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The “Beijing Consensus” and the Chinese Model of University Autonomy

Abstract This paper attempts to address connections between the Chinese model for development or the “Beijing Consensus” and Chinese universities. Chinese universities seem to be caught between serving governmental agendas and pursuing their own goals as an academic community. Up until recently, they had become used to following the lead of the government, which often comes with rationales and approaches featuring pragmatism and utilitarianism. Drawing on the perspectives of social embeddedness and external control of organizations in higher education, we argue that the lack of dynamism and innovation that is hindering Chinese higher education’s development is largely owing to the political, social, and cultural factors prevailing in the environment in which the universities operate. Put in another way, Chinese universities are confronting a crisis, owing to the inbuilt constraints of China’s development model.

Keywords Beijing Consensus, Chinese university, crisis, autonomy

Introduction

China’s economic success in the past three decades has triggered a debate on the

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so-called “Beijing Consensus” *vis-à-vis* the “Washington Consensus”¹ for development. From a fragile economy in the late 1970s, China has overtaken other major economies one by one, and became the world’s second largest economy in 2010, now next only to the United States. China’s economic growth certainly has implications for its universities, as they are becoming more and more vital to creating human capital and technological innovations able to support an increasingly knowledge-based economy. For this reason, the Chinese government has been investing hugely in elite university schemes (i.e., Projects 211 and 985) in order to raise some universities and programs to a world-class level. This move has triggered a worldwide competition in efforts to create world-class universities, as well as some discussion over whether or not there is an emerging Chinese model of the university. In this paper, we attempt to address connections between the “Beijing Consensus” and Chinese universities, in particular the impacts of social and political change on university operations and the academic profession. The perspectives we draw on are those of social embeddedness and external control of organizations in higher education. We argue that Chinese universities are confronting a crisis, owing to the inbuilt constraints of China’s development model. Finally, we try to explore whether or not it is possible for Chinese universities to draw strength from the nation’s rich cultural traditions, in order to find a way out of the current situation, where tangible or materialistic interests and utilitarian goals have become somewhat of an obsession.

¹ The term “Washington Consensus” was first put forward in 1989 by John Williamson, an economist from the Institute for International Economics, to summarize commonly shared themes in the policy advice given at the time by such Washington-based institutions as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States Treasury Department, which were believed to be necessary for the recovery of Latin America from the economic and financial crises of the 1980s. Later, in spite of Williamson’s reservations, the term “Washington Consensus” has been used more broadly to describe the general shift towards free market policies that followed the displacement of Keynesianism in the 1970s. Typically, a democratic and “soft” state is characterized by “Washington Consensus” type policies, which has become controversial when the capitalist world has been suffering from recessions since the 1990s, and the governments often made responses to crises with no due diligence. Most recently, Francis Fukuyama (*The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, 2011, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) asked a very radical question about America’s political disorder today: Has America gone from a democracy to a “vetocracy”? He argued that government was also created to act and make decisions.

The “Beijing Consensus” and the Analytical Framework

The “Beijing Consensus” made its first appearance in the mainstream political lexicon in 2004 (Ramo, 2004), denoting an alternative economic development model to the “Washington Consensus” with its advocacy of market-friendly policies. More recently, Williamson (2012) has described the “Beijing Consensus” as having features that include incremental reform (or gradualism), innovation and experimentation, state capitalism, and authoritarianism (as opposed to either democracy or autocracy). From a more positive perspective, Zhang (2011) highlights the aspects of the Chinese model for development that stand in contrast with Western approaches, which include:

- practice-based reasoning: Unlike reforms in the West which have often started with amendments to constitutions or changes to laws and regulations, China tends to start with experimentation and pilot projects. The successful experiences are then extended to a wider reach. Finally changes may be made to laws and regulations and ultimately the constitution, if necessary;
- gradual reform: Following a practice-based reasoning, the Chinese model adopts a trial-and-error approach, encouraging local experiments of all kinds and dispersing the successful experiences generated from the experiments. This approach is perhaps best summarized by Deng Xiaoping’s wisdom: “crossing the river by groping for stepping stones”;
- a strong state: In contrary to the “soft state” in the Western model, the Chinese state often demonstrates a strong will, and is “arguably the most efficient organizational power in the world” (p. 93). Essentially, “any weakening or transformation of the state function” could only be introduced by the state itself (p. 93);
- prioritizing stability: Deng Xiaoping’s doctrine is that “stability prevails over everything else.” For this reason, he demanded a no-debate approach to reform policy formation and execution;
- primacy of people’s livelihood: In the Chinese model, the reform must put people’s tangible benefits in the first place, rather than seeking democratization for the sake of democratization.

