the structure of access and opportunity. Does the system serve a minority group or the majority of the population? Does it erect barriers and reinforce hierarchies? Or does it advance wider access to economic mobility and allow everyone a fair chance to succeed?

I argue that Chinese excellence in the post-Mao era is about the system becoming more Western-oriented, more elitist in ethos, less overtly top-down in directives, and more techno-bureaucratic in means. This has moved major Chinese universities up in the global ranking tables without diminishing the attractiveness of exclusive Western universities to those like the son of my Shenzhen interlocutor. Meanwhile, over the last five years, things have been changing quickly on the ground. The Chinese system of higher education is reaching an inflection point after a three-year disruption during the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are growing signs that the pendulum is about to swing in a different direction. There are long-term dynamics that predated the pandemic, and these emerging developments should not surprise us if we follow the dialectics of China’s modern history.

The transformation of China’s higher education began in 1977, the year a set of standardized entrance examinations known as the *gaokao* was reinstated nationwide for all applicants for college admissions.² The resurrection of this threshold exam signaled the incremental abandonment of the educa-

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 reoriented 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” (*renli*) into a pool of “talent” (*rencai*).

Another function is to produce top-notch excellence. To modernize and to move China beyond its traditional economy, universities must take on the mission to produce “high-caliber constructive members of society” schooled in science and technology.⁵ These talented individuals must be as outstanding as possible and leaders with cutting-edge expertise.

Two strategies emerged to meet the twin goals of “quantity” and “quality.” The first was the diversification of university streams of funding. The goal was to bring in more funding for education, especially from family savings for tuition costs and from local government taxes of businesses, which would pay for rapid increases in college enrollments. The second was the internationalization of the Big Two, enabling the almost instant leap of TsingBei into the ranks of global universities.

Both strategies accelerated the development of China’s universities as producers of human capital. And both produced social inequity as the price of their success.

Up to the early 1990s, China’s schools of higher learning had been exclusively situated in major cities and sustained entirely by government funding.⁶ Multiple ministries ran their own specialized universities. Advanced learning served a centrally planned economy with a nationwide division of labor.

Reforms decentralized that planning and localized the schools, directing the latter to prioritize the developmental needs of their immediate regions. All ministry-run schools were consolidated under the direction of the Ministry of Education. In medium-sized cities, these changes led to the creation of new schools, usually on the basis of single-subject institutions such as those of technology or teacher training, especially in the inland provinces of central and western China. The changes thus redrew the map of tertiary studies, but they left unaddressed the issue of regional disparity in per capita educational resources.

Meanwhile, the marketized socialist economy diversified the financing structure of higher education. As the changes took hold, China’s major universities in urban centers drew their operating budgets from at least eight streams of funding: central government funding, local government funding, tuition and fees, special project funding, private giving, dividends from intellectual property, profits from school-run business enterprises, and corporate giving. The diversification brought new revenue, especially family savings, into the educational system, enabling the schools to upgrade their programs while creating more seats in their classrooms.

The cost, however, contributed to the vast disparity in educational quality between rich and poor regions. Inland schools in underdeveloped regions depended

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) presented their strategic plans to become “world-class first-rate universities with Chinese socialist characteristics” within two decades. TsingBei was given special policy provisions to become world-class by international standards. What did these special policy provisions entail?

The leadership at PKU and Tsinghua partnered with the Ministry of Education to remake their institutions.⁷ Government initiatives poured multiple millions of dollars to accelerate their physical upgrade into modern institutions. By 2001, Tsinghua and PKU each gained a new campus at Shenzhen, where they launched new programs through international partnerships. They changed the procedures of personnel appointments and reviews, both to incentivize research productivity and to facilitate faculty mobility within and across institutions. On admissions, TsingBei expanded their scope of autonomy under the gaokao system to manage their own selections.⁸ The changes enabled the Big Two to further define and differentiate their emphasis on undergraduate education.

