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Reflections on the Social Role of Contemporary Chinese Universities in the Reform Era

Abstract In the last three decades, along with rapid economic and social changes in China, dramatic changes have taken place in Chinese higher education, where Chinese universities have been experiencing a variety of systematic reforms. Chinese universities are also facing some new issues yet they have largely neglected the task of establishing their own internal values and taking up their social responsibility.

Keywords social role, change, universities, higher education, challenge

Introduction

In 1978, the reform and opening-up policy was initiated and China's main focus turned to developing the economy, so it was inevitable that education would adjust to this central theme. Accordingly, higher education policy and development also became market oriented and pursued rapid economic growth. In fact, economic and social change provided great opportunities for higher education development. As a result, along with rapid economic and social changes, dramatic changes also have been taking place in Chinese higher education.

Since the reorganization of colleges and departments under Soviet influence in the 1950s, Chinese higher education has never undergone such momentous change and has never attracted so much attention from both the general public and academia. As is well known, Chinese higher education had been reorganized according to Soviet patterns in ways which placed its institutions in a relatively closed environment. However, since 1978, China's market has begun to play roles that provide both a dynamic and the resources for the remarkable transformation of higher education. In much of the academic literature on Chinese higher education, scholars largely focus on macro changes happening in the higher education system over the past three decades. Bie (2008) argued that

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“reform and development are two main themes in Chinese higher education since national policies of reform and opening-up were adopted” (p. 50). By this he means that the reform and development of Chinese higher education is based mostly on political reform, economic development, scientific and technological progress and the internal logic of higher education. Chinese higher education “has established a comprehensive and large system with advanced functions and a profound impact on teaching, learning, research, and social service” (Bie, 2008, p. 50). Similar opinions can be seen in an article written by former Vice-Minister of Education, Zhou Yuanqing. He also argued that the main momentum of Chinese higher education is towards opening-up to China’s large society and deep reform of the whole educational system, resulting in the establishment of a new higher education system which is based on the change from a planned economic system to a market-based economic system. Also, more attention has been paid to improving higher education quality (Zhou, 2008). Other scholars pointed out that during the process of Chinese higher education reform, “many breakthroughs have been made” in different areas such as academic operations, the administrative system, the investment and funding system, enrollment policy and graduate employment, facilities management, and instructional reform at colleges and universities (Wang & Liu, 2008). Gao (2009) believes that, in the last three decades, Chinese higher education has been making significant progress in terms of school size, number of students and faculty members, academic affairs and patent development. These great achievements not only benefit from rapid economic development, but also depend on the changes in educational policies.

Some scholars also try to analyze the changes taking place within universities and colleges themselves. Wang (2009) describes the changes from “elite to mass,” “instruction to research,” and “single-discipline to multi-discipline studies” in Chinese universities. However, these scholars have not deeply analyzed why such kinds of changes happened and how they may be used to facilitate further development. At the same time, many scholars have pointed out that in the rapid development of higher education, there are still some problems which academics need to explore and reflect on, such as funding, education for students with disabilities, and teacher accountability (Gao, 2009).

In the late 19th century, a number of modern Chinese higher education institutions were gradually established and were given the title of university. Almost all of them were the predecessors of current Chinese top universities. Alongside the term “university” which carries a rich legacy of history in Europe and North America (Hayhoe, 1994), some ideas from Western models of higher learning were introduced by Chinese scholars and integrated into China’s own patterns of scholarship. Unfortunately, during the first half of the 20th century, and even since 1949, most Chinese scholars overlooked the American land grant

model of the university based on the idea that the universities should be public institutions devoted to cultivating young people to serve agricultural development (Williams, 1991). Since World War II, the idea that universities should be the “conscience of society” has also been largely ignored as pragmatic functions relating to the education of qualified manpower and the production of knowledge have dominated (Yang, 2004). Chinese universities are no exception to this worldwide trend.

Furthermore, as the idea of the entrepreneurial university emerged in Europe and the United States in the 1990s (Clark, 2003), China’s central government also initiated some projects such as “Project 211” and “Project 985” to encourage selected top universities to be more creative in research and meet the demands of social and economic development. That makes most Chinese top universities look like huge corporations that can get a lot of additional financial support by focusing on issues related to the development of the urban economy and society rather than public institutions which should be responsible for solving broader social problems, especially those which are coming up in rural areas. For instance, how can governments create an equitable social welfare system in which all ordinary people can benefit? How can governments change the situation whereby youth born in the countryside have fewer higher education opportunities than those born in cities? (Yang, 2010; Wan, 2006). How can governments address the problem that few undergraduate and graduate students would like to select subjects related to agriculture as their major and get a job in suburban areas, despite agricultural development needing increased technological support?