It would be surprising if these aspects of the Chinese developmental model did not have an impact on and indeed penetrate the higher education system. Adopting a social embeddedness perspective, we may argue that higher education systems have a relational interaction with the political economy where they are situated. The concept of embeddedness was first introduced as part of an

assertion that economic relations between individuals or firms are embedded in actual social networks, rather than existing in an abstract idealized market (see Granovetter, 1985). Applying this concept to the realm of higher education, higher education can be interpreted as a system consisting of individual higher education organizations behaving similarly to “corporate actors” (Coleman as cited in van Vught, 1996, p. 44) and “embedded in an environment which includes the social, political and economic conditions within which the higher education organisations need to operate” (van Vught, 2007, November, p. 8). Following this perspective, a higher education system is viewed as both acting to shape the economy of a particular country, and at the same time being shaped and changed by the political economy. More explicitly, the theory of external control of organizations, taking a resource dependence perspective, views organizations as “being embedded in networks of interdependence and social relationships,” (Granovetter as cited in Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003, p. xii) and being potentially controlled by the external sources of these resources, though organizations could possibly opt for balancing strategies and actions that are available to them (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003, p. xii). These perspectives are very relevant to Chinese higher education (and our analysis), where a “strong state” has been controlling the crucial resources for Chinese universities and shaping the environment in which Chinese universities operate.

Compared to their Western counterparts, Chinese universities are much more closely articulated with national and local development plans and strategies. Chinese universities are, to a large extent, the government’s educational and research arm for economic and social development. State control over higher education has always been a dominant tendency in China, but now it appears under the guise of a kind of academic centralization or statization. Since the 1990s, the state has promoted decentralization of steering and management in exchange for institutional performance and accountability, while at the same time tightening its control over normative criteria for knowledge production. This shift is accomplished through a batch of state-led initiatives that aim to create centers of excellence in Chinese universities. State control used to reside mainly in the organizational process under the macroplanning regime of the 1950s and 1960s, but now it is expressed through manipulating the knowledge production process, which is often driven by the state’s purpose and follows a rationale of managerialism. A typical example would be the way in which Chinese universities are compelled to set up a schedule for attaining world-class status,

mostly measured by research outputs and performance. Put explicitly, knowledge advancement no longer arises from scholars' individual interest, but has become an integral part of national efforts to fulfill the century-long dream of China's resurgence. Chinese universities and scholars are often most willing to articulate their intellectual pursuits with the state's needs, largely owing to influences from the Confucian knowledge tradition that stress a unity of knowledge and action. For its part, the state is keen to support higher education, in particular those institutions and scholars who excel in terms of producing outputs that can meet the state's needs. In sum, the social embeddedness and external control perspectives of higher education help capture the close linkages and structural parallels between China's developmental model and Chinese university operations. Despite its success in fostering fast GDP growth over the past three decades, the "Beijing Consensus" now faces the paradox of embeddedness, which has serious effects on the way Chinese universities perform their functions.

The Crisis Confronting the "Beijing Consensus" and Chinese Higher Education

The Chinese higher education sector appears to be booming in many people's eyes, very much like the Chinese economy. Driven by a government that upholds the ideology of efficiency for development, Chinese higher education achieved massification in less than ten years, and is now rapidly moving towards a universal system. The higher education enrollment soared from 3.4 million in 1998 (the year immediately before the latest expansion that aimed to massify the system) to 22.3 million in 2010². This enrollment change shows a 6.6 times increase over 12 years, or an annual growth rate of 17 percent. The number of institutions increased from 1,022 to 2,358 in the same time span, or by 2.3 times. If all kinds of enrollments are taken into account, China's higher education participation rate (of the 18–22 age group) reached 15 percent (the threshold of mass higher education) in 2002, and 26.5 percent in 2010, from 9.8 percent in 1998 (Zha, 2012b; Ministry of Education of China, 2012). Fig. 1 below depicts the aggregate growth of Chinese higher education, which resembles an emerging

² These figures refer to enrollments in regular or formal institutions and programs. If those enrolled in non-regular institutions/programs (e.g., continuing education and online virtual institutions and programs) are also included, China's higher education enrollment reached 31 million in 2010.