In comparison with previous practices, the Ministry of Education continued to exercise broad authority. Through its various appointed expert committees, the Ministry set and reviewed academic goals, degree requirements, curriculum criteria, hiring procedures, personnel standards, and operating guidelines, behaving as the strategic planner and accreditation authority of higher education. Yet, instead of downright state control, these exercises came with technoscientific claims of professionalism.

Educational authority in the Reform era steadily moved from a singular to a dualistic approach in the governance of Chinese universities. First, central authorities pulled back from direct management of campus administration, focusing instead on issues and directives that structured the policies that governed institutions of higher education. Second, the state accorded equal standing on campuses to university presidents and Party secretaries. The former, qualified for scholarly

credentials, were charged with academic administration from the perspectives of “domain expertise,” with the responsibility to deliver educational results of excellence. The latter, who held ranked Party positions, chaired university councils and personnel committees and assured the respective institutions’ political correctness. Meanwhile, the Ministry appointed its own committees of technical or domain experts to advise and consult on the formulation of national policies for higher education. Reforms, in short, saw advancement in the professionalization and institutionalization of educational governance in line with global standards, albeit without any decrease in Party authority.

Does the availability of more funding mean that deans and faculty members gained greater autonomy in managing schools? Does professionalization enhance the agency of campus administrations?

Government funding, especially project-specific grants, indeed came with all the accompanying budgeting, accounting, auditing, spending, and reporting rules and regulations. Revenue generated from nongovernmental sources exposed universities to extra Ministry scrutiny for corruption. The state’s shift to rule-based governance seemingly expanded professional autonomy. It injected, however, the politics of insider dealings and the consolidation of elite networks into research enterprises, while barely containing the application of political loyalty as a funding criterion.⁹

Does international engagement advance participation in university policy-making and administrative autonomy? Because they transformed into world-class institutions early on compared with other schools, Tsinghua and PKU earned prerogatives and exemptions from regular bureaucratic rules. Yet the Big Two were operating in a gray zone, in which there were no existing rules nor laws. One might argue that the mandate to explore best practices and build international partnerships paradoxically put the universities at an even higher degree of dependency on shifting state policies and the political will of top leaders.

There are a few insights to gain from UC Berkeley’s interactions with Tsinghua and Peking University. In the 1980s and upon the full resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, Berkeley became one of the first American universities to pursue scholarly exchanges with Chinese counterparts. The 1984 Berkeley-PKU memorandum of understanding was among the first of its kind that committed the two sides to scholarly exchanges.

However, interest between the two sides was asymmetrical. Chinese scientists were keen to engage with the West, but their American counterparts were slow to respond. By the mid-2010s, students from the PRC made up over 30 percent of all international enrollees in American institutions of higher education.¹⁰ Multiple delegations of Chinese visitors streamed through American university campuses from coast to coast. Several universities released reports about their “China strategy.”

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 a “trans-Pacific” century upon China’s admission into the World Trade Organization. In 2012, the convergence of these interests and interactions led to the issuance of Berkeley’s “China Strategy Report,” as well as an agreement to create the Tsinghua-Berkeley Shenzhen Institute (TBSI).

Buoyed by a general optimism and support for a globally connecting world, the TBSI was an organized research unit of international engagement that broke new ground for Berkeley. It institutionalized collaborative work from multiple laboratories in engineering and biomedical studies. Yet, staying in line with the decentralized and bottom-up style of Berkeley research initiatives, it was nonetheless initiated, led, and anchored by interested faculty (principal investigators) rather than university administrators.

