Front. Educ. China 2016, 11(1): 23–43
DOI 10. 3868/s110-005-016-0002-4

RESEARCH ARTICLE

David PICKUS

For the Future of Chinese Universities: Three Conversations from the Past

Abstract This article argues that ideas from the ancient past supply insight about the future of Chinese universities. I make this case by outlining three claims about the nature and purpose of education in Homer, Plato, and Augustine. I propose that conversations based on these ideas illuminate central underlying problems facing Chinese higher education today: Educating the next generation to be properly assertive and make complex judgments, and helping faculty see their own motives and impact clearly. To show this, I explain why discussions of ancient Western authors are useful for the present moment, explaining what vistas these texts open. I conclude by clarifying how the exercise can help China achieve its educational goals.

Keywords classical tradition, educational conversation, faculty development, humanism, university reform

Introduction

This article is about using the Western classics for the future of higher education in China. It is inspired by my experience as a foreigner teaching at a Chinese university, and argues that pedagogical progress is most surefooted and likely when grounded in the educational insights of the past (Hutchins, 1937; Halpin et al., 2000). Specifically, I claim that engagement with a few ancient ideas about vitalizing pedagogy provides a helpful perspective for thinking about the choices that Chinese 21st-century universities now face. I propose three "conversations" from the past, meaning ancient thoughts that have the capacity to spark thoughtful discussion. Although it lacks a set protocol, there is a longstanding pedagogical methodology that makes the consideration of tradition the

David PICKUS (✉)
School of History, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China
E-mail: pickus@asu.edu

foundation for innovation (Shils, 1981). The undergirding idea is that returning to the sources of the past provides new energy and focus for the labor of educating the new generation that lies ahead (Holtz, 1986). As early as the 18th century, thinkers have been arguing that direct confrontations are not always productive as a means to stimulate new growth and creativity. Rather, a playful stepping back and reconsidering of materials that make up our heritage allows for an imaginative and innovative way to treat problems that often degenerate into polemics and strife (Schiller, 1794/1994).

What exactly are these conversations? They are responses to three canonical authors from the Western classical tradition: Homer, Plato, and Augustine. Though these authors played significant roles in the creation of Western ideals and institutions, it is not necessary to think of them as speaking only to a Western audience, or with the goals of European societies solely in mind. Like Chinese classical thinkers, their value extends beyond their place of origin. Even if canonical works are shaped by their birth, they do not belong to any single place. Culture as a whole belongs to the world cultural heritage of humanity. Hence, Homer can belong to China if he speaks to its current predicament by following the method of isolating the moments that most challenge or provoke us, thereby reflecting on what we would say in response. From this perspective, all these texts have something vital to say about the contemporary situation. To demonstrate its relevance, I wish to place the response to antiquity within the framework of our shared responses to the pressing issue of the consequences of the accelerated growth of China's institutions of higher learning. This allows us to use conversations from and about the past to draw attention to what is most challenging today. As historians Guldi and Armitage note, "The mission for history as a guide to life never entirely lapsed" (2014, p. 10). The aim here is to show why those concerned with the future can orient themselves by classical antiquity.

How, specifically, are these broadly humanistic concerns related to today's pedagogy and educational theory? Does engaging literary, religious, and philosophical ideals drift us so far away from the *terra firma* of data-driven research that we will be unable to apply the consequences of our findings (Noddings, 2011, Chapter 7)? Certainly, there is a danger of this if arguments are raised only to be left hanging. But there is no reason to assume that there is an unbridgeable gap between the ambitions and methods of recent academic scholarship and classical theorizing. Research in education can never lose sight

of the lived experience of those involved in teaching and learning (Aveni, 2014). To this end, as much as we require measurable and assessable inquiry, the question of how to cultivate and improve instruction cannot eschew wider discussion of the goals and purposes of education and universities altogether (Kaufmann, 1977). This is where disciplinary research blends with classical thinking. Homer, Plato, and Augustine were also teachers, albeit in an age when teaching had a noticeably less distinct professional demarcation from other spheres of life. What they had to say about pedagogy and instruction is, also, the voice of experience.

What problems addressed by them are most salient for 21st-century Chinese higher education? There are three urgent questions about the ends of Chinese university instruction, namely:

1. What degree of self-assertion is proper and necessary for students, and how to maintain a healthy balance between self-assertion and deference?

2. How can faculty educate students not only to draw distinctions, but to reflect on the distinctions drawn?

3. How can faculty confront themselves—i.e., observe their practices with a responsible, critical distance—thereby identifying what is truly genuine and beneficial within their pedagogy?

These questions cannot be answered without stepping back and taking a stand on the purpose of instruction altogether. Undoubtedly, proposing answers to them alone will provide no panacea to solving the problems of Chinese universities, but if faculty have a renewed and energized sense of purpose they are more likely to take individual steps that lead to noticeable advances in pedagogy, while avoiding the non-adaptive practices that contribute to a downward slide (Stewart & Kilmartin, 2014; Stewart & Schlegel, 2009; Miller, Finley, & Vancko, 2000). Globalized higher education will be enriched by a common framework for discussing the role of teachers and ways of developing their capacities fully. Given the pressures and conflicting forces moving Chinese universities, examples from our shared classical tradition can teach us how to improve schools by teaching the teachers. What exactly? To find out, let us position ourselves in present-day needs.