In this article, the first point the author tries to argue is that the changes taking place in China’s universities can be viewed as one part of the change to a modern higher education system. The second point is that the new challenges Chinese universities are facing result from the fact that they have neglected the task of establishing their own internal values and taking up their social responsibility.

Reform of the Chinese Higher Education System and Changes in Universities in the Last Three Decades

As articles mentioned above pointed out, from 1985 to the first ten years of the 21st century, in order to rebuild Chinese higher education system including the investment and management systems, as well as the structure of higher education, the national government issued several policy documents which have resulted in a series of changes in Chinese universities and colleges. Some changes which have been discussed in many academic articles are fundamental and should be emphasized as background for further discussion.

Firstly, Chinese universities and colleges, which were under the control of different governmental divisions in the era of the planned economic system, have been given legal status as independent social institutions. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 1952, the new government reorganized higher education along Soviet lines, such that higher education institutions were directly operated by either the Ministry of Education (MOE) or such other central ministries as the Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power, the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry, the Ministry of Justice, or a provincial government. This model, whereby each higher education institution was clearly affiliated to a governmental body, lasted for the next near 40 years (Zha, 2009).

Even until the mid-1980s, most Chinese universities and colleges were financed by different government departments and trained professionals and technicians for the state-owned enterprises and public-service institutions simultaneously operated by those government departments. Most of their external and internal affairs were directly controlled by their "patrons." The first important educational reform document, "The Decision on the Reform of Educational System," emphasized that governments should grant autonomy to higher education institutions and reorganize the structure of higher education (China's Communist Party Central Committee, 1985). However, this reform process was disrupted in the late 1980s. From the 1990s, along with the rapid expansion of higher education, the focus was shifted to reforming governance again, and university autonomy was reaffirmed by the "Program for Education Reform and Development in China" in 1993 (Yang, Vidovich, & Currie, 2007). Consequently, in 1998, the "Higher Education Law" was passed, confirming the corporate status of universities and colleges. Under this new circumstance, universities and colleges would have a more independent legal status, as the law details "the autonomy in seven domains that Chinese higher education institutions can now enjoy: student admission, specialization establishment, teaching affairs, research and service, international exchange and cooperation, internal structure and personnel management, and property management" (Zha, 2009, p. 45). The law also gave formal legitimacy to the "Presidential Responsibility" system, meaning the university presidents would become responsible to formulate their own institutional policies and long-term development plans, as well as to set their own strategic goals and define their own academic focus in order to compete successfully (Zha, 2009). For example, according to Article 34 of the "Higher Education Law," "Higher education institutions shall, on the basis of the needs of teaching, act on their own in drawing up their teaching programs, compiling teaching materials and making arrangements for their teaching activities" (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1998).

Secondly, along with Chinese universities and colleges getting status as independent legal entities, a “less centralized higher education system emerged in the late 1990s, legislated by the ‘Higher Education Law’ that takes effect on January 1, 1999” (Zha, 2009, p. 44).

In the mid-1980s, due to reaffirmation and redevelopment of the socialist commodity economy, the Chinese government initiated a process to restructure the national higher education system in order to rationalize and redefine its functions. As a result, one priority issue in higher education was to change the situation in which most universities and colleges were run by the central ministries. Governance reform had originated from the “Decision on the Reform of the Educational System” issued by the China’s Communist Party Central Committee in 1985. However, the full-scale restructuring movement did not start until the government’s own adjustment and reorganization took place in 1998. In order to downsize and improve efficiency, some of the central ministries were dismantled, and it was decided that most central ministries would no longer be permitted to run higher education institutions, with the natural exception of the MOE. Many formerly ministry-run institutions were transferred to provincial or local administration. The problems of inefficiency in administrative management, the overlapping of specialties and the overly small size of individual institutions, seemed to be solved through the transfer of authority from the national government to the provincial or local governments, the mergers of many over-specialized institutions and the resultant pooling of resources.

Therefore, from the 1990s, efforts had been made to combine single-discipline universities, colleges and other institutions into comprehensive universities and establish a cooperative relationship between the MOE and provincial governments. As a result, from 1990 to 2005, 1,067 specialized higher education institutions were merged to form 431 institutions with much broader mandates (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2006).

The other result was that a decentralized, two-tiered administrative system came into being. The policy of decentralization in 1985 empowered provincial governments to run higher education institutions autonomously, while the national MOE now only provides a macro policy framework. Hence, provincial governments, as well as individual higher education institutions, can have more voice in decision-making regarding the allocation of higher education resources, appointing university leaders, assigning jobs to graduates and deciding enrollment numbers for individual institutions (Cai, 2004). The national government, for its part, directly manages only a small number of key institutions which function as models for the rest on how to serve the nation. It was expected that the transferred responsibilities and powers would enable local higher education development to meet society’s demand (Zha, 2009). By 2010, 75 universities were supported and managed by the MOE, and another 39

universities, colleges and professional higher education institutions in the areas of defense, sports and civil aviation continued to be supported and managed by 20 corresponding ministries or special national organizations. The much greater number of 2,149 regular higher education institutions, including 640 private institutions and 400 adult institutions, belonged to provincial governments.