For Tsinghua, partnership with Berkeley catapulted its start-up Shenzhen campus to a new level of international credibility. The multiplier effect also contributed to the university’s research connections. For Berkeley, the enterprise raised many questions. Did the TBSI and its operational templates constitute a transferrable model for campus engagement with global partners elsewhere? Was the TBSI a viable standard for a measured institutional response to the trans-Pacific

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 operations from undergraduate admissions, faculty reviews, university funding, and academic senate oversight, to central administrative communications and student councils. Of particular interest to the visitors were questions pertaining to the tension between Berkeley's abundance of rules and regulations, highly bureaucratized administration, and the complete academic autonomy in research and teaching. How was it possible, PKU visitors asked, for a state-funded public institution to foster an academic culture of faculty self-governance and intellectual freedom? It's both fascinating and sensible that this would be the big question.

Through international interactions, both Tsinghua and PKU came to see the limitations of China's established educational practices. To break out of the compartmentalization of knowledge in narrowly defined fields of technical studies, Tsinghua expanded its faculties in arts, history, and humanities, by whatever the weight the school assigned to these studies. To undo the educational effects of the gaokao-centered admissions practice, the Big Two promoted student-centered undergraduate learning, and inverted the prevailing norm of teacher-centered lecturing in Chinese classrooms. Many other old norms were broken, including the hiring of new PhDs with degrees earned from universities other than one's own, or even the hiring of international scholars. In 2012, Tsinghua counted more than forty Berkeley PhDs or former faculty members among its deans, chairs, and research directors.

These changes contributed to the rise in global standing for China's top universities. They produced stunning results in the STEM fields and propelled China's status in advanced technology. However, the ideas taken in from international partners widened the gap between the coastal elite and the inland provincials. The dismissal of gaokao among elite groups, for example, erected new barriers to succeed for inland students. The promotion of student choices and individual electives – the advocacy to flip classroom dynamics – bred resentment among inland teachers, who had never known any other way to teach and learn.

In retrospect, Chinese educational reforms since the 1980s have yielded notable results. Multiple statistical indicators, counting money and people, point to the depth and magnitude of the transformation. By 2022, the gross enrollment ratio of Chinese college-age cohorts into colleges reached nearly 60 percent. The country has achieved close to full literacy. Over 240 million degrees have been conferred since 1990. Central authorities are happy to announce that the Chinese labor force supplies enough trained workers to staff all lines of work. The system has delivered the target numbers – of credible quality – that sustained the world's fastest growing economy.¹¹

On the quest for “excellence,” Chinese officials can also take pride in their accomplishments. Even if the subjectively assembled tables of global rankings are discounted, it is undeniable that the Chinese research output has increased in quality as well as quantity.

But this excellence is achieved at the expense of notable unevenness in several ways. There is much strength in engineering, but not nearly as much in biological and health science studies. It goes without saying that humanities and social sciences fare far less well.¹² This is to say nothing of the fact that teaching has been deemphasized in favor of the widespread glorification of scientific laboratory research.

Is “unevenness” in the distribution of strengths an absolute weakness? Does the Chinese state command the tools and the capacity to make strategic adjustments to overcome the imbalance? While tension from this unevenness *could* become generative forces for change in the next phase of Ministry action, these state-engineered disparities have produced problems that call into question the system's fairness and equity.

On the charged issue of “China or the West,” elite Chinese universities have moved substantively across the spectrum toward Westernizing their institutional norms and practices. They use English as a conceptual and professional language. By contrast, inland schools struggled to gain such linguistic proficiency. To be sure, reformist applications of the formula, “Chinese learning for essence, Western learning for application,” differ in the 2000s from that of a hundred years ago, when the formula was first proposed by Qing reformers. Those were the days

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 its interior. Under the new circumstances, effective cultivation of “quality” (*suzhi*) human talent, Wu stresses, must begin with a new recognition of past failings. The system of the recent past must face up not only to the siloed and differential practices that separated the scientific and humanistic pursuits, but also to the inter-generational rupture (in other words, those who came of age in the 1980s versus those born at the turn of the century) over the loss of historical memories and cultural understanding.¹³

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Western-inspired and urban-based ethos of elitism, credentialism, and boundless ambition for world-class competitiveness had already seeded discontent. Against the high pressure for success under the gaokao and job interviews, performative gestures such as “lying flat” (*tang ping*) and “involution / rolling in” (*nei juan*) became popular for the college-bound and early-career cohorts. The professed disengagement of these individuals signaled a level of discontent that undercut the disciplinary capacities of the state and the schools. The rise of youth unemployment in 2023 added a sense of unease approaching crisis in China’s higher education.