Massification and Its Challenges

Instructors at Chinese universities today face a fascinating field, full of both

opportunities and challenges. The higher education system's massification process is now entering its third decade (Hayhoe, Li, Lin, & Zha, 2011). While the fact of sustained expansion is evident, the scope of this change is so vast that even experts have difficulty gauging its full magnitude. It must be emphasized that massification is more than a large expansion, and it helps to visualize its urgency and implications. Since the mid-1990's China's universities have grown to include, by world standards, a large percentage of the population. The significance of this gain must be grasped by imagining the immense network of new social realities created: hundreds of new institutions, construction of vast new campuses, and the admission of millions of new students. A few statistics provide some notion of the magnitude of this change. In 1977, with the return to normalcy of Chinese universities after the Cultural Revolution, about 1.5% of the age-related population had access to higher education (Altbach as cited in Tan, 2012). By 2020, some commentators say the number is expected to reach 40% (MoE as cited in Tan, 2012), though the notion of "access" is loose and requires caution. To grasp what this growth means, consider that China's Ministry of Education reported over 25 million higher education students in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014). By 2024 this figure could appear small. The day on which China is securely in the ranks of countries where higher education is an expected life course for a majority of urban youth is approaching (Trow, 2010).

Thus, even if an instructor is not focusing explicitly on massification, the consequences of this growth by magnitudes are everywhere, guaranteeing established patterns will not remain stable. Yet, despite this change, or perhaps due to the inherent anxiety of change, the more Chinese universities massify, the stronger the temptation to slot individuals within specified ranges. An easy way to see this is to consider the problem of faculty assessment, specifically, the societal and institutional pressures they evoke. Chinese instructors are assessed by rigorous and typically prescribed performance benchmarks (Mohrman, 2013). Yet, like performance standards everywhere, the set tasks to be achieved primarily focus on what is most empirically measured and ranked: publications, grants, tabulated scores, etc. More elusive qualities conducive to learning—difficult to measure anywhere—are even less likely to be rewarded in this highly structured system. Simultaneously, Chinese students bring complex needs to the classroom that often find contradictory expression. Some commentators see a desire to make classroom learning livelier and more interactive, and to obtain the higher standards of creativity that, *in theory*, are

found in Western classrooms (Li, Remedios, & Clarke, 2013). Nevertheless, Chinese students are no different from their cohorts elsewhere in seeking formulaic predictability, even at the cost of genuine engagement. There is also a demand for classroom guidance. Authoritative teachers are valued (Liu, Keeley, & Buskist, 2014). This is undeniably useful in helping students to gauge progress, though it should be discussed whether students rely too heavily on the hope that others will lay out future directions for them. Intensifying problems, high levels of graduate unemployment heighten anxiety, spur policy analyses about the usefulness of degrees, and harden the public conviction that anything other than the delivery of a high grade is a unrecoverable failing (Li, Whalley, & Xing, 2014; Bai, 2006).

This atmosphere easily produces mutual dissatisfaction between instructors and students, heightening among faculty a painful awareness of the limits of what can be achieved at any given moment. Frustrations thereby engendered undergird the worry that some of the more polemical charges leveled against the higher education system in the past may continue, despite improvements, to circulate in the present (Tam, Heng, & Jiang, 2009). The attitude taken by some foreigners to what they call a "test-driven system" sometimes invites further controversy (Lucenta, 2011, p. 76). The point is that the consequences of massification accelerate inquiry into higher education's meaning and purpose. To address these issues, China's own research into higher education is expanding rapidly to fit changes in structures, mentalities and ambitions (Kang, Wang, Shi, & Sun, 2014), while young instructors are struggling to find individual ways to voice and cope with institutional discontents (Yan, 2014). In subsequent years, many steps will undoubtedly be taken to improve instruction and student engagement. Keeping pace, the question of the qualitative value of a degree becomes unavoidable (Hu, 2015). Where should universities go?

A good first step is to identify long-term desires. Rather than dictate desires, we can ask stakeholders to reflect on a perennial heritage of educational thinking. Here, we can return to the "back to the sources" methodology mentioned at the start. Contained in a sense of tradition is that notion that conversing about the past empowers us to take more decided steps toward the future. Hannah Arendt (1958) argued that the very newness of upcoming generations required past orientation points to chart out meaningful paths to the future. All industries, including higher education, in the search for successful ways to adapt to current needs, can profit from a guiding motif in the creation of Silicon Valley that "To

invent the future, you must understand the past" (Berlin, 2015, May). To put this into practice concretely, let us go on to see what the Western past has to say that is useful for China's higher learning current needs and hopes.

Homeric Self-Assertion

Homer's work is the best starting point because it is impossible to understand the values of ancient Greece and Rome without grasping what he had to say about the nature and purpose of human life (Jaeger, 1939/1986). Homer was a teacher of Western antiquity. Thus, his portrayal of a pedagogue in action reveals central beliefs about the ways a teacher can lead the pupil from subservience to independent maturity (Gregory, 2011; Verdenius, 1970). Consider this section from Book One of the *Odyssey*. In line 296, the Goddess Athena tells Odysseus's youthful son, Telemachus that it is time to grow up. As these words are spoken, Odysseus is nowhere to be found, and his enemies, invading his home, are happy to assume that he is lost at sea. Their goal is to marry Odysseus's wife and seize his estate. Telemachus desperately needs a teacher. He needs advice on growing up, since not only his own manhood, but the fate of his father's holdings is at stake. According to the custom of the time, if the "man of the house" is not there to defend the estate, then any other aristocratic man can enter and seek to marry the wife, thereby taking the property as his own (Finley, 1978). Stated in contemporary terms, growing up for Odysseus's son means coming to exercise his strength in proper measure, enough to give him a reputation for formidability, so that he eventually can defeat all his father's rivals, and make sure that no one ever doubts his strength again. As the goddess tells him:

> If you hear that he's dead, among the living no more,
> Then come home yourself to your ancestral land
> Build him a barrow, and celebrate the funeral
> Your father deserves. Then marry off your mother.
> After you've done that, think up some way
> To kill the suitors in your house, either openly
> Or by setting a trap. You've got to stop acting like a child
> You've outgrown that now. (Lombardo, Trans., pp. 9–10)

This may seem like strange or inappropriate counsel for 21st-century China, or

the 21st-century altogether. Why talk about killing and revenge when the subject is improving universities? Yet, these few lines have something to contribute to our discussion, for, though we use different methods, we continued to be perplexed by the challenges that troubled Homer. Hence, while his notion that respect is only earned through violent dominance essentially fits a lawless age, this is also the crude beginning of Western civilization's efforts to help a young person find his true character by giving him a proper sense of mission and proportion. It is also one of world literature's oldest statements that education must culminate in a test of capacities. This last point becomes more meaningful when we realize that the young Telemachus never fulfills the plan Athena set out for him. Instead, as we quickly learn, his father Odysseus really is alive, and he is the one who comes home to restore his honor and take his vengeance. However, a broader look at what Homer meant by a hero altogether shows that Odysseus embodies the lessons that Athena sought to teach his son. Heroism is the capacity to realize potential that is otherwise unexpressed, misdirected or untapped (Nagy, 2013).

Hence, beyond the dramatic conflict, Homer's seeing of educational development as an outcome of a struggle with oneself and others started an ongoing conversation. When Athena admonishes Telemachus, saying: "You've got to be aggressive, strong—look at how big and well-built you are—so you will leave a good name" (Lombardo, Trans., p. 10), she proclaims in the bluntest, simplest terms what a boy must do to come of age. Yet, the whole discussion revolves around the question of how, exactly, to be strong. This is why Homer is still relevant today, even to countries from the original sphere, like China. The question of how to teach young people how to find their place in a globalizing world is at the heart of our education. Finding one's place is inextricably bound up with self-assertion. How to do it correctly? How much aggression does it entail? It should be noted that even Homer did not advocate the exercise of strength against others without the exercise of self-control, or genuine mastery (Harris, 2001). Hence, his contrast between the directed anger of Achilles and the immoderate ranting of Thersites in the first two books of the *Iliad*.

This is the link to today's pedagogy: A central task of the teacher—now as then—is to help students find the right balance between accommodation and assertion (Foy, 1977). The education that a 21st-century society develops must also be one that helps students to identify the kinds of struggles a young person is most likely to face. Homer raises this question, and if we, rightly, do not like his

primitive answer of pride and vengeful violence, then we look where his ideals continue to do harm, refining them in ways more germane to our globalized world (Shay, 1995). How should Chinese universities prepare students to assert themselves, and what kind of "fighters" are they likely to become? Faculty will benefit from an aesthetically playful, non-confrontational forum for taking up the issue. This is a conversation for stakeholders to initiate and draw their own conclusions. A useful way to start is to begin with an ancient author like Homer who suggested that learning and fighting were one and the same. If we wish to modify this argument—civilize it, tame it—we must go beyond Homer, turning to a thinker who was interested in doing just that, namely Plato.

Platonic Dialectic

Plato (c. 428–348 BC) lived at least 300 years after Homer. In this intervening period, Greek intellectual life grew immensely in sophistication, not least due to the crystallization of a philosophical tradition. Thus, Plato's complexity, intellectual and moral, is, in at least one easily discernable sense, more civilized than Homer's. For Plato, the highest good and honor is not gained on the battlefield. He idealizes neither open slaughter, nor tactical double dealing. Indeed, a key opening move in his central dialogue, *The Republic*, has Socrates refuting the claim that justice consists of rewarding your friends and harming your enemies (see Bloom, Trans., 1991, pp. 7–13). There is little in Homer that supports such a view. Yet, we cannot say that Plato's values are altogether different from Homer's. He admired heroism and self-assertion, and—deeply at odds with his own Athens–showed sympathy to the militarized society of Sparta (Russell, 1945; Cropsey, 1995). Nevertheless, the way he went about making his case was different, pointing to his ongoing contribution to pedagogy. His thought represents a breakthrough in dialectical reasoning, or deliberate reflection on strengths and limitations of the concepts that we use (Benson, 2006). This is why Plato's method—rather than the ends toward which it is used—still speaks on the perennially modern theme of the worthiness of knowledge (Smith, 1923, p. 163).

To show this point and then apply it to 21st-century concerns in education: Plato's pursuit of philosophic excellence takes the form of a philosophical contest in which the best argument must somehow incorporate the others and prevail (Scott, 2000). Along these lines, Plato presented the trial and subsequent

execution of his teacher and master, Socrates, as a kind of struggle for spiritual superiority, having Socrates directly invoke the spirit of Achilles in his final, defiant apology (Allen, Trans., 1991, p. 91; Bruell, 1999). In this respect, Plato tried to make philosophy a vehicle for glory and honor the way that physical courage and craftiness was for Homer (Barker, 2009). Yet, in doing so, he inextricably tied philosophy to pedagogy, for we also need to be taught to recognize this philosophical excellence when we see it. Homer had little difficulty with this because of the tangible physicality of his notion of excellence. However, for any culture that thinks of excellence in terms of a spiritualized, aspirational ideal, Plato's thoughts on how to do this serve as an instructive starting point for the question of how to teach students to refine and transcend crude and unreflective standards of excellence and success.