Thirdly, with a change in aims from a mandate for teaching only to the one that includes research and public service as well, the focus of Chinese universities and colleges has shifted to include serving society. This began in the early 1980s when the academic degree system and graduate education were resumed, and research institutes and centers were established in universities and colleges. After that, in order to enhance universities' research ability and improve the overall quality of Chinese higher education institutions, disciplines and specialties were adjusted and the national government initiated "Project 211," in 1993, and "Project 985," in 1998. Both of these projects aim to foster a few leading universities for the nation, and raise a small number of China's top universities to a world-class level. Billions of RMB have been channeled from the national government into the universities whose names are on these project lists (Hawkins, Jacob, & Li, 2009, p. 230).

With this scale of government support, universities have developed rapidly, and graduate education has expanded so quickly that the number of graduates has exceeded that in the United States in recent years. At the same time, a variety of research laboratories, centers and bases have been established in every university, with consequent improvement in instruction and research. The new challenge facing the government is a kind of convergence of approaches and models, which has resulted in Chinese universities failing to develop their own unique characteristics.

Fourthly, Chinese universities and colleges have been changed from fully public institutions that functioned almost as social welfare agencies to semi-public institutions in a cost-sharing system. Before 1994, all higher educational institutions were fully funded by the government. Students were not only charged no tuition, but were also provided with free housing and stipends for food and other expenses by the government. In return, on graduation, they were obliged to follow job assignments according to state plans (Zha, 2009). This was possible in a highly selective system that educated fewer than 5% of the age cohort, but with the decision to move to mass higher education in the 1990s, the provision of housing and other services became an obviously heavy burden for universities. Therefore, there was a move to privatize many services, and involve local providers. Physical facilities are rented out or even sold to newly established service companies which manage their own finances and take over responsibility for former regular employees of the university on a contract basis. These companies operate on a market basis, and are required to obey the law.

At the same time, the concept of cost sharing and cost recovery was introduced in the early years of reform. From 1994, 37 institutions participated in a pilot scheme to charge tuition, and the fee levels were raised dramatically after 1995 (Zha, 2009). By 1997, tuition fees had been made compulsory for all students. As a result, governments and higher education institutions no longer have to face the embarrassment of budget deficits. Indeed, this reform might be viewed as the prelude for rapid higher educational enrollment expansion which was initiated in 1999. Universities' operating funds from non-governmental sources have begun to account for an increasing proportion of revenue, including tuition fees, research grants, services, endowment gifts, and income from university-run enterprises (Zha, 2009). On the other hand, along with implementing a contract system in faculty recruitment and outsourcing campus services to local companies, universities and colleges are liberated from responsibility for many aspects of the daily life of faculty and students. Meanwhile, a national system of scholarships and tuition assistance has also been established to encourage and reward excellent students and support students from families that cannot afford high levels of tuition. There are three types of student aid in China: fellowships, grants and loans. Fellowships, received by 3% of undergraduates, are channeled towards excellent students. Grants are received by 20% of undergraduates. There are four types of loans with the maximum of 6,000 RMB per student each academic year and the repayment takes place within six to 14 years after graduation, with interest subsidized by the national government. Grants and loans are meant to assist students irrespective of academic performance. But loan allocation tends to favor excellent students in high quality institutions (Yang, 2009). Many see the issue of whether ordinary people are accorded social justice and equality of opportunity as an important measure of Chinese education reform.

Fifthly, Chinese universities and colleges have changed from elite educational institutions to mass educational institutions. "Perhaps no reform effort could compare with the massification of the higher education subsector by increased overall enrollments" (Hawkins, Jacob, & Li, 2009, p. 227). The shift toward vocationalism and mass forms of higher education responds to the demand of new modes of economic production associated with the so-called "knowledge society." Social forces may have an impact upon the massification of higher education in different ways in different contexts. For example, in China, the pursuit of higher education, especially elite education, is not only motivated by the aspiration for a higher social and economic status, as it is elsewhere, but is also rooted in a traditional Chinese idea, which regards success in school, especially in an elite university as the whole family's glory. This has its origin in a Confucian philosophy going back over 2,500 years. Therefore, families are likely to concentrate their financial resources on sending their children to

university, which has probably accelerated the expansion of higher education. For the same reason, Chinese parents and students prefer to study at elite institutions and to study subjects considered as elite rather than at mass institutions, something that may have a negative effect on the transition to a mass system (Pretorius & Xue, 2003).