For control, the Ministry of Education had steadily developed, over the past four decades, a sophisticated system that meticulously measured faculty performance and closely tracked professional behavior. Ministerial control came in the form of scheduled reviews conducted in prescribed categories. For credibility, the reviews incorporated the opinions of field experts and knowledge leaders. Up and down the channel, the system communicated in a language of scores, numbers, indices, points, sizes, dollar amounts, ratios, percentiles, projectiles, and so forth. As rewards, satisfactory performers received superior grades, elevated ranks, more funding, and conditioned operational autonomy. In comparison with their early PRC predecessors, the Ministry has successfully moved the exercise of

control and the contest for autonomy to a different plane of governance and governability. The universities are incentivized to partner with the state to strive for greater excellence and resources, albeit on the condition of adherence to Party loyalty.

That quantitative approach and standardized method of evaluation speak to the Ministry's participation in a bureaucratic system of professionalized routine that relied upon, when circumstances required, a "project engineering" (*gong-cheng*) approach to mobilize for special targeted objectives.¹⁴ As processes of operation that drew inspirations from systems engineering, one might argue, the project engineering approach took the place of the "campaign" (*yundong*) mode from the Mao era. That approach allowed the Party and the state to mobilize resources and create exceptional conditions for the achievement of prioritized goals, often through institutional means and on a monumental scale. It also allowed the authorities to appear fair-minded and merit-driven, despite complaints to the contrary.

As I began this essay with an anecdote that gestured to the aspirations of Chinese students and their status-conscious parents, let me conclude with another from a different encounter. At a joint panel on the theme of "innovation" during the 2010 Tsinghua Week at Berkeley, two panelists shared their thoughts. The Tsinghua presentation, by a dean of public policy, told a story studded with data about the university's research achievements. The presentation, which detailed sizes of funding, composition of teams of credentialed researchers, number of indexed papers, number of patents, and so forth, was about completing an impressive number of state-assigned top-priority projects in the most recent decade. The Berkeley presentation, featuring a quantitative biologist, opened with fulsome praise for the gene-sequencing capabilities on the Chinese side. After a few more words about computing machines and biological research, the presenter asked: "Where does innovation come from? How does one set one's research agenda?" He shared reflections about sitting in the shade of the trees in his own backyard, sipping coffee in the morning, and watching his children play. What could he do with his research, he asked, to make their lives better? How might science benefit people today and in the future? The striking contrast between the two presentations could be interpreted in more than one way. However surprising or unsurprising, they set in sharp relief the differences in the culture of knowledge-making between the two systems. It took effort for the two sides to begin communicating on that panel. In the years since, it has been a tremendous process of learning to collaborate across national systems and individual institutions.

China's transformation has inspired many intriguing questions. Some ask if the "Confucian Model" of East Asia stands a chance to take the place of that of the West as an alternative to third-world modernization. Others ask if there is a form

of “smart authoritarianism” when it comes to industrial policies for advanced technology. These formulations stress the exceptional qualities of the Chinese case, and how the Chinese exception might challenge existing assumptions about the role of the state and the market in developmental strategies.

But Chinese experience might also conform to worldwide patterns elsewhere. Backlash against globalization, for example, has given rise in many countries to various forms of cultural nationalism, including in higher education. Universities have been declared as soft targets for national security threats, and have come under many rules when engaging in scholarly exchanges. Chinese ideas about the securitization of university campuses, meanwhile, go beyond anti-espionage rules and laws about exchanges. Following the project engineering mode of control, students have recently been called to engage in “soul forging” (*zhuhun gongcheng*), inoculating their hearts and steeling their minds against spiritual infiltration.