This question of increased "spiritualization" has direct relevance to reform issues in Chinese universities. Consider the involved matter of altering admissions standards. *China Business Newsweekly* reported in April 2014 that Xi'an Jiaotong University will be able to participate in a trial run, whereby their own admissions criteria will count for 30% of the acceptance decision, while the national exam, *gaokao*, will count for 60% and high school performance for the rest. This reform's purpose is to "assess each student for their professional aptitude, adaptability and creative potential thus providing an opportunity for students to shine in areas not typically associated with higher education in China" (China Business Newsweekly, para. 5). Whether or not such plans are carried through and their consequences remain unclear. Yet, most likely, attempts of this sort will not stop with one university, nor will envisioned reforms be confined to entrance requirements. Efforts to devise new standards of excellence will be one step among many that try to make the university responsive to changing conditions. Even if individual reform efforts are hampered, the desire to define excellence in terms other than quantitative scores will remain.

Here is the connection between ancient and modern times, and between Plato's world and our challenges. Like him, we have inherited a series of principles and standards that are well-established, and to some degree clear, but which are no longer seen as adequate and desirable. Meanwhile, the new goals and ambitions, seeking "professional aptitude, adaptability and creative potential" are alluring, but not as clear as the standardized guidelines of the past. What to do in this situation? One option is to build on Plato's thought, considering his conviction that if essential categories of distinctions remain unclear, then what's required is

to find a mechanism for making them more self-reflective and adaptive. This point is illustrated by an example of dialectical reasoning contained in his dialogue on love, *The Symposium*. This is a record of a philosophical discussion held between friends at a "drinking together," the literal meaning of the word "symposium" (Allen, Trans., 1991). Sitting together, each speaks in turn and offers a definition. The dialectic emerges from the dialogue, as each speaker builds upon the ideas that came before, rejecting some and expanding on others.

Many subjects receive attention, but one comment made by the model teacher, Socrates, is quite illuminating, since it provides a brief account of the interactive process of his own education. This is not that common in traditional Western literature, since ancient Greece (in common with neighboring cultures) had traditions that described sages as coming into the world in an extraordinary manner, sometimes even fully formed (Shankman & Durrant, 2000). Yet, in a revealing flashback, Socrates tells a whimsical story about how he began by thinking crudely about love, but learned to better himself. His teacher—of all people—is a witch named, Diotima, who managed to correct his previously misguided ideas about love.

For us, the important point is how Socrates came to gain new insight. The story opens with the problem of how we should visualize love in divine form, a natural challenge to cultures assigning a divinity to all significant abstractions. Thus, Socrates first told Diotima that because love is beautiful, that god(s) of love must also be beautiful. Given the conventionally beauteous terms in which love is typically described, he thought Diotima would agree, but she did not. Daunted, Socrates then asked if she thought love, therefore, is "ugly and bad." Diotima then brusquely got to the point by responding, "Hush, don't blaspheme. Or do you suppose that whatever is not beautiful is necessarily ugly?" Suggesting that Socrates was thinking naively, she went on to ask if he was not "aware that that there is something intermediate between wisdom and ignorance." As she explained:

> Don't you know... that right opinion without ability to render an account is not knowledge—for how could an unaccountable thing be knowledge?—nor is it ignorance—for how could what meets with what is be ignorance? Right opinion is surely that sort of thing, intermediate between wisdom and ignorance. (Allan, Trans., 1991, p. 144)

Hence, her central admonition to Socrates: "Don't compel what is not beautiful to be ugly, nor what is not good to be bad" (Allan, Trans., 1991, p. 144). Speaking this way conferred a great benefit upon him by teaching him to think this way, as learning this lesson was an essential step in making Socrates a philosopher (Rosen, 1968). Indeed, it remains useful for us. Despite the abstract wording, Diotima's meaning is straightforward: To be correct, opinions must correspond to reality, but we must be careful not to substitute familiarity for comprehension. We can know generally and abstractly that something is true, without being able to give much account of it. To take a modern example, knowing that knowledge has something to do with the brain is not wrong. It is correct. It "meets with what is," but it is, at best, "right opinion," something intermediate. But if we dwell in this twilight, intermediate stage we are likely to fall into the trap of inept categorization, e.g., thinking that a generalization about the brain is the same as understanding it, or believing that something not beautiful must be ugly, and so forth.

Why are such considerations relevant? As with Homer, the point is not to suggest that Plato's own values and conclusions are the best ones for today. Plato wrote his *Symposium* to argue for his own philosophical ideal of love. Yet, what he wanted is not as important as his procedure. The method by which Plato got to his ultimate view of love represents an important enrichment of Homer's original intuition about the nature of education. Homer simply had characters expressing things, but Plato wanted them to express ideas reflectively, so as to grasp their proper proportions. Having an idea was not enough, its nature and value had to be measured against the claims of other notions. Diotima was a good teacher because she did not indulge Socrates by letting him think in un-dialectical terms; that is, he could not use words without somehow specifying where they ceased to be meaningful. For this reason, once Socrates incorporated this lesson, he made it his task to strive to discover the extent of the coherence and value of concepts themselves.