Since the process was initiated in 1999, Chinese higher education has experienced a historic leap in development, the number of regular higher education institutions has increased from 1,022 in 1998 to 2,689 in 2009. By 2009, the number of undergraduate and short-cycle students in regular higher education institutions had increased to 21.44 million, from 3.49 million in 1998. By 2009, the total number enrolled in all types of higher education had reached 29.79 million, and the gross enrollment rate in higher education had reached 24.2% (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010). During the last two decades, with the fast-growing market economy, the speed of development of science and technology, and the rising income levels and living standards, higher education in China expanded rapidly (Hawkins, Jacob, & Li, 2009). The expansion of scale has greatly alleviated the longstanding gap between social demand and higher education supply so that many Chinese people, especially those in major cities or coastal areas, have benefitted a lot (Yang, 2004).

Therefore, a lot of universities and colleges have built new campuses in suburban areas where provincial or municipal governments sold land to them at a relatively low price, and a lot of university towns have emerged in different provinces. On the other hand, the massification of higher education in China is very different from the parallel process that took place in the United States. There, the massification process was mostly based on population growth and economic development, and focused on recruiting young people from middle class and low income families as a way of enlarging the democratic basis of American society. In China, by contrast, the gap in enrollment rates between coastal and hinterland areas, urban and rural backgrounds has increased in the massification process (Yang, 2004).

Obviously, there have been some significant changes in Chinese universities and colleges not yet mentioned. And these changes could be viewed as key to understanding what has happened to Chinese higher education in the past three decades. As a specific result of these dramatic changes, most Chinese universities have been becoming multi-disciplinary, research oriented, multi-functional, and to some degree commercialized. In one word, they have been emerging as "multiversities," a concept introduced by Clark Kerr (1963) in his book *The Uses of the University*, which is based on his individual experiences and profound insights as a long-serving university leader at a top American research university: University of California.

What universities have got from national and provincial governments as well as corporations, social institutions and organizations, includes not only considerable funds but also substantial social resources and higher academic reputation. At the same time, Chinese universities have begun to get involved in new social relationships, including the establishment of cooperation with governments, corporations and research institutions, the provision of research to meet the demands of various social sectors, the needs of ordinary people, and the commercialization of scientific and technological findings. On the one hand, universities gain social support by the variety of relationships they have established while they also have more funds from governments and social institutions, much more competitive environments and a high degree of social visibility. This has meant they have to enhance their own management quality, through establishing more rational academic structures and administrative processes based on knowledge innovation. In a word, this is a golden period for Chinese universities.

However, in the author's view, Chinese universities have not developed in a way that can meet the expectations of governments, the people and their patrons. The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the challenge emerging inside and outside Chinese universities, and what Chinese universities should do to take up an appropriate level of social responsibility.

The Challenge Facing Chinese Universities for Further Development

Although they have not achieved a worldwide reputation that can parallel that of their western peers, Chinese universities have functioned effectively to facilitate social change in modern Chinese history. Beginning with Peking University's reform led by President Cai Yuanpei in 1917, Chinese universities developed rapidly over three decades and cultivated a lot of excellent intellectuals who were active in political, economic, scientific and cultural areas in the first half of the 20th century. One thing that should be mentioned is that Yang Chenning and Lee Tsungdao were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1957, 11 years after they graduated from the Southwest Associated University in 1946, an institution founded by the merger of Peking University, Tsinghua University and Nankai University during the Sino-Japanese War. China's top universities achieved high academic reputations during 1911–1949, because they devoted themselves to formulating their own ideas, traditions and characteristics though learning from German and American universities as well as exploring their own approaches and ways to deal with academic and instructional affairs based on China's social reality. After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, during the reorganization

of higher education, a lot of specialized universities and colleges were founded. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese universities had been focusing on training specialized technical personnel and teachers for different sectoral needs, and a new tradition emerged, which emphasized the training of experts on the basis of both fundamental theoretical and technical knowledge.