In his recent book *Empires of Ideas*, William C. Kirby asks: Do Chinese universities stand a chance to lead the world in the twenty-first century?¹⁵ The answer can be “yes” if the question is about the role of higher education in the service of state-directed economic development. Do Chinese universities serve the people of China across the board? Visitors inevitably note that the campuses of Chinese universities (and now also buildings, thanks to the pandemic regime) have gates, walls, even guards, plus machines as recent additions that read bar codes assigned to campus community members. In contrast with the Berkeley campus, they are not open to entry to one and all. Though much has changed in the domain of higher learning since the Mao years, how much has changed irreversibly, so that the Party, even as it retains its presence, does not overwhelm the enterprise of learning at Chinese universities?

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ENDNOTES

- 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, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China’s New Class* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Daniel A. Bell, *The Dean of Shandong* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2023); Susan Greenhalgh and Li Zhang, eds., *Can Science and Technology Save China?* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020); Zachary M. Howlett, *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2021); Jennifer Hubbert, *China in the World: An Anthropology of Confucius Institutes, Soft Power, and Globalization* (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,” *The 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., *Yanjiu Dongtai* [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 Pinglun* [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, *Cong Xique Zou Xiang Chongzu: Gaodeng Jiaoyu de Xuqiu yu Gongji Yanjiu* [From Scarcity toward Adequacy: A Study on the Demand and Supply of Higher Education] (Beijing: Jiaoyu Kexue Chuban She, 2008); Xiangming Chen, *Daxue Tongshi Jiaoyu Moshi de Tansuo: Yi Beijingdaxue Yuanpei Jihua Weili* [Searching for a General Education Model in the University – A Case Study of the Yuanpei Program in Peking University] (Beijing: Jiaoyu Kexue Chuban She, 2008); and Ling Chen and Barry Naughton, “An Institutionalized Policy-Making Mechanism: China’s Return to Techno-Industrial Policy,” *Research Policy* 45 (10) (2016): 2138–2152.
- ⁷ Dongping Yang, ed., *Zhongguo Jiaoyu Lanpishu* [Chinese Education: A Blue Book] (Beijing: Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chuban She, 2004); Li Zhifeng, et al., *Piaoyi de Xueshu: Dangdai Zhongguo Gaoxiao Jiaoshi Liudong* [Scholarship on the Move: The Mobility of the Teaching Staff in Contemporary Chinese Higher Education] (Beijing: Zhishi Chanquan Chuban She, 2020); and Li Jun, *Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Yanjiu Shi* [A History of the Study of Chinese Higher Education] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chuban She, 2005).

- 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, *Zhongguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Biange 40 Ren Tan* [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. See Open Doors, "Leading Places of Origin," <https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/leading-places-of-origin> (accessed March 20, 2024).
- ¹¹ Wu Daguang, "Chengjiu yu Yujing: Woguo Gaodeng Jiaoyu Pujihua Jincheng de Sikao" [Achievements and Advance Warnings: Reflections on the Progress toward the Generalization of Higher Education in Our Country], *Zhongguo Gaojiao Yanjiu* [Chinese Higher Education Research] (2023): 4.
- ¹² Xin Xu, "A Policy Trajectory Analysis of the Internationalization of Chinese Humanities and Social Sciences Research (1978–2020)," *International Journal of Educational Development*, May 12, 2021.
- ¹³ Wu Daguang, "Zhongguo de Daxue Rencai Peiyang Moshi Naiyi Handong: Shenceng Yuan-yin Zai Nali?" [The Model of Talent Cultivation in Chinese Higher Education Is Virtually Unshakable: What Are the Deeper Causes?], *Tencent*, August 19, 2022.
- ¹⁴ Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- ¹⁵ William C. Kirby, *Empires of Ideas: Creating the Modern University from Germany to America to China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2022).