mountain. In 2007, the Chinese system overtook the American in terms of enrollment size, and became the world’s largest higher education system. Now, the Chinese system notably outperforms the American in the output of science and engineering students who may contribute directly to economic growth. This is illustrated by Fig. 2. In this development process, most Chinese universities

Fig. 1 Size Growth of Chinese Higher Education: 1990–2010

Asia-8 = India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan of China
Eu = European Union

Fig. 2 First University Degrees, by Selected Region/Country: 2008 or Latest Data
Source: National Science Board, 2012, p. O-7.

borrowed hugely from banks to expand their facilities and, in many cases, to build new campuses so as to accommodate their fast growing enrollments. Consequently many of them became heavily indebted and subject to an enormous pressure to pay back bank loans. Since 2010, the Chinese government has stepped in to bail out those troubled universities with public funds on a very short timeline (Zha, 2011a). Over the next decade, the *National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)*; or *2020 Blueprint*, which was officially unveiled on July 29, 2010, pledges to raise China's higher education participation rate to 40 percent by 2020.

Not only is the sheer size of these growing “mountains” in Fig. 1 impressive, but also their fast increasing heights. Paralleling the growth in size, the Chinese government launched a number of pro-excellence projects (namely, Projects 211 and 985) to raise a group of selected universities to world standing, through a strategy of concentrating resources. Since 1995, the Chinese government has implemented Project 211, which has identified and given special financial support to 100 top universities in order to elevate them to “world standards” in the 21st century. As a step further, the Chinese government announced that the country “needs to have a few first-class universities at the world's advanced level” in May of 1998, at the ceremony celebrating the centennial anniversary of the prestigious Peking University. This announcement resulted in an even more elite project being initiated in 1999, which includes only 39 top Chinese universities so far. Project 985 is commonly regarded as the elite part of Project 211, yet otherwise coded from the date of its initial announcement. This elite group has been enjoying huge increases in research funding from the government. Their average level of research funding is now approaching that of members of the Association of American Universities (AAU), a group of leading research universities in North America. With these enhanced efforts, China has now the second largest annual output of science and engineering papers, again next only to the United States, a huge increase from its modest position merely 10 years ago (National Science Board, 2012, pp. 5–34). In 2012, the Chinese government launched a new initiative, Project 2011 (named after a top Chinese leader's remark at Tsinghua University's centennial anniversary ceremony in spring 2011), which supports expanding the innovation capacity of Chinese universities through stimulating and energizing collaborative research programs, largely through financial support. On the basis of the features described above, there have been some discussions about whether a Chinese or Asian model of the

university is emerging (Marginson, 2011; Yang, 2011; Zha, 2011b, 2011c). In spite of these apparent successes, however, Chinese higher education is embarrassed by a challenging question raised by the late eminent scientist Qian Xuesen³: Why have Chinese universities failed to engender innovative minds? If a higher education system fails to nurture innovative minds, it can hardly claim success on any other counts. For this reason, we argue that Chinese higher education is facing a crisis. More precisely, we see this crisis as stemming from and rooted in the externality of Chinese universities, something which lies beyond their control.

The Paradox of the “Beijing Consensus”

To explain the origin of this crisis in the current situation of Chinese higher education, we need to scrutinize the inner constraints of the “Beijing Consensus.” Our analytical framework contends that the crisis is essentially interwoven with a concomitant political and social crisis in the country. The “Beijing Consensus,” in its current format, places emphasis on efficiency for the sake of accelerating economic growth. This model carries some advantages in terms of the efficacious mobilization of resources (human and material), and the capacity to expand and improve infrastructure dramatically in a short timeline. This is evident in the proliferation of high-speed rail systems nowadays in China, as well as the development of hundreds of magnificent university campuses across the country. Nonetheless, this model contains an inbuilt paradox. The practice-based reasoning that stresses and pursues tangible interest has caused pragmatism and utilitarianism to prevail in Chinese society, such that people tend to behave selfishly and compete unscrupulously with others. As a result, a kind of social Darwinism that advocates the survival of the fittest has become the dominant moral principle, and this has created all kinds of tensions in Chinese society. Furthermore, the gradualism exemplified in the phrase “crossing the river by groping for stepping stones” has arguably held back critical efforts at institutionalizing an effective regulatory environment. Consequently, Chinese society is now suffering structural confusion or even disorder, and a massive

³ Qian Xuesen (11 December 1911–31 October 2009), is better known to the West as Hsueh-Shen Tsien. Educated at MIT and Caltech in the 1930s, he established a reputation as one of the leading rocket scientists in the United States, and became one of the founders of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Caltech. After his return to China in 1955, he made important contributions to the missile and space programs of the country.

degeneration in people's ethical codes. These constraints of the "Beijing Consensus" certainly have implications for the evolution and maturation of a modern university system on Chinese soil, which must find its own expression of values such as university autonomy and academic freedom that require a systemic rationale and institutionalized protection.

Recent incidents involving senior Party officials may shed some light on the paradoxical aspects of the "Beijing Consensus." When the public finds that such figures are not entitled to a due process under the law when being removed from office, they come to realize how important it would be to have institutionalized mechanisms and legal commitments that serve to protect their safety and rights. Without such assurance, university autonomy and academic freedom will be understandably fragile. At a deeper level, it is the dilemma resulting from the heterogeneous ideologies co-existing in China's development guidelines that is responsible for this political crisis and condition of social disorder. In the post-Mao era, China has been upholding distinctive state ideologies, with each consecutive leaderships of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempting to instill the guiding ideologies that differ in focuses. *Mao Zedong Thought* was essentially an ideology stressing class struggle after the proletariat had overthrown the bourgeoisie, and mainstreaming peasants and workers while discriminating against intellectuals. By contrast, *Deng Xiaoping Theory* emphasized economic construction, in which the service of intellectuals was badly needed, and advocated political and economic pragmatism. The *Three Represents* was a socio-political ideology introduced by Jiang Zemin, preaching the reconstruction and enhancement of the CCP's base through social elites, including businessmen and entrepreneurs, in an era when peasants and workers were gradually given less recognition. The *Scientific Development Concept*, credited to Hu Jintao, is the current official guiding socio-economic ideology in China, calling for minimizing conflicts amongst different interest groups in society—through tested and proven methodologies of governance—in order to create a "harmonious society." It is commonly viewed as a response to the ideological gap exposed by the social problems that have stemmed from China's economic reforms. Nonetheless, it has been less effective in reconciling those different focuses and emphases of the distinctive guiding ideologies. Some clearly contradict each other, yet they have to live with each other, as a result of the no-debate policy⁴. Thus, ironically, the "Beijing Consensus" features an

⁴ They are now all written into the *Constitution of Chinese Communist Party*, and adopted as the guiding ideologies for the party and the state.

internal state of no consensus in the guiding ideology. Operating in this socio-political context, Chinese universities are understandably confused, and easily get lost. They thus tend to focus on tangible interests and succumb to a spirit of utilitarianism, which is indeed taking over many campuses, and spreading among faculty and students.

Chinese Higher Education Is Facing a Crisis

As a matter of fact, there has been a sense of crisis in Chinese academia ever since the government launched the world-class university campaign. There were hot debates over what should constitute a world-class university, and how far Chinese universities are from world standing. The debates eventually revealed that Chinese universities largely lack a university spirit, i.e., an independent ethos that works to hold together an academic community in its pursuit of the truth (Xun, 2012). In the words of a Chinese university president, “the university spirit in China is really lost. It’s a reflection of the whole society, which has gotten lost in utilitarianism. It’s in a state of spiritual dehydration” (Yang as cited in Xing, 2010). To make their point in these debates, many quoted a renowned Chinese educator of the Republican period, Mei Yiqi, who made the insightful comment that “the greatness of a university lies not in its magnificent edifices, but in its eminent academics.”⁵ Unfortunately, the “Beijing Consensus” seems to be very efficient in bringing magnificent buildings to university campuses, but is not necessarily able to attract great minds. In this model, the university demonstrates a close linkage to the government, as its education and research arm, and the government shows a strong commitment to supporting the higher education system. In many ways, Chinese universities are still treated as part of the bureaucracy, with some practices carried forward from the 1950s. For instance, the university is always granted an administrative rank, equivalent to that of a

⁵ Mei Yiqi gave this well-known saying in his inauguration address when he became the president of Tsinghua University in 1931. He held the longest presidency in the history of Tsinghua University, from 1931 to 1948. As a strong proponent of general education, he led Tsinghua’s rapid rise to the top ranks. During the anti-Japanese war period, most of Tsinghua’s faculty and students fled south to Kunming, where they were joined with students and faculty fleeing from Peking and Nankai Universities, and formed the Southwest Associated University or *Lianda*. Mei, the youngest of the three university presidents, became the chief administrator of *Lianda*. Despite the humble physical conditions, Southwest Associated University reached world class standing at the time. It is argued that an important reason behind *Lianda*’s success was its geographical remoteness and the loose government control during war-time China.

bureaucratic unit. This practice has not only been kept but also further developed recently. Most elite universities included in Project 985 are now elevated to the quasi ministerial rank of the central government, as a move to strengthen their status.

State control over higher education has never disappeared in China, despite a gradual shift from a direct state control model to patterns increasingly aligned with state steering approaches since the mid-1980s. The *Higher Education Law* of China, which took effect on January 1, 1999, granted legal person status to higher education institutions, and a degree of autonomy in seven major domains, including student admission, new program development, teaching, research and service, international exchange and cooperation, arrangement of the internal structure and personnel management, as well as property management. Yet, it (and other education laws, regulations and policy documents) have never explicitly limited the capacity of government to interfere into university affairs. Consequently, there appears to be a conflict or a paradox: On the one hand, Chinese higher education institutions have been accorded an increasing amount of decision-making power over their own affairs in recent years; on the other hand, the Chinese government may tighten its control over higher education institutions whenever it feels that to be necessary. Some see a tightening in control most recently through various government-led evaluation exercises, whereby central, provincial, and local governments form and send inspection missions to scrutinize and evaluate all kinds of work in the higher education institutions which are under their jurisdictions. The scope of such exercises ranges from undergraduate program teaching evaluation to anti-corruption appraisal, from tuition charge audit to campus safety checks. The higher education institutions seem to become drained of energy and resources in the process of satisfying these evaluations and inspections. We interpret this practice as another form of “crossing the river by groping for stepping stones” or a trial-and-error approach in the higher education realm. In a sense, Chinese universities are now allowed some degree of autonomy on an experimental basis, while the government keeps a close eye by monitoring their operations and performance. Once things are perceived to be going wrong, the government is always ready to interfere and resume control.

This kind of mentality and approach certainly has an impact on the functions of Chinese universities. A recent survey of a group of Chinese university leaders (National Academy of Education Administration, 2012) reveals that interference by the government is relatively common. Among all types of interference, direct

interventions into the university’s personnel management, resource supply and curriculum/program development are the most common, also the imposition of development targets and strategies as well as performance indicators. These are all viewed as having the largest impact on the daily operation and development direction of Chinese universities. It might be fair to say the current environment in which Chinese universities operate simply does not allow them to develop an independent spirit and focus on academic pursuits by the faculty and students. Rather, the students are driven by a need to earn all kinds of credentials and certificates in order to prepare themselves for tough competition in the job market, while the professors are attracted by various “shortcuts” to power and influence, taking advantage of the government’s generosity towards higher education, which sometimes leads to academic misconduct and corruption. University leaders, for their part, are often distracted from their fundamental responsibilities to pursue all kinds of tangible interests, ranging from ingratiating themselves with the government to running enterprises. It is widely perceived that corruption is not limited to the political sphere in China but has penetrated into universities and academia. Given this situation, China’s success in higher education is largely a matter of quantitative progress, which is seriously threatened by a lack of integrity. Thus a crisis is looming with respect to standards of excellence and genuine intellectual capacity in the Chinese system, as highlighted by Qian’s question. The decline in international citations of Chinese research outputs might be one piece of evidence in support of this point. From 1999 to 2009, China enjoyed a 16.8 percent annual increase in research papers in science and engineering fields, and is now the second largest article-producing country in the world. However, the share of China’s citations that are international witnessed a considerable decrease between 2000 and 2010 (National Science Board, 2012). Similarly, the Chinese universities that enter the major world university ranking league tables (e.g., those made by *Times Higher Education* [THE] and Quacquarelli Symonds [QS]) show consistently much lower citation scores than their peers, while standing out for their income from industry. These facts suggest that Chinese universities have tended to lag in original and innovative work, while attending to tangible tasks.

Another phenomenon that may signal the looming crisis is that Chinese students are now increasingly drawn to studying abroad, despite a much broader access to universities and colleges in China now than was the case a decade ago. In 2011, among entrants in the national higher education entrance examination (mostly fresh high school leavers), some 78 percent on average across the

country had the chance to go to a university or a college. In the same year, the number of Chinese students who went to study abroad hit a record of 339,700. This figure is expected to rise to 550,000 or even 600,000 by 2014, and this group is also getting younger in age: More Chinese students now choose to finish their high school abroad. From 2006 to 2011, the number of Chinese students attending private high schools in the United States grew by over 100 times. Overall, Chinese higher education enrollment grew at an annual rate of 17 percent between 1998 and 2010, while the number of Chinese students studying abroad increased by over 25 percent annually in the same time period, both setting a record in the contemporary world higher education community. More recently, Chinese students have started to be drawn to universities in Hong Kong, where the number of undergraduate students from the Mainland registered a 129-fold increase over the last decade, from only 36 in 1997 to 4,638 in 2010. Arguably, universities in Hong Kong take advantage of their liberal learning environment and international faculty. This tendency, together with China's demographic change, may threaten student supply in Chinese higher education in the long run. Since 2008, the number of entrants in the national higher education entrance examination has kept going down, and is 1.4 million less in 2012. As an immediate consequence, Chinese students abroad are estimated to contribute over US\$15 billion per year to the economies of their host countries (Zha, 2012a). This phenomenon suggests China may have started suffering both a brain-drain and a resource loss that will take its toll in coming years.

Will Balancing Strategies Solve This Situation?

Charismatic University Leaders Cannot Make Up for Inadequate Institutional Arrangements

As our analytical framework indicates, an imbalanced state could give rise to strategies and actions that aim to restore equilibrium. In the Chinese context, a related phenomenon can be observed, that is, the exercise of self-mastery (*zizhu*). Often this term is used to express the concept of university autonomy in China, yet more precisely it means the university supports but does not subordinate itself to the state while retaining the capacity to initiate its own development strategies and patterns (Hayhoe & Zhong, 2001; Hayhoe & Liu, 2010). Often this becomes possible with a determined and visionary university leader at an elite university possessing a relatively strong bargaining position. From 2006 to 2009, the

authors of this chapter investigated the path and patterns of China’s move to mass higher education, through case studies conducted at 12 Chinese universities. Seven were selected out of the elite Project 985 group, and two of these had stories that exemplified the notion of self-mastery in China.

One case was Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, and its former president Zhu Jiusi. During its emergence to the top ranks of leading Chinese universities, Zhu played a crucial role. Towards the end of the crippling Cultural Revolution, Zhu developed a vision for his university. One basic element in his vision was to broaden the curriculum beyond the engineering sciences, which his university had been limited to under the Soviet model, and include fields such as philosophy of science, scientific journalism, higher education and basic sciences, which had originally been allowed only in comprehensive universities. Another element of his vision was to nurture active research programs in areas of strength, and seek funding from wherever possible, at a time when research was carried out in separate institutes under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, along the lines of the Soviet model. His sense was that excellent research should lead and invigorate teaching. These initiatives were far in advance of government thinking in China at the time, and Zhu’s leadership developed into a highly influential scholarship of practice that opened up new vistas for Chinese universities after the Cultural Revolution (Hayhoe, 2006; Hayhoe & Liu, 2010; Hayhoe, Li, Chen, & Zhou, 2011).

Another case was the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei, and its former president Zhu Qingshi. He took a strong stand against expansion, and argued for a functional differentiation, in which the central mission for elite universities like his was to raise the bar of quality, not to contribute to growth in quantity. When he stepped down in 2008, he spoke of his decision against enrollment expansion and creation of a new campus as a major merit of his presidency, which saved the faculty from the distractions caused by heavy teaching loads and daily transportation among disparate campuses, and secured their time and energy for research⁶ (Zha, Li, & Cheng, 2011). In both cases, a

⁶ In both *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2011–2012 and QS World University Rankings 2011–2012, the University of Science and Technology of China obtained the highest citation scores among all the Chinese universities included in the two league tables, 73.6 (THE) and 51.9 (QS), while being ranked lowest for industry income on the *THE* scoreboard. In comparison, China’s two top universities, namely Peking University and Tsinghua University, scored 51 (THE) and 29.7 (QS), and 37.4 (THE) and 26.4 (QS) respectively.

charismatic and highly determined university leader was the key. This is especially true in the case of the University of Science and Technology of China, where Zhu Qingshi has a reputation of fighting against the establishment. Now, he is leading a newly founded South University of Science and Technology of China⁷ in Shenzhen, as an experiment intended to explore possibilities for increasing Chinese educational innovation. Nonetheless, university leaders come and go, and their charisma and may not be enough to balance an environment that lacks institutionalized self-regulation and protection from external interference.

Many faculty and staff of the University of Science and Technology of China later regretted Zhu Qingshi's non-expansion strategy, as missing an opportunity for their university, when they witnessed how generously the government bailed out those indebted universities. Now, the South University of Science and Technology of China is being drawn back under the administrative grip of the education authorities, or at least is having to give up some of its innovative practices including those in the areas of student enrollment and curriculum development. The *2020 Blueprint* seems to recognize this institutional drawback and calls for experimentation in establishing a modern university model on Chinese soil, which features expanding university autonomy and institutionalizing professorial rule over academic affairs. More recently, China's Ministry of Education promulgated the *Interim Regulations on Creating Charters for Higher Education Institutions*, which took effect on January 1, 2012, and aim to assist Chinese universities in discerning the boundaries within which they

⁷ The South University of Science and Technology of China (SUSTC) is widely recognized as a pioneer in education reform. In contrast to common practice in China, where the central government or local authorities appoint university presidents, the SUSTC has a board of directors for such crucial personnel appointments. The board has the right to examine and approve the university's management, financial reports and development plans. Ever since its establishment in 2010, this university has been struggling with its bid for autonomy in student enrollment and overall management. It made headlines when admitting the first batch of 45 students who took the university's own set of exams in early 2011, instead of the national university entrance examination in June. It even intended to grant its own academic diplomas, against the rule that university degrees are awarded by the State Council, if those students were not recognized by the education authorities. Eventually, its enrollment plan received approval on January 10, 2011, only seven weeks ahead of the scheduled beginning of the semester on March 1. China's Ministry of Education officially approved SUSTC's establishment in April 2012, requiring it to follow the ministry's regulations when it considers adding new courses and making other adjustments to its curriculum. It is now suspected that the SUSTC may fall back into the administrative grip of education authorities and gain no more autonomy than other public universities when it has to seek approval for curriculum and enrollment.

have jurisdiction. Only if a binding procedure can be worked out to constrain the hands of government and limit its scope, will it be possible to break the vicious cycle which has been described in this chapter.

Liberal Education and Internationalization Give Cause for Hope

Arguably, internationalization—in particular the establishment and operation of joint programs and institutions—facilitates drawing on international experience to break through some of the internal constraints of the Chinese system. The past decade did witness the proliferation of such programs and institutions in China. The number of joint degree-granting programs/institutions increased from 71 in 2001 to 579 by 2011. If the provision of sub-degree and non-degree programs is also taken into account, it is estimated that there were 1,340 such programs and institutions in 2011 (Lin, 2012). In this sense, some even argue that, given time, transnational higher education programs and institutions will form a third pillar in the Chinese higher education system, alongside public and private institutions. The international partners are spread across the world, with a majority being from the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, Canada, Germany, Russia, France and Hong Kong of China. However, these programs and institutions largely demonstrate a degree of conformity to the commercialization and compartmentalization of higher education, concentrating in such “marketable” fields as business, information technology and language studies. From the critical perspective of world systems theory, they could work to enhance the dependence of Chinese higher education on Western systems, rather than spearheading changes in the Chinese system (Zha, 2012a).

Much hope is thus placed on liberal or general education. A liberal education curriculum is perceived to propel students to “develop understandings of a breadth of topics, enhance their critical thinking abilities, and become well-rounded, educated citizens” (Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2009, p. 221). Since the late 1990s, the notion of liberal education has surfaced as a possible solution to the innovation-lag in Chinese higher education. The past decade witnessed that Chinese universities increasingly adopted the rationale of liberal education, and reorganized and broadened their curricula. Among the seven cases we studied, at least three created special programs or colleges to deliver liberal education courses. These include the *Yuanpei Program* (now Yuanpei College) at Peking University, the *Meng Xiancheng Shuyuan* at East China Normal University, and

Yu Youren College at Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University. The notion of liberal education has apparently become appealing to Chinese university leaders, as it could be connected to the Confucian knowledge tradition which placed emphasis on humanistic education. The proponents of such a linkage contend that liberal education implies learning from the past, rather than borrowing from the West, and give a Chinese name to such practices in Chinese universities, *tongshi* education, in order to differentiate it from the Western concept (Gao, 1994; Zhu, 2005, October 13; Hu, 2009; Zhang, 2012). Notably, many liberal education units in Chinese universities name themselves *shuyuan*, in a deliberate effort to link themselves to the *shuyuan* or classical academies in the Confucian education tradition in Chinese history.

The *shuyuan* began to flourish in the Song and Tang dynasties, forging an alternative system to the civil service examination system, and a knowledge tradition stressing humanistic education, with an independent ethos that was tolerant of different schools of thought. The *shuyuan* promoted the humanistic education that fostered character development, as opposed to the pragmatism of the examination system. Education in *shuyuan* is considered important for its intrinsic value, and oriented “towards the deep approach rather than the surface approach to learning...The purpose of learning is therefore to cultivate oneself as an intelligent, creative, independent, autonomous, and what is more, an authentic being” (Lee, 1996, p. 34). Thomas Lee (2000) noted how these institutions had struggled against the authoritarianism of the Chinese imperial bureaucracy, and thus asserted that the *shuyuan* had a balancing role. Notwithstanding these claims, there are at least two questions that need to be examined. One is how possible is it for contemporary Chinese universities to revive and embrace the traditional values embodied by the *shuyuan*, after more than a century of radical changes and a series of revolutions on Chinese soil, also against the overriding tendencies towards specialized knowledge. So far, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the view that *tongshi* education has ushered in fundamental changes in Chinese universities. The other is how this supposed renaissance of traditional values could be free of manipulation by political factors. A recent piece of research on *tongshi* education in a prestigious Chinese university identifies the utilitarian approach adopted, and concludes it “is heavily laden with political meaning,” rather than embracing a new educational philosophy (Zhang, 2012, p. 415). Over hundreds of years, Chinese culture and knowledge traditions have often been tinged by their association with authoritarian political regimes and the

way in which they have been subject to political manipulation.

Conclusion

Chinese universities seem to be caught between serving governmental agendas and pursuing their own goals as an academic community. Often they appear to be vulnerable in the face of a “strong state” and its interfering hands. Up until recently, they had become used to following the lead of the government, which often comes with rationales and approaches featuring pragmatism and utilitarianism. Even worse, the ideological dilemma now confronting the Chinese model for development or the “Beijing Consensus” might well constitute an externality that Chinese universities cannot escape from. Barbara Fuhrmann and Anthony Grasha noted, “[W]hat is or is not thought to be quality curriculum ‘is largely the result of our educational philosophies, beliefs, values, and normative positions’ ” (as cited in Ratcliff, 1997, p. 152). By the same token, we argue that the lack of dynamism and innovation that is hindering Chinese higher education’s development is largely owing to the political, social and cultural factors prevailing in the environment in which the universities operate. Now that the “Beijing Consensus” is at a crossroads, Chinese universities are exposed to a crisis as well.

Reviving the traditions appears to be an attractive option to many, which is evident with the proliferation of Chinese classic literary education or *guoxue* programs and *tongshi* education programs in Chinese universities. It is notable that Max Weber once located Chinese literary education as leaning towards the extreme of emphasizing the nurturing of charisma in the spectrum of educational aims he sketched out. The other extreme in this spectrum was the transmission of specialized knowledge (Ringer, 2004). Here the central question might be how far these programs have genuinely provoked and energized the transformation of Chinese universities. Unfortunately, research has indicated the impact may be superficial, as a result of the utilitarian approaches that associate *tongshi* education with the political agenda of creating “world-class” universities or the marketing goal of particular branding campaigns (Miao, 2007; Zhang, 2012). When concluding her case study of *tongshi* education in one leading Chinese university, Zhang (2012) revealed that *tongshi* education “has largely focused on the artifacts, that is, the reorganization and reclassification of courses, without changing other aspects of the curriculum or the deeper levels of the RUC

institutional culture” (p. 416). As such, *tongshi* education is more a matter of rhetoric than reality, and has failed to “bring about significant transformation in the learning experiences of the students” (p. 416).

Last but not least, we want to caution that a blind revival of the traditions could be a double-edged sword, as the traditions are always multifaceted. The intrinsic value of the Confucian tradition for pursuing knowledge, self-cultivation and human perfection is only one side of the coin. “The other side places emphasis on the dimension of external manifestation and utility of education,” and demands “a correlation between a person’s internal establishment and external performance” (Lee, 1996, p. 37). That is another principle of the Confucian scholarly tradition, which is sometimes expressed in the terse phrase “sageliness within and kingliness without,” and could lead to the “aspiration for extrinsic rewards.” The emphasis put on worldly affairs would result in an inbuilt paradox in the Confucian scholarly tradition, as the “ideal of external manifestation of a person’s internal establishment” and the “aspiration for extrinsic rewards” that coexist in the Confucian tradition essentially contradict each other (Lee, 1996, pp. 37–38). This paradox, in turn, often causes Chinese intellectuals to be vulnerable to political forces and social currents. If not properly handled, a noncritical revitalization of the Confucian education tradition could serve to enhance conformity among Chinese intellectuals, and further jeopardize the independence and autonomy of Chinese universities.

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