After 1978, because of the dramatic changes mentioned above, people have had good reason to believe that Chinese universities would be much more independent in developing their own characteristics according to the core values they establish, and in taking up social responsibility as academic communities. However, government-led reform has not only resulted in most universities and colleges looking similar, but has also made it necessary for every university to concentrate on the missions and targets set by the different policies of different periods. In spite of a strongly shared judgment that “the ongoing higher education reforms are characterized by a decline in government control and the increasing involvement of market mechanisms” (Cai, 2004, p. 165), it is clear that the Chinese government has still played a key role in the process of higher education reform at both national and provincial levels. As Mok (2001) pointed out, “a policy of decentralization was adopted, however, the national government still has absolute authority through policy making rather than direct control. Even though it has delegated authority to provincial/local governments and individual higher education institutions to take charge of their operational matters, it has introduced ‘internal competition’ and ‘review exercises’ to regulate the higher education sector” (p. 124). On the one hand, in order to fulfill the demands of economic and social development, it is necessary for governments to make macro policies as a way of realigning higher education with the new economic directions and ensuring that higher education institutions contribute to the accomplishment of the national strategies aimed at enhancing China’s economic and social power in the process of industrialization and urbanization. On the other hand, even though central government has been trying to create a decentralized governing system through empowering local governments and higher education institutions, a series of higher education policies initiated by the central government has brought challenges to the internal values of Chinese universities and colleges.

The first serious challenge is about how Chinese universities play an appropriate social role in this era of reform and change. Government financial support and policy guidance are important, but courage and social conscience are also necessary for Chinese universities in terms of solving social problems and ensuring that scientific research contributes to human welfare. For instance, the important issue of how to guarantee educational equity needs not only government’s policy adjustment but also universities’ efforts.

Even though the expansion since 1998 has benefited many people with access

to higher education, it is still essentially a government controlled result of state planning, as part of the government's social and economic development strategy. Economic growth has been at the center of the government's agenda since the early 1990s. Consequently, higher education development has inevitably been subordinated to economic development (Wan, 2006). On the other hand, the dramatic progress of privatization and marketization has aggravated the inequalities in regional development and the higher education enrollment gap between urban and rural areas since the 1990s (Yang, 2010). As Wan (2006) pointed out, under the cost-sharing mechanism, what mainly affects student choice of higher education is family finances rather than test scores. As is shown by statistics, from 1997 to 2001, the number of higher education applicants from urban areas grew at a more rapid rate than those from rural areas. In 1999 the increase in the number of urban students who registered for college entrance exams was four times greater than the increase in rural students. After 2002, the situation changed somewhat as applicants from urban and rural areas showed the same rate of increase. More and more students from rural areas began entering the academic track to pursue higher education with support from the national system of scholarships and tuition assistance. Moreover, the ties between the labor market and higher education have increasingly been strengthened. For example, in the planned system, all graduates were allocated to a variety of workplaces by government. Since the mid-1990s, however, in order to adapt to a market-oriented economy, more and more graduates have been encouraged to seek employment opportunities by themselves (Cai, 2004). However, it is much more difficult for graduates from rural areas to find a job than their peers from urban areas. Therefore, the enrollment expansion in higher education has widened the gaps between students from advantaged and vulnerable groups in all respects, including access to higher education, the type and the quality of higher education they receive, and their job opportunities. All of these disparities will influence their future life in the long term. The situation is so bad that the government has had to acknowledge it. Zhou Ji, the former Minister of Education, argued that "educational equity is an important and growing problem, the educational administrative departments must determine how to plan and coordinate the delicate relationship between the quick educational fix on the one hand and overall educational equity on the other" (as cited in Hawkins, Jacob, & Li, 2009, p. 233).

As for universities, they have not paid much attention to this issue, because they believe that solving this kind of problem is the government's responsibility. Recently, several scholars pointed out that based on data (1978–2005) from Peking University, the enrollment rates of rural children have been declining over the past three decades, because farming families do not have much social, political or economic capital given that most of them live in underdeveloped

regions of the remote countryside or frontier areas and have been marginalized by the tiered economic developing strategy implemented by the central government in recent decades (Liu, Wang, & Yang, 2009). In response to this finding, several top Chinese universities began to acknowledge the problem and declared that there will be no discrimination when they recruit new students and that they will make greater efforts to change this situation.

The second challenge universities need think about is the reason for establishing a formal academic system. Since the 1990s, the development of new disciplines has become the fundamental and core work of most universities and other academic matters, such as faculty recruitment, research and instruction, have largely depended on this. As for scientific research, it is encouraging that some researchers have made remarkable achievements due to China's recent economic growth and the increasing investment in science, technology, and education. Yet, most of these research results came from a handful of institutions which were directly associated with Chinese government-initiated projects. This concentration implies that the national average level of research and innovation remains rather modest. Except for a few outstanding achievements in these special cases, a long road lies ahead for Chinese experts and scholars to catch up with cutting-edge research in science and technology (Yang, 2004). At the same time, in order to directly respond to social demand and get more funding from government or through providing services, universities have tended to be highly utilitarian. This can be seen in the emphasis on applied disciplines and applied research. As a consequence, there is intense competition, not only among different universities, but within each university itself. Universities thus have little time to consider their role as independent social institutions which are responsible to preserve, transmit and create human knowledge.

