What’s Wrong With China’s Universities?

Thorsten Pattberg

Ivy League universities in the West are a magnet for Chinese students, meaning that China’s own elite universities lose out on some of the best talent.

David Y. F. Ho

Chinese students are famed for their diligence and perform well in international comparisons, but China’s universities produce few world-class graduates. Why?
How China’s Ivy League Obsession Shortchanges Homegrown Universities
By Thorsten Pattberg

IT IS NO SECRET that the Chinese have a crush on Harvard. It is natural for high-intelligence individuals to be drawn to elite universities in the same way that athletes seek out top sports programs, and ivory towers have come to salute the rising number of outstanding Chinese applicants on a scale unprecedented in history. Harvard has de facto become a Chinese outpost. It is not alone. From the University of California at Berkeley to Yale or Cambridge in the UK, top schools brim with Chinese prodigies or prince-lings, or else engage in China-related research and cultural diplomacy. This is good news for China’s elites, but it has a dark side: a brain drain.

GOING WEST
The latest evidence comes from a $15 million donation to Harvard by a billionaire couple, Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin, to establish a Soho China Scholarship, SOHO being Pan’s real estate development company, the largest in China. This wasn’t all that newsworthy because donations like this to Harvard are somewhat common, but this one sparked apparent outrage on Chinese social media — unless it was a well-orchestrated publicity campaign.

As business people, Pan and Zhang surely expect some form of return on their investment, apart from branding and patronage, perhaps by getting relatives or friends into Harvard. Most Chinese commentators would have little problem with that, as caring for one’s family and friends is part of Confucian tradition. In fact, most critics would probably do the same if they had the financial means.

President Xi Jinping sent his daughter to Harvard; and Bo Xilai, the jailed former mayor of Chongqing, had his son enroll at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he made headlines for his extravagant lifestyle. This has confirmed what international observers already suspected: That the taiziding, or sons and daughters of China’s rulers, are mainly heading to the Ivy League for prestige and guanxi, not necessarily for the pursuit of educational ideals. The critics’ ultimate concern, however, is this: Why not invest in China’s educational system?

Chinese students (together with other East Asians such as Singaporeans, Japanese, and South Koreans) have, on average, superior mathematics, reading and science skills. This is a readily available fact. Even the UN study of the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment confirms that students from Shanghai, Macau, Hong Kong and Taipei are on top of the world. So why not Asian universities?

A SUPERIORITY COMPLEX
There is something particularly alluring to China (and the rest of the world, really) about the American Ivy League, the ultimate expression of class privilege in the US. America’s indulgence in this extreme segregation of society into the privileged 1 percent and the 99 percent of also-rans can be painful to watch, but it is deeply rooted in Anglo-Saxon culture. After all, the British still have their royalty, snobbish Oxbridge and posh grammar schools such as Eton, Charterhouse and Harrow.

In a class-stratified society, education isn’t about knowledge, but about privilege. What is studied doesn’t matter as much as where it is studied. US and British elite universities have thus turned into an exclusive club for ruling classes, academic dynasties and the global plutocracy. When it comes to China, not everyone with money and connections can make it into the Ivy League. Many well-to-do Chinese students (China has more dollar millionaires than Germany, Britain and Japan combined) trickle down to second- and third-tier US universities: more than 235,500 of them in 2013, according to the Institute for International Education. It may be a simplification, but it appears that in the educational US hinterland some get bored, party, buy expensive cars or help relatives with local businesses. Compared to their high-flying compatriots in the Ivies they clearly get the lesser deal, but still, what they do, even if it is not much, is elevating the average IQ in their respective schools. The US, one way or another, wins.

The march of the prodigious Chinese has alarmed parents and guardians of other minorities and prompted an American scholar at Yale Law School, Cal Meier, under the name Amy Chua, to write best-sellers about allegedly superior cultural groups. Now famous as the “Tiger Mom,” Chua, a graduate of Harvard College herself whose daughter also attends Harvard, asserts that Chinese mothers are simply better than other moms due to a strange cocktail of a superiority complex, insecurity due to being a minority and impulse control — her “triple package.” That, of course, is politically correct nonsense: the Chinese in China are not a minority group, yet their academic aptitude and diligence are equally legendary.

THE ENGLISH PATIENT
England’s Cambridge University is another Chinese bargain. It recently got into the news again because of a whopping £3.7 million ($5.8 million) donation by Wen Ruchun, the daughter of former Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, which was couriered through the shadowy Chong Hua Foundation based in Bermuda. Ms Wen also made international headlines in late 2013 in a probe into whether Morgan Stanley, the US Investment Bank, offered her bribes. Apart from that, the dons of Cambridge University have no objection to the red money that’s being used for academic culturally and the global plutocracy.

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Few outsiders realize the mechanics of elite academia, the nepotism, hierarchies and moral ambiguity.

Prestigious directors often rake in millions of dollars in funds from governments or, even better, businesses, which they may spend freely on silly conferences, prestige projects and their own personality cult.

China needs — no, it deserves — its own Harvard (and Cambridge, Yale, Princeton, and so on). It is entirely conceivable precisely because Chinese students have the momentum and a competitive advantage that spurs them to succeed anywhere in the world. But as long as the elites in China don’t believe in their own civilization and would rather invest in education elsewhere, nothing short of a miracle will wake this once-proud nation from its historical slumber.

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In Focus: Pattberg