Education in East Asia

OVERSTRAINED, OUTDATED AND IN NEED OF REFORM

The education systems of Asian nations such as South Korea, Japan and Singapore are the envy of the western world in terms of measured achievements against global standards. But behind the successes, lurk growing problems of inequality, overemphasis on rote learning, academic corruption and graduates poorly prepared for the world of work. Much needs to change.
CHINA BEWARE: A CORRUPT CULTURE IS UNDERMINING HIGHER EDUCATION

By Yang Rui

There is little doubt that China’s universities in recent decades have made great strides in building educational institutions of international standing, a fact that various global rankings increasingly reflect.

But a deeper understanding of the challenges Chinese universities face in becoming world class emerges when one recognizes that China’s system of higher education has been largely unsuccessful in merging Western and traditional Chinese conceptions of the role of a university, writes Yang Rui.

DURING the past three and a half decades, China has made some remarkable achievements in higher education, evidenced especially by scientific publications and the sheer number of graduates. While such progress has been widely acknowledged, the future development of China’s higher education is not assured. For some, such as Professor Richard Levin, former president of Yale University, China’s top universities could soon rival Oxford, Cambridge and the Ivy League. For others, China’s pumping of resources into universities will only lead to diminishing returns as Chinese culture and practices act as a brake on the pursuit of academic excellence. People are kept informed about such over-generalizing views by both the media and scholarly works. These easy-minded judgments are often due to a shortage of intimate knowledge of the Chinese system.

RAPID GROWTH

China’s system of higher education has made impressive progress. Admissions have expanded dramatically since 1999. The system has become the world’s largest in terms of the sheer number of teachers and students. In 2013, 34.6 million students enrolled in China’s 2,788 public higher education institutions, with a gross enrollment rate of 34.5 percent. Postgraduate students totaled 179,400. Full-time teachers reached 1,496,900, with a student-teacher ratio of 17.53:1. China’s 718 private tertiary institutions enrolled 335 postgraduate, 3,616,400 undergraduate and 1,958,500 associate degree students.

China is now the world’s third-largest producer of peer-reviewed research articles after the European Union and the US. According to Science and Engineering Indicators 2014, published by the US National Science Foundation, out of the world’s 827,705 articles published in 2011, researchers in EU countries produced 254,482 articles (31 percent), the US 212,394 (26 percent), China 89,894 (11 percent) and Japan 47,106 (6 percent). The number of papers authored by Chinese scientists grew an average of more than 15 percent annually during 2001-2011, rising from 3 percent of global research article output to 11 percent over the decade.

At a policy level, especially since the 1990s, China has aimed at both qualitative and quantitative developments in higher education. This includes the Program for Education Reform and Development in China (1993), the Education Act of the People’s Republic of China (1995), the 211 Project (initiated in 1995) and the 985 Project (initiated in 1998). In addition, the dramatic expansion of institutions started in 1999. More recent is the quest for world-class universities. At certain stages, China’s strategies have been effective. According to the latest Academic Ranking of World Universities (2014), China ranked 3, 3, 6, 13 and 7, respectively, in the top 301-500, 151-200, 201-300, 301-400 and 401-500, featuring 32 times in the top 500. With such success, there has been evident pride in Chinese idea of the university and the fact that Chinese universities are not willing to assume that Western models define excellence. Discussions have started on whether or not there might be an emerging Chinese model of the university.

China’s achievement appears even more remarkable when compared with other non-Western societies. China’s many factors including its strikingly different higher learning traditions; checkeried history of transplanting foreign education patterns; already well-established modern, Western-style higher education system; remarkable economic growth; and tremendous talent pool combine to make its experience interesting to observe. Its true meaning lies in the possibility of offering an alternative to Western models.

THE LINGERING GHOST

Higher education is deeply rooted in culture. Human civilizations in diverse regions of the world have had various higher learning traditions. During its ancient civilization going back thousands of years, China developed rich traditions in higher learning that contrast sharply to those in the West. Ancient Chinese higher learning institutions appeared in the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE). The famous Jixia Academy (稷下学宮) was established 20 years before the Platonic Academy in Greece.

Ancient education focused on knowledge of human society, with a central focus on political utility defined by the ruling classes. The Imperial Examinations (科舉) and the Academies (書院) were key elements of China’s classical higher learning that featured a Confucian approach to scholarship that prepared would-be officials for the state. Higher institutions were a subsidiary body of the bureaucratic system. They neither could nor attempted to go beyond the imperial framework. In marked contrast to medieval Western universities, they did not have autonomy and academic freedom. Instead, they were loyal servants of the emperor.

What is now described as the “global research university” is rooted in the universities established in Europe during the Middle Ages. The model was profoundly shaped by 19th century Germany and 20th century America and spread around the world both through colonization and the emulation of its scientific achievements and contributions to nation-building. China began to experiment with such universities in the late 19th century, with its first modern institution estab-
lished in 1895. Attempts to indigenize the Western idea of a university have not stopped since, with little success.

The markedly different cultural heritages have led to continuous conflicts between the traditional Chinese and the imposed Western ideas of a university. Modern Chinese universities have institutional establishments based on Western values, on the one hand, and another system supported by traditional culture, on the other. The two systems often result in constant tensions that reduce the efficiency of university operations, making China’s unique traditions a problem rather than an asset in the modernization of higher education. The merging of Chinese and Western ideas of a university remains unfinished business.

The coexistence of two powerful systems of strikingly different nature is proving an extremely tough challenge for China. While the choice of having both at the same time appears to be the only reality, the two systems do not tolerate each other easily. Traditional ways of thinking have survived dramatic social and cultural changes in China’s modern history, and remain deeply rooted. The clash between the two traditions forms the most fundamental cultural condition for the development of China’s contemporary system of higher education. It is a specter that has been haunting China for more than a century. The “pain” it has caused could be felt constantly and regularly.