One phenomenon may explain why this situation is getting worse and worse. Most Chinese universities have developed a kind of academic evaluation system which is based on quantitative standards in order to raise the research level of their faculty. As a result many university faculty members spend all their time and energy in publishing articles and books. Academic productivity has become a kind of private affair, and faculty publishing is aimed only at getting a higher academic position. This results in faculty members giving up any concern for their university's academic standards and their social responsibility as scholars. In some cases it even results in academic misconduct and plagiarism. By the same token, few faculty members wish to take on research topics that address genuine social, scientific and cultural problems. Consequently, they have no understanding of the current social reality around them and the true social needs crying out for attention. Nor do they have a shared or collective identity, around which to envision the development their own institutions and disciplines. University scholars have even taken refuge in a kind of collective aphasia, in the

face of frequent public crises and concerns about social development.

The reason for this situation is closely related to the use of economic standards as benchmarks by higher level management. As universities have emphasized the practical and technical value of higher education, educational values have been totally neglected. University achievements have been simplified into the number of publications, research grants, graduates and other research outputs. Such a tendency naturally causes tension between the more profitable applied subjects of science and technology and basic theoretical subjects, especially in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, it also creates institutional winners and losers with a widening gap between the relatively few elite research universities and the large number of mediocre or even substandard institutions (Yang, 2003). Nan Fan (2002) described the real academic life of college intellectuals in one of his articles. He wrote, "Some of them constantly go back and forth between laboratory, library, classroom and the tiny apartment. Occasionally, they will also be engaged in a short academic trip, gathering in an academic conference hall equipped with a slide projector. Because of the lack of outdoor activity or sports, these people are characterized by pale faces, physical weakness, with 80% wearing glasses, and many suffering from insomnia and neurasthenia syndrome. They are intellectuals" (p. 160).

One point that should be emphasized is that the reputation of a university does not depend on how many books and articles its faculty have published, but on how it guides every member in taking up their social responsibility through what they publish and the way in which it formulates moral standards and develops its mission, guiding ideas and approach to education. Unfortunately, few contemporary Chinese universities have this kind of tradition, perhaps due to the disruptions in their history over the 20th century. During last three decades, except for responding to governmental policies, there is little evidence of efforts to develop a unique ethos.

When we reflect on the history of American land grant colleges and universities, we will find that those colleges and universities founded during and after Civil War mostly aimed at supporting the mechanization of American agriculture. Consequently, during the last 150 years, those land grant colleges and universities really made great achievements, not only helping the United States accomplish agricultural mechanization and then industrialization through applying scientific findings to actual production, but also strengthening American democratic development by cultivating millions of young people from different social classes and from all parts of the United States (Williams, 1991). As a result, public higher education in the United States served as a social force to shape or reshape America's modern economy and society over the 20th century. However, in China, universities have not paid much attention to the needs of rural areas, and have seldom helped peasants and rural residents solve their productive and

practical problems. To some degree, Chinese universities have neglected the responsibility they should take on as a kind of social institution which could affect the transformation of Chinese society in the way that land grant universities such as Wisconsin University did for the United States in the early 20th century.

The third problem or challenge faced by Chinese universities is that when they respond to social demand, they are more concerned with the benefits coming from their services than what it means to society. However, it is unfair to blame universities blindly on this account, because they have to seek for funds in the present economic-oriented environment, both for basic survival and for development. In order to improve facilities, whether library resources, laboratory equipment or housing for the famous professors and experts they wish to invite, and for their teachers and students, substantial funds and resources are needed. In addition, the government expects universities to shoulder the task of raising half of their budget on their own. Consequently, the gap will have to be filled by partnerships with the business world. Universities are thus required to cooperate with the private sector and even operate profit-making enterprises of their own to raise income (Yang, 2004). Although still being viewed as public institutions, universities have become used to focusing on raising money to satisfy the many different needs of their members. However, the process of increasing integration with society has also led to new problems. For example, a criterion for performance assessment is designed to measure the economic benefits brought by faculty members to the institution, which is likely to weaken the academic quality of instruction and research (Yang, 2004). The term “entrepreneurial university” was first put forward by Burton Clark (2003) of UCLA, but it appears universities in China look even more like enterprises than those in the West. Similar problems may also have existed in American universities, when they could not get enough funds from government and had to get involved in social services for economic reasons during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, but the author argues that the attention they paid to this kind of useful knowledge was balanced by their traditions of developing science for the public good and cultivating young people to be responsible citizens (Douglass, 2000; Pelfrey, 2004).