We can return to the specific application to our world. Defining the limits of words is not a recondite concern, interesting only to otherworldly philosophers. It is vitally needed as China's massified universities enter their second generation. To see this more clearly, consider an item published by President Jie Zhang of Shanghai Jiao Tong University on Oct. 15, 2014. Titled "Developing Excellence: Chinese University Reform in Three Steps," it mentions China's tremendous

financial investment in higher education, totaling more than 700 billion RMB in 2012 alone, and leading to a noticeable boost in university productivity. Simultaneously, he shared some concerns: “Yet the quality of research, as indicated by citations, lags behind, and technology transfer is sluggish. Ossified practices in evaluation and incentivization—such as rewarding publication quantity over quality—are holding Chinese universities back” (Zhang, 2014, p. 295).

Pedagogical arguments like these are not dismissive or foreign to local discourse; they are part of a search for a new system of values, one more sophisticated and better attuned to emerging needs. But how will we decide what quality is? The idea of testing for it hardly goes uncontested in the West (Guinier, 2014). Likewise, what constitutes ossification? For his part, President Zhang goes on to outline an ambitious program for his own university that will enhance the faculty and enrich its output. He concluded: “We are moving away from knowledge transfer to knowledge creation and from instruction-centered teaching to student-centered learning. Our philosophy has changed to nurturing students to be engaged, competent global citizens” (Zhang, 2014, p. 296). To achieve these valuable goals many things will be necessary, including learning the lesson on inner quality that Diotima taught Socrates. It will not be possible to make a settled and fixed list of what performance is desired of faculty, students, etc. Yet, different conceptions can be discussed and compared with each other, and performance can be judged by a shared investigation of relative values.

This last point requires more explication. In the near future it will not be possible to assume that someone who undoubtedly has talents and aptitudes in a particular field is, in fact, fully knowledgeable about it. It is well-documented that relative outsiders to a discipline may make vital contributions, but it is harder to specify what, precisely, the relationship between learning, knowledge and general aptitude is (Kaufman, 2013). Simultaneously, knowledge-creation and student-centered learning demand some guidance to mastery, otherwise they produce no lasting fruit. Thus, Plato also remains before us. The way to elucidate what this guidance is and decide how it should be implemented is to continue the process he helped start. This requires initiating discussions that that reflect on the meaning of our key concepts. Yet how prepared are instructors to undertake this task of self-analysis? Raising this question takes us to our third text.

Augustine's Moment of Honesty

By most accounts, the classical tradition in the West began with Homer and ended with Saint Augustine (354–430 AD). Augustine—Christianity's most influential theologian—is thus extremely important for a wider audience, as he provides a sense of how the West's classical tradition concluded, and what became of it. Yet, it is not easy to get a clear picture of his contribution because he was a multi-faceted character (Chadwick, 2009). In terms of education, two aspects of him are especially important. On the one hand, he is extremely dogmatic. His notion of a Church that is the only route to eternal salvation, and hence, the only possible source of political and social authority, lent weight to a long-standing belief that education must instill single, correct beliefs. On the other hand, though this aspect is blunted by his subsequent embrace of orthodoxy, the young Augustine was very much a rebel against the cultural authorities he encountered at school**.** When he wrote "woe unto you, O torrent of human custom!" (Outler, Trans., 1955, p. 20) in Chapter XVI of the *Confessions* he was decrying the very things that rebel thinkers have attacked since the dawn of the modern age: conformity, and the notion that something common and accepted must, for that reason, be right. Not surprisingly, the young Augustine hated his teachers. What he had to say about them brings up a difficult, but unavoidable, topic in the discussion of Chinese universities, namely ongoing teacher education.

While Augustine never disputed that his teachers could be skillful and knowledgeable, his stance toward them was decidedly unfriendly. As a boy and young man, he disliked following rules and consequently was punished a lot, including being beaten. Like other young people who receive punishments, Augustine developed a keen eye for seeing the flaws of the adults around him. In Book IX of the *Confessions* he noted that though he was punished for sulking and behaving badly after he lost some childhood ballgame, his teachers behaved the same way when they lost an argument, but no one rebuked or punished them (Outler, Trans., 1955, p. 17). This observation colored Augustine's worldview as a whole. For the rest of his life he was suspicious of education and educational systems. The only thing that one could trust was a complete conversion to (his version of) Christianity, which meant that the spokespeople for this God were supposed to hold ultimate power (Wills, 1999). As he developed his ideas, Augustine's rebellious non-conformity, and his authoritarianism were made, by

his standards, to fit together nicely (Topping, 2010). All other forms of education except an approved religious education were rejected. Yet the skeptical, defiant spark was never entirely extinguished.

It is with this counter-current that Augustine's path fits into our discussion. A previous treatment of a problem that we find difficult and even threatening to deal with today allows for past intellectual history to be productively used (Randall, 1963). We can imagine ourselves in Augustine's place and ask how his perspective transforms us. As with Homer, it is not necessary to adopt the value system of an ancient author in order to draw meaningful lessons for the present. What is necessary is to think about the wider implications of the argument about education. In Augustine's case we can ignore a dogmatic imperative and focus solely on his definition of the problem: An instructor cannot rely on his or her own view of themselves and the impact they have on others. Long before there was any talk of educational assessment, Augustine saw clearly that teachers could deceive themselves about what students actually learn, as they are driven by pride, as much, or more than, anyone else (Floyd, 2004). Long-term historical understanding, especially long-term cross-cultural understanding opens a safe arena for self-confrontation in an audience that otherwise might have an incentive to avoid it.