TOXIC ACADEMIC CULTURE

Academic culture is another challenge for China. As a set of attitudes, values and beliefs held by academics in relation to all aspects of their professional work, it has a strong impact on what is done, how it is done and who is involved in doing it. Decisions, actions and communication are affected on both instrumental and symbolic levels.

Some have cited academic culture as a significant impediment to China’s higher education reaching a leading status in the world. According to this view, an academic culture based on meritocratic values, free inquiry and competition is significantly lacking in China.

Since the 1990s, academic culture has fast become decadent, penetrating everywhere from regional to flagship institutions in almost every aspect of university operations. It has taken various forms including plagiarizing academic achievements, obtaining scientific research projects or rewards by bribery and other illegal means and covering up academic corruption and scandals by universities or research institutions.

Within the Chinese system, performing research and holding an official position are closely linked. Academic performance has a direct bearing on administrative advancement. Being promoted into government or even staying within universities with administrative positions can mean far more substantial financial rewards than pure academic work. Chinese scholars are thus more and more prone to becoming trapped in the pursuit of administrative standing rather than devoting their time to legitimate academic research.

China’s academic culture reflects the wider society. Under the influence of guanxi, free movement of staff, students and resources — as well as career advancement of faculty — is very restricted. Decision-making is not based solely on academic merit, but also on personal relationships and preferential treatment. Plagiarism and the falsification of scientific results are not uncommon. Those in powerful positions carve up major research grants. Without many opportunities left for diligent individuals, academics seek instant success and quick profits, and their misconduct can be easily found in daily academic and administrative affairs.

This toxic culture has devastating effects on the development of higher education and national modernization, leading to distortions and inefficiency in institutions and the system. It causes great damage to individual and institutional morale and to the style of academic work, ruins the academic atmosphere of Chinese universities and pollutes the minds of young students. It is serious enough to keep the development of China’s advanced science from being successful. It has also affected the nation’s ambitious deployment of the Chinese knowledge diaspora.

THE ROT HURTS

Compared with the fundamental cultural conflicts between Chinese and Western higher learning traditions, a rotten academic culture hurts the Chinese system more directly, with evident impact on everyday operations. It is far beyond the higher education sector to solve such widespread and deeply rooted social problems. Chinese society attributes special standing to higher education. A corrupt academic culture, therefore, damages the standing of institutions and the academic community even more badly.

With rampant academic dishonesty, it is fair to point out that China’s state education policies began to stress the need for preventing research misconduct in the early 1990s. In 2006, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Education stepped up efforts to build academic norms and research integrity by developing standards and regulations, setting up special agencies, issuing policy papers, organizing national forums or seminars and promoting international co-operation.

Some universities have established specific units to deal with academic fraud and corruption. There are signs of awareness of this serious issue within the Chinese higher education sector. It is also reasonable to expect some rapid positive policy effects. Yet, considering the general shortage of social trust and the width and depth of the issue within society, it is not realistic to hope that the problem will be eliminated in the coming years. This has been confirmed repeatedly by my own research.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although Chinese universities have made tremendous strides, a long-desired judicious combination of Chinese and Western traditions as the fundamental mission of China’s universities has not materialized. China’s promise is thus doomed
to be limited. Chinese universities still lag far behind the best in the West. They have been able to improve their hardware considerably, but the software will take much longer. Financial and other resources combined with some innovation strategies can make only so much.

Simply buying state-of-the-art laboratory equipment will not guarantee the kind of intellectual atmosphere that has developed over centuries on European and American campuses. It is remarkable to see how China’s strong traditions in higher learning have survived dramatic social and cultural changes in China’s modern history, and remain deeply rooted among the Chinese people. The impact of tradition on the current development of higher education is profound but so far it has been largely a negative asset. Only when this heritage is turned into a positive can Chinese higher education lead the world and only then will talk about a Chinese model make real sense.

The bubbling and gurgling about China’s rise in higher education in the literature as well as in the media lacks a solid foundation. In the present great leap forward in Chinese higher education, what is often missing is sufficient attention to cultural and institutional establishments. Essentially, China’s present higher education endeavor is part of its much more general process of seeking an alternative to Western globalization. Although integrating indigenous and Western ideas of the university is a must for the Chinese system, it has never been achieved. Instead, the aforementioned two levels of challenges are dealing China’s higher education weighty blows.

Judged by current practice and considering China’s deeply entrenched academic practices, China is likely to continue on this path: learning the useful part while leaving the ideological aside. A handful of China’s educational flagships will join the distinguished leagues of the world’s leading universities in scientific and technological research without much social and cultural influence at a global level. Chinese universities are not likely to challenge Western supremacy, especially because global university development is not a zero-sum game.

So far, very few people have been able to theorize how Chinese universities differ from their Western counterparts. However, it is important to note that nearly all the respondents in my recent research on China’s top universities expressed their optimism about China’s future success in building world-class universities (although some were more cautious than others), even though they differed substantially in their attitudes toward China’s current situation, especially in terms of academic corruption. Even those who strongly criticize China’s academic culture remain optimistic about China’s success in creating world-class universities.

This contrasts sharply with the two extremes expressed in the English literature by international (usually Western) observers. It begs a question about the interaction between recognition and perspective and the difficulty of knowing anything in its entirety. Being able to watch the development of their institutions from within and based on their actual experience gives much weight to the judgment of Chinese respondents. It also urges us to reflect on the influence of “Western” anxieties on perceptions of the changing geopolitical architecture of higher education within an East-West binary that still imagines Asia to be the West’s “other.”

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