In recent years, criticism of Chinese universities has focused on the heavy hand of bureaucracy at universities and the paucity of truly eminent scholars or other outstanding academic achievements, although universities are at least as sophisticated as their counterparts in the West in terms of infrastructure. Lian (2012, January) argued in one article that for fostering world citizens, teachers need more thinking and research space while students need a free environment for learning and growth, without any administrative interference. He also pointed out that using official discourse to judge between right and wrong and to criticize the educational policies of other countries indicates an absence of core internal

values in the whole educational system. In the author's view, if the situation whereby government maintains firm and direct control cannot be changed, Chinese universities will be incapable of finding their own path of development and will remain confused about their real mission and calling. The lack of eminent scholars will be a phenomenon that persists for very long time.

In early February 2010, when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao hosted leaders and professors of Chinese universities to solicit their opinions on his government report to be delivered in March at the coming session of the National People's Congress, Wen said that "a good university should have its own unique soul, which expresses itself in independent thinking and freedom of expression" (Zhao, 2010). It is obvious that Premier Wen expects Chinese universities to play the role of spiritual and cultural leaders in China's social development. If this is to happen, government needs to grant much more real autonomy to Chinese universities rather than influencing their development by issuing policies which keep universities busy with considerable non-academic affairs.

Concentrating on Chinese Reality and Reshaping the Foundation of Universities through Positive Activities

In the last two decades, China's economy has been growing rapidly and people's lives have been changing. However, as attention is paid to growth rates and economic statistics such as GDP, other problems including social inequality, environmental pollution, abnormal climate, food security, and human rights have been ignored. In addition, the majority of Chinese people have not benefitted from the achievements of economic development nor do they get a fair share of the wealth they have created by hard work. That is the reality faced by every scholar and expert.

Chinese universities have been trying to apply their knowledge in ways that could help governments and ordinary people solve different kinds of problems. However, they have seldom tried to understand and get involved in social reality at a deeper level. If Chinese universities want to develop as high a reputation as their western peers, what they can do is to further involve themselves in social issues, help ordinary people have a high quality of daily life and rebuild their own sense of social responsibility based on their own traditions and identities.

First of all, Chinese universities should collaborate in establishing a sense of academic community, openly declaring their social standpoints and responsibilities. They should take clear positions on issues of social justice, advocating extensive democracy and scientific progress, which is aimed at the common interest of all human beings. What Chinese universities have lacked over the last three decades is faith in what a university should be and should do

in a modern society, especially in modern China. Although Chinese scholars have published many articles and books to discuss ideas generated by western scholars, analyzing what western universities have done, they have seldom considered in detail what Chinese universities should be, especially in relation to the social reality of modern China.

Yuan Longping, a famous hybrid rice breeding expert who is named the father of hybrid rice in academia and the people's agriculturist by ordinary people, is the best model for Chinese scholars to learn from. He began his research on hybrid rice in 1960 when China had just gone through a three-year natural disaster. In that year, he was 30 years old. When he experienced starvation himself and saw so many ordinary people die because of food scarcity, one simple idea arose in his mind. As a graduate from agricultural college he had to do something to increase grain production in order to avoid a similar situation happening again. When he got some information about technical progress on hybrid sorghum, hybrid corn and seedless watermelon from an agricultural journal, he immediately began experimentation for the breeding of hybrid rice. In July of 1960, he found a natural hybrid rice plant and tested his finding by sowing its seeds again in 1961. In 1964, he began a crossbreeding experiment though natural pollination, using six male sterile plants which he found together with his wife. Ten years later, he bred the first generation of hybrid rice. In 1976, after success with experimental planting in Hunan province, his hybrid rice breeding techniques were popularized around whole country and 2.08 million mu¹ of farmland received transplanted seedlings bred with his hybrid rice seeds. Since then, he has never given up his ideal, which has improved the average grain output per mu continually. It is really no exaggeration to say that Yuan Longping's hybrid rice techniques have helped China—the biggest developing country—to feed her people, nearly one-fifth of the population of the world. Even though he has had a world reputation since the 1980s, he always views himself as a rural inhabitant and an ordinary person among billions of Chinese people (Zhuang, 2008). In 2001, Yuan Longping was honored with the First State Pre-eminent Science and Technology Award given by the central government.

Yuan Longping can serve as an inspiration for Chinese scholars to apply their knowledge to practice that will benefit ordinary people. At the same time we have to recognize that Chinese society is getting so complicated that university faculty may feel frustrated when they try to solve all kinds of social problems. Thus it is important for Chinese universities to join together and cooperate in researching the social changes taking place in China at a deep level and analyzing how these changes are influencing every part of society and everybody's daily life. Chinese universities need to establish collaborative

¹ 1 mu = 666.66 m².

academic organizations among themselves as well as within different academic areas. They should encourage their faculty members and researchers to get involved in social activities that will further understanding of what is happening in China. These forums will generate ideas about building a more equal, harmonious, healthy and wealthy society, in which ordinary people can share the achievements they have contributed to. That means a new relationship among Chinese universities which is collaborative rather than competitive.

At the same time, universities should encourage their faculty members and researchers to go off campus and out of their academic offices, down to the basic units of society, such as communities, the countryside, factories and minority districts, and get deeply involved in social development. Chinese universities should change their curricular system and academic evaluation system in order that all their members, including students, are willing to explore the realities of life rather than be confined to the classroom, debating theoretical problems continually. What is more, the instructional system should be adjusted so that real social problems can be discussed in every class. All students should be educated to be responsible for issues of social justice, to take on ordinary people's interests, and contribute to the prosperity of the nation and human civilization. This is not easy, but Chinese universities have to make the effort.

In November 2011, the Chongqing Municipal Government issued a policy that all 750,000 undergraduates in its universities are required to complete six periods of practice during four years of study: a one month paid internship in a governmental sector; one month of time spend living, laboring and eating with peasants in remote countryside or minority regions; one month learning industrial skills from workers in factories; one month of military training; planting 100 trees over four years, and writing a worthwhile research report based on the above-mentioned experiences of practice (Guo, 2010, November). This policy has brought back a lot of memories about the period from the 1950s to the 1970s when millions of educated youths went to the countryside to labor with peasants. It has also aroused some criticism. However, it indicates that this Chinese local government has become aware of the need to ensure that university students understand social reality through their own experiences. Clearly universities should be a place to guide young people to realize their social responsibilities as well their roles as educated citizens.

Furthermore, Chinese universities should restructure their academic and administrative system so as to make it possible for all faculty members and students to participate in internal decision making. To some degree, the university, as a social institution, is a microcosm of the larger society. It thus has an important social responsibility to put democratic ideals into practice and educate every member to be an active participant in society. Chinese universities should give more academic and administrative authority to their colleges, departments

and centers, and encourage deans, directors and academic leaders at all levels to make independent decisions on academic and administrative affairs. At the same time, both academic and administrative leaders should give professors and other faculty members more rights and opportunities to participate in academic and administrative affairs. Nowadays, nobody is able to keep up with the fast and complex pace of scientific progress and social development, so encouraging both independent and cooperative research among faculty members is the best way to keep in step with what is happening and facilitate cutting edge work in every research area. One thing that should be particularly emphasized is that young faculty members who are full of energy and innovative ideas should be given more opportunities for academic decision-making, since this may mean more possibilities to make significant achievements in academic areas and gain a higher academic reputation for their academic groups. The democratic participation of graduate and undergraduate students also should be viewed as a part of the reorganization of academic and administrative systems because it helps them experience and understand how academic affairs and social problems are dealt with and how a university is organized and managed. Most of all, as a unique client group, students should have more opportunities to know and take part in universities' decision-making processes so that they can express their own ideas and opinions regarding better educational services.

Since the 1840s, the pursuit and dream of generations has been to realize modernization and reconstruct the national life of China. As social institutions transplanted from western countries, the ways in which universities and colleges have been structured and reorganized by governments and intellectuals in different historical periods has a special significance for China's modernization. Even now, Chinese people tend not to view universities just as social institutions responsible for preserving, developing and spreading knowledge, but also as responsible for strengthening the nation's economic and political standing. At the same time, changes and challenges which Chinese universities and colleges have experienced and are now facing are actually responses to what had happened in China over last three decades. Even though Chinese universities and colleges are becoming much more commercial and pragmatic, some Chinese scholars, still influenced by the Confucian tradition of "ruling the state and the world," are trying their best to reestablish our own cultural spirit and soul as Chinese rather than as people without their own historic roots. It is also a process of reestablishing the unique characteristics of Chinese universities and colleges.

Through reflection on the changes and challenges Chinese universities have experienced in the past and are now facing, the author has tried to suggest that the rapid economic and social development of recent years has provided a historic opportunity for Chinese universities and colleges. Not only leaders and higher education researchers, but indeed all university members, should be aware

that the university is an academic community and a home to the human spirit. We thus have to devote ourselves to upholding its internal values and fulfilling its social responsibility, to the greatest extent possible. Many specific reform initiatives are also needed, such as the redefinition of educational goals, a rethinking of the meaning and assessment of quality and a focus on learning outcomes rather than teaching performance. Examinations should be less a matter of assessment and screening than of assessment for learning and development, and indeed for lifelong learning (Lee, 2008). The degree to which these initiatives can be successfully realized will determine the future and destiny of higher education in China. It will also reflect the extent to which Chinese universities and colleges establish their own internal values and take up their responsibility to society.

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