This mistrust of pedagogues goes beyond devising better assessment procedures. Instructors must learn to mistrust themselves in a productive way. The key to doing that lies in Augustine's psychological insight about the teaching profession. Even if we distance ourselves from Augustine's presuppositions about original sin, pedagogues profit from his notion that teachers would do well to examine their own motivations. Instructors present students with arguments about what is true, as well as what is noble and desirable. Yet, these claims may have their origins in our passions and pride as much as in intellect. Augustine's legacy, in this respect, is thus one of caution. The more instructors are trained to be aware of their own potential irrationality, the more effective they will be. Conversations about instructor training in Chinese universities might be enriched by drawing on the resources of a global heritage, taking elements of their own choosing for pedagogical self-definition.

This is not an abstract or idle concern. Though instructional training for university faculty everywhere face inhibitions and limitations, the ongoing globalization of education will most likely sharpen the concern that faculty bring students to a mastery of international standards (Townsend & Bates, 2007).

Consequently, it is likely that Chinese universities will start seeking some collective method such as workshops or training sessions to address the perception of young faculty that they are left without pedagogical guidance (Tang, 2010). Indeed, as young instructors grow familiar with faculty development guidance, particularly by studying and visiting outside of China, they will come to see teacher training as expected, unlike previous generations. Concurrently, international forums for Chinese administrators explicitly identify faculty cultivation as a development goal (Cook, 2014). However, as much as the time may be ripe for a new collaboration, success in this area depends, ultimately, on the skills and rectitude of the instructors themselves. Here Augustine's concerns flow into modern projects. Success in faculty training and cultivation will depend on introspection into what really goes on in a teacher's mind and heart. His example thus remains useful and relevant, and his point, if allowed to sink in, is a reminder of how easily teaching can go astray if teachers are not as vigilant with themselves as they are with others.

Conclusion: Application for Today

Where do these conversations lead? As a way of reaching a conclusion, let us raise two interconnected questions about the meaning of the argument as a whole. First, if the matter is education today, why not focus on that and skip the excursus into antiquity? Second, if we must orient ourselves by way of antiquity, why not do so by way of Chinese antiquity, and skip the deviation to the West? One thing should be made clear: A discussion of Western thought is not meant to eliminate or preclude consideration of Chinese or other traditions. We should keep in mind that thinking is like other forms of cultivation. The fastest result is not always the most fruitful one. It is not far-fetched to consider insights from a wide variety of perspectives as a means of revitalizing history to make more informed and measured decisions of our own. To show what this look backward brings us, let us summarize the main consequences of each discussion as they relate to higher education, going on to consider these conversations as a whole:

1. Building on Homer, instructors can be inspired to think of education as a transformation and disciplining of energy. An instructor must know how to cultivate this energy in students, and how to enable them to express it in a measured and effective fashion;

2. Building on Plato, instructors can be alerted to the danger of letting students think in “either-or” terms, teaching them instead to define key concepts in terms of degrees. This focuses attention directly on the question of how to teach students to say that something is true to some extent, but not to true to another;

3. Building on Augustine’s, instructors must know how to question their motivations more candidly and honestly than they might otherwise wish. This draws attention to the perennial challenge of how students experience the teacher, and what they learn from the instructor’s example.

I understand that there is no guarantee that exposure to these ideas will culminate in a desired broadening of consciousness. Yet, I wish to conclude by arguing that these conversations are not a detour, but a direct broaching of challenges at the heart of all educational development, including China’s. Their words open the question of what to do today. Even the most empirical and circumscribed discussions may never find their focus if the most valuable goals and ends fall from sight. Every conversation need cultivation and direction, which is effort. But why make this particular effort in China now? The immediate answer to this question is that debates about the meaning, nature and purpose of higher education are already raging in China. Let us return to the everyday business of higher education. A brief glance makes it clear that there is no quick and easy way to fit the needs of an educational institution to those of the instructors. In China in the second decade of the 21st-century, the matter is made significantly more complex by the fact that the model from the 1950’s runs the danger of channeling students into set post-graduation positions that no longer fit society’s current conditions or needs (Wang, 2014). Models of well-being that rely on an underlying sense of community and enmeshment are coming under increasing stress (Lu, 2010), especially when universities aim to meet many more needs, and support a much wider range of students. Likewise, in the West and East, concrete promises that education will realize all your wishes shatter on hard realities (Rosen, 2004). Instead, globalized universities must find their own paths to seeing education as a venture. I strongly believe that faculty with a sense of mission and purpose will play a central role in adapting universities to the changes to come, not least in China. In institutional theory, it is much-commented that the increase of stress heightens individual and organizational unraveling (Bährer-Kohler, 2013). Yet, as these transformations necessarily bring stress with it, the central question is how to supply the means for creative, resilient adaptation.

An answer fitting the changing world of globalized higher education is that it should not be "supplied." Rather, those participating should join an already ongoing conversation, defined as using existing elements to present our own thoughts on the living challenges of the past. The ancient texts we considered are still meaningful because, when we read them afresh we see that they did not only address their own concerns, but also took up the perennial issue of the purpose of education. Those who carry on take these thoughts forward and apply them to a discussion of what faculty are doing as teachers in all countries, including China. This sets the stage for cultivating an individual mix of native and international thought (Yang, 2014). Saying that Chinese instructors can be taught by an ancient text does not mean that others—particularly outsiders—will, therefore, dictate to them. It also does not mean that they must see themselves as beholden to Western ideas. Rather, the conversations center on ideas that faculty should pose for themselves, and adapt for their own purposes. This adaptability is the point. Scope is needed to adapt innovations to individual contexts and challenges (Xing & Dervin, 2014). The conversations envisioned can be taken up by anyone made familiar with the short selections described here. Conclusions are not imposed, and that is a key aim of this playfulness. The words of thinkers past can be expanded upon and applied in unpredictable, yet personally meaningful, directions. Herein lies the value of swerving outside China to the Western tradition. It is not that the Chinese tradition nothing to offer. Indeed, it has its own version of the ideas mentioned so far. Hence, the Western tradition is recommended here not because of any superiority, but because it is literally foreign. For most who take up the topics, these ancient Western authors will be new, but the contemporary pedagogical concerns will be familiar. This tension will lend the discussions a freshness allowing them to adapt the ideas to Chinese circumstances flexibly and creatively. In a globalized Asian setting, ancient Western texts come with fewer presuppositions and expectations of how they are to be read and applied. Conversations can proceed as participants choose.

