

# Enter the Dragon? China's Higher Education Returns to the World Community: The Case of Peking University Personnel Reforms

Dr Rui Yang  
Comparative Education Research Center  
The University of Hong Kong

Ideas and Universities Virtual Seminar Series



20 April 2009

## Introduction (i)

- Peking University (北京大学) is usually seen as the best and most prestigious university in China.
- Also viewed by many as the first modern university in China, it has always been closely linked to China's modernization.
- Aiming to rank among the world's best universities in the coming decades, its leadership places great emphasis on internationalization as a strategy to move towards this goal.
- At the celebration of the university's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the then Chinese President and the General Secretary of the CCP urged Peking University to lead the way to establish world-class universities in China.

## Introduction (ii)

- Peking University planned a radical overhaul of its faculty appointment and promotion policies in 2004.
- The reforms go far beyond the sphere of personnel itself, touching upon the crux of China's university education since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: a successful adaptation of European-American education systems has not been matched by continuity with the traditional Chinese spirit of higher learning.
- Despite the fact that there has been no shortage of an awareness of the need for such a match, the practice has always been particularly tortuous.
- The development of Peking University is a vivid portrayal of the issues in China's modern higher education.

## Introduction (iii)

- In today's China, discussions of university reforms necessarily involve tensions between short-term targets and fundamental educational goals, the ideal and the reality, the Chinese and the Western, the individual and the society.
- The personnel reforms at Peking University serve as an example to assess the costs and benefits of China's higher education reform in a context of globalization.
- As China's repositioning in the global context is of major importance for the world, the experience is enlightening in helping to identify directions and dynamics for the present Chinese university reforms.

## Historical Impact of PU

- Founded in June 1898, PU was where Western and Chinese educational, cultural, and intellectual traditions met and were debated with a sustained depth and intensity.
- The prominence of the university owes much to the charismatic chancellor, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), who formed the fundamental character of the university and was even-handed with respect to both Chinese and Western learning.
- The university developed frameworks to enable Chinese and Western knowledge to coexist with new ways of thinking about the classical heritage, and was fashioned as a center of cultural transformation with remarkable academic achievements.

## Different Perceptions of Standing

- Compared with its reputation within the Chinese system, PU's standing in the world community is more disputable: the World University Rankings listed it as 17<sup>th</sup> in the world in 2004; 14<sup>th</sup> in 2006 and 36<sup>th</sup> in 2007.
- In contrast, the Shanghai Jiaotong Index ranked PU's research strength within the 228<sup>th</sup> in the world.
- The story would be completely different if academic reputation and actual influence were counted: in its 110 years of history, PU has trained numerous students and postgraduates who are now scattered all over China, with the bulk as pillars of all aspects of society.

## According to Professor Chen Pingyuan (2006, p. 114),

“Universities have their own contributions to their societies. In terms of teaching and research, Peking University is not world-class yet. Where Peking University excelled was its impact on China’s ideological and cultural developments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its role in China’s modernization process could well be beyond the reach of many world-class universities. With regard to contributions to human civilization, very few universities in the world can compete with Peking University. This is because at this crucial moment when an old eastern giant country is rising, a university that can function as profoundly as Peking University does is extremely rare.”

## Contextual Factor: Globalization

- In a context of globalization, higher education policy changes in many countries are shifting to neo-liberal orientations, with a redefinition of relationships between the university, the state, and the market.
- The pursuit of economic benefits becomes the essential and prioritized goal for higher education, threatening the status of the original educational purpose that higher education should strive for.
- Market ideologies have burgeoned in the Chinese higher education sector, and the influence of supranational organizations is increasing.
- Over the last two decades, China’s universities have been increasing opening to public scrutiny.
- With greater accountability to external constituencies, some traditional values of universities are being challenged.

## Contextual Factor: Commodification

- The most prominent theme of China's education reforms has been building close links between education and the market.
- China's education policies are produced by economists to "meet the needs of a socialist economy."
- It is now politically correct in China to advocate market-driven reforms in education.
- Good public schools are being sold to private owners in the name of economic reforms.
- As commercialization of education is an initiative of the Chinese government, education fees are a logical consequence of state policies, and universities are seen and managed differently.

## Contextual Factor: World Class Status

- To strive for world-class universities has been designated as one of China's key policy positions.
- The government is committed to promoting a group of Chinese universities with the potential to enter the world-class league within a decade and is investing heavily in them.
- Chinese universities once competed between themselves without looking out at their international peers now embrace international norms, especially among at the top layer.
- The notion of world-class status within China, however, seems largely imitative rather than creative.

## Evolution of the Personnel Reforms

- In May 2003, PU released the first draft personnel reform proposal throughout its campus for comment.
- It made decisions on a few general principles, including removal of the longstanding *de facto* tenure of *iron rice bowl*, avoiding academic inbreeding and setting a limit to faculty members.
- The essence of the plan was to open up academic positions, including a schedule to eliminate a proportion of teachers within a certain time frame, hoping the competitive mechanism of the market (especially the international academic market) would lead to improvement in the quality of teachers.
- The proposal generated a great deal of controversy, was hotly debated in the academic circles.
- The second draft plan showed evident revisions and substantial compromises in comparison with the first version.

## The Contention over the Reforms

- The critics consisted mainly of young and middle aged faculty members who were expected to be most affected.
- The most concentrated opposition came mainly from humanists and some social scientists, especially within the university, or among its alumni.
- The sharpest critics asked whether it was intended to reform or castrate the university.
- The issue was seen as a question of life or death concerning China's traditional culture, one of importance to the entire Chinese nation.
- The criticism raised the matter to the level of principles, and even accused the reform plan of breaking the law.

## The Premise of the Reforms

- The widespread dissatisfaction with how Chinese higher education institutions were performing provided a clear motive for reform.
- Within PU, nearly all people on campus, both supporters and critics of the reforms, were critical of the current state of affairs at the university.
- The university's performance was seen as poor even by domestic standards.
- The reform plan aimed to end some of the old practices of appointment and promotion in which the corrupt aspect of the Chinese *guanxi* and seniority were the main factors.
- Many people who criticized the reform proposal never denied the need for reform. The debate was about how to reform.

## The Orientation of the Reforms (i)

- Some supporters suggested that PU connect to the international standard.
- This emphasis on conformity with international practice was challenged by others.
- Gan Yang (2004) objects to the argument that Chinese academics must publish in English in the West to receive validation for their work.
- He warns that the reforms designed to create world-class universities often ape American research universities at every step. By moving in this direction, China's universities are doomed to become "dependent fiefdoms" of American universities.

## The Orientation of the Reforms (ii)

- The most enlightening, meaningful part of the debate was the notion of the Chinese idea of the university.
- The argument is that the fundamental mission of the Chinese university is a judicious combination of learning from Western university traditions and the ideological, intellectual, cultural and educational independence of the Chinese.
- The orientation of Chinese university reforms should be towards developing such a mission.
- There is, however, a need for awareness of “narrow-minded indigenization” and strong academic nationalism

## Roots of Chinese Higher Education (i)

- By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, China had perfected one of the world's most durable political systems during 2000 years of its imperial history and had developed a unique civilization that had deeply influenced the culture of its neighboring countries.
- China's higher education had evolved according to its own logic and never deviated from its developmental path, despite external influences. Higher education circles confined their dissemination of knowledge to a provincial level and persisted in disregarding knowing anything of the rest of the world.

## Roots of Chinese Higher Education (ii)

Over a long historical process, a unique set of scholarly values arose in China. There was no institution in Chinese tradition that could be called a university. Instead, the imperial examination system and the academies (書院) were key elements of ancient Chinese higher learning.



## The European-North American Model (i)

- The proposed personnel reforms at PU were based almost entirely on the perceived US experience, demonstrating an acceptance of American policies and practices.
- University reforms in China are a combination of externally imposed standards that force China to adopt international (usually Western, and often American) modes of education and administration, with voluntary and often enthusiastic acceptance of foreign standards of academic excellence.
- Reformers at PU cited Harvard and Stanford Universities almost exclusively in legitimizing their policy.



## The European-North American Model (ii)

- The wholesale adoption of U.S. plans may not be totally appropriate for a country with a very different history and cultural traditions.
- At a minimum, Chinese universities could benefit from studying the problems that have plagued American universities, learning from examples of what not to do.
- The Chinese need to look at knowledge and its production outside China more critically.
- China's looking outside its borders for standards of excellence implies the superiority of Western educational norms, linking to the longstanding issue in Chinese education that indigenous Chinese wisdom and imported Western knowledge have never been on an equal footing.

## Dewey's Comments on Cai Yuanpei

In an essay Dewey wrote after working at Peking for two years, the great American educational thinker compared Cai Yuanpei with the then presidents of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Columbia. He concluded that in terms of professional knowledge, Cai was no match for the presidents of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. But in terms of education, the British presidents were no match for Cai Yuanpei. The latter had remade Peking University and turned it into China's first university in a truly modern sense. This pushed forward reform and progress in the entire society (Feng, 1992).

## Cai Yuanpei's Legacy (i)

- Cai Yuanpei advocated free thinking principles and an all-embracing approach, now seen as the most fundamental characteristics of Peking University.
- Remolded by Cai, Peking has become a Western-model university established by the government while tied in many ways to the traditional system represented by Chinese academies.
- Cai Yuanpei wanted to combine the Chinese educational spirit, especially Confucian and Mohist character building, with Western systems.



## Cai Yuanpei's Legacy (ii)

- Cai had read widely in almost all the major areas of social sciences and the humanities.
- It would be hard to imagine that a scientist or an engineer by training, or even a social scientist or a humanist without a broad knowledge base and profound understanding like Cai's, could accurately seize the opportunity, hit out in many directions at once and quickly lay a solid foundation for Peking's development in the succeeding decades.
- Broad intellectual interests are a huge advantage for a university president. Cai's success reminds us that a scholar with a broad knowledge base is often more suitable as leader of a university than a highly specialized expert.
- This is a timely warning given that contemporary scholarship has become highly specialized and the knowledge base of individuals is becoming narrower and narrower.



## Chinese Idea of the University

- The central purpose of China's modern higher education has been to combine Chinese and Western elements at all levels
- There are strong grounds for such a combination: as Confucian culture has a remarkable capacity to accommodate other cultures and absorb some of their best elements into itself, integrating diverse streams of thought into an organic whole.
- China then has much to contribute to the world community, especially culturally, an important task at a time when the human society is confronted with serious issues of sustainable development, and cultural conflicts.
- PU should aim for this level of contribution and is particularly well positioned to do so, yet these goals are not uppermost

## End Remarks (i)