How, then, should they be organized? That is the point. They should not be organized by others. It is up to the individuals involved. Once given a framework that allows access to the main themes, they have freedom to innovate and explore, creating a "cosmopolitanized" level of global engagement (Beck, 2006). How to start? I can think of no better way to do this than to connect instructors directly with their wider intellectual heritage, a world heritage befitting an interconnected age. As the philosopher of education, Chris Higgens, puts it: "In order to

cultivate selfhood in students, teachers must bring to the table their own achieved self-cultivation, their commitment to ongoing growth, and their various practices, styles and tricks for combating the many forces that deaden the self and distract us from our task of becoming" (2011, p. 2). Homer, Plato, and Augustine have the power to accentuate the self-cultivation of instructors wherever modern universities are to be found. It could well be the case that someday we come to see these ancient Western texts through Chinese pedagogical eyes.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Ding Rui-Chang and Naomi Thurston for their helpful comments and assistance on earlier drafts.

References

Arendt, H. (1958). The crisis in education. *Partisan Review*, *25*(4), 493–513.

Augustine. (1955). *Confessions and enchiridion* (A. C. Outler, Ed. & Trans.). Ann Arbor, MI: SCM Press.

Aveni, A. (2014). *Class not dismissed: Reflections on undergraduate education and teaching the liberal arts*. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.

Bai, L. M. (2006). Graduate unemployment: Dilemmas and challenges in China's move to mass higher education. *The China Quarterly*, *185*, 128–144. doi: 10.1017/S0305741006000087

Barker, E. T. E. (2009). *Entering the Agon: Dissent and authority in Homer, historiography and tragedy*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Bährer-Kohler, S. (Ed.). (2013). *Burnout for experts: Prevention in the context of living and working*. New York, NY: Springer.

Beck, U. (2006). *Cosmopolitan vision* (C. Cronin, Trans.). Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Benson, H. H. (2006). Plato's method of dialectic. In H. H. Benson (Ed.), *A companion to Plato* (pp. 85–99). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Berlin, L. (2015, May). *Silicon Valley then and now: To invent the future, you must understand the past*. Retrieved January 9, 2016, from https://medium.com/backchannel/why-silicon-valley-will-continue-to-rule-c0cbb441e22f#.udhwesod5

Bruell, C. (1999). *On the Socratic education: And introduction to the shorter Platonic dialogues*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield.

Chadwick, H. (2009). *Augustine of Hippo: A life*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

China Business Newsweekly. (2014). XJTLU leads reform of Chinese higher education with autonomous admission assessment. Retrieved January 19, 2016, from http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/xjtlu-leads-reform-of-chinese-higher-education-with-autonomous-admission-assessment-255066381.html

Cook, C. E. (2014). Professional development for Chinese university leaders: Collaboration, not competition. In Q. Li & C. Gerstel-Pepin (Eds.), *Survival of the fittest: The shifting contours of higher education in China and the United States* (pp. 121–132). Berlin, Germany: Springer-Verlag.

Cropsey, J. (1995). *Plato's world: Man's place in the cosmos*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Finley, M. I. (1978). *The world of Odysseus* (Rev. ed). New York, NY: Viking Press.

Floyd, S. D. (2004). How to cure self-deception: An Augustinian remedy. *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, *7*(3), 60–86.

Foy, B. (1977). Classroom aggression. *International Review of Education*, *23*(1), 97–118. doi: 10.1007/BF00615416

Gregory, J. (2011). Education. In M. Finkelberg (Ed.), *The Homer encyclopedia* (Vol. I, pp. 238–239). Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell.

Guinier, L. (2014). *The tyranny of the meritocracy: Democratizing higher education in America*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Guldi, J., & Armitage, D. (2014). *The history manifesto*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Halpin, D., Moore, A., Edwards, G., George, R., & Jones, C. (2000). Maintaining, reconstructing and creating tradition in education. *Oxford Review of Education*, *26*(2), 133–144. doi: 10.1080/713688531

Harris, W. V. (2001). *Restraining rage: The ideology of anger control in classical antiquity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hayhoe, R., Li, J., Lin, J., & Zha, Q. (2012). *Portraits of 21st-century Chinese universities: In the move to mass higher education*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Higgens, C. (2011). *The good life of teaching: An ethics of professional practice*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Holtz, B. W. (Ed.). (1986). *Back to the sources: Reading the classic Jewish texts*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Hu, A. N. (2015). The changing happiness-enhancing effect of a college degree under higher education expansion: Evidence from China. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *16*(3), 669–685. doi: 10.1007/s10902-014-9528-1

Hutchins, R. M. (1937). Tradition in education. *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (1915–1955)*, *23*(7), 588–601.

Jaeger, W. (1939/1986). *Paideia: The ideals of Greek culture* (G. Highet, Trans., Vol. I.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Kang, C. P., Wang, G., Shi, M., & Sun, F. (2014). Research trend on higher education in China for the past ten years. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *28*(3), 319–339. doi: 10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0059

Kaufman, S. B. (Ed.). (2013). *The complexity of greatness: Beyond talent or practice*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Kaufmann, W. (1977). *The future of the humanities*. New York, NY: Reader's Digest Press.

Li, D. M., Remedios, L., & Clarke, D. (2013). Chinese students' groupwork practices and experiences in China. *Higher Education*, *68*(2), 227–241. doi: 10.1007/s10734-013-9704-y

Li, S., Whalley, J., & Xing, C. B. (2014). China's higher education expansion and unemployment of college graduates. *China Economic Review*, *30*, 567–582. doi:10.1016/j.chieco.2013.08.002

Liu, S., Keeley, J., & Buskist, W. (2014). Chinese college students' perceptions of characteristics of excellent teachers. *Teaching of Psychology*, *42*(1), 83–86. doi: 10.1177/0098628314562684

Lu, L. (2010). Chinese well-being. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 327–342). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Lucenta, L. (2011). China's education lacks higher learning. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, *93*(4), 76–77.

Miller, R. I., Finley, C., & Vancko, C. S. (2000). *Evaluating, improving, and judging faculty performance in two-year colleges*. Westport, CN: Bergin & Garvey.

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2014). *Number of regular students enrolled in normal and short-cycle courses in higher education*. Retrieved January 6, 2016, from http://en.moe.gov.cn/Resources/Statistics/edu_stat_2014/2014_en02/201509/t20150901_204819.html

Mohrman, K. (2013). Are Chinese universities globally competitive? *The China Quarterly*, *215*, 727–743. doi: 10.1017/S0305741013000672

Nagy, G. (2013). *The ancient Greek hero in 24 hours*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Noddings, N. (2011). *Philosophy of education* (3rd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Plato. (1991). *The republic of Plato* (A. Bloom, Ed. & Trans., 2nd ed.). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Plato. (1991). *The dialogues of Plato: The symposium* (R. E. Allen, Trans., Vol. II). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Randall, J. H. (1963). *How philosophy uses its past*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Russell, B. (1945). *The history of Western philosophy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Rosen, S. (1968). *Plato's symposium*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rosen, S. (2004). The state of youth/youth and the state in early 21st-century China: The triumph of the urban rich? In P. H. Gries & S. Rosen (Eds.), *State and society in 21st-century China: Crisis, contention, and legitimation* (pp. 159–179). New York, NY: Routledge Curzon.

Schiller, F. (1794/1994). *On the aesthetic education of man, in a series of letters* (R. Snell, Trans.). Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press.

Scott, G. A. (2000). *Plato's Socrates as educator*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Shankman, S., & Durrant, S. (2000). *Siren and sage: Knowledge and wisdom in ancient Greece and China*. London, England: Continuum International Publishing.

Shay, J. (1995). *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*. New York,

NY: Simon & Schuster.

Shils, E. (1981). *Tradition*. London, England: Farber & Farber.

Smith, H. B. (1923). Plato and modern education. *The Monist*, *33*(2), 161–183.

Stewart, K. D., & Kilmartin, C. (2014). Connecting the dots: The decline in meaningful learning. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, *28*(2), 53–61.

Stewart, K. D., & Schlegel, K. W. (2009). Expecting more: On elevating academic standards in public universities. *Liberal Education*, *95*(1), 44–49.

Tam, K. Y., Heng, M. A., & Jiang, G. H. (2009). What undergraduate students in China say about their professors' teaching, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *14*(2), 147–159. doi: 10.1080/13562510902757179

Tan, G. Y. (2012). Higher education reforms in China: For better or worse? *International Education*, *43*(1), 101–118.

Tang, L. W. (2010). *An analysis of the perceptions of young (junior) faculty in selected four-year universities in China regarding pre-service training, collegiality, and teacher effectiveness training* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Fayetteville, Fayetteville, NC.

Topping, R. N. S. (2010). Augustine on liberal education: Defender and defensive. *Heythrop Journal*, *51*(3), 377–387. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2265.2009.00522.x

Townsend, T., & Bates, R. (Eds.). (2007). *Handbook of teacher education: Globalization, standards and professionalism in times of change*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

Trow, M. (2010). *Twentieth century higher education: Elite to mass to universal* (M. Burrage, Ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

Verdenius, W. J. (1970). Homer the educator of the Greeks. Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde [*Report from the Literature Division of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Suppl.)*], *33*(5), 207–231.

Wang, L. (2014). Higher education in China: Local, national and global contexts. In L. Wang, *The road to privatization of higher education in China: A new Cultural Revolution?* (pp. 13–28). Berlin, Germany: Springer-Verlag.

Wills, G. (1999). *Saint Augustine*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Xing, X, & Dervin, F. (2014). Dancing in fetters: Chinese principals' perceptions of the effects of Finnish training programs. *Frontiers of Education in China*, *9*(2), 211–237. doi: 10.3868/s110-003-014-0017-x

Yan, F. Q. (2014). Freedom and struggle. *Frontiers of Education in China*, *9*(4), 612–617. doi: 10.3868/s110-003-014-0048-x

Yang, R. (2014). China's strategy for the internationalization of education: An overview. *Frontiers of Education in China*, *9*(2), 151–162. doi: 10.3868/s110-003-014-0014-x

Zhang, J. (2014). Developing excellence: Chinese university reform in three steps. *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, *514*(7522), 295–296. doi: 10.1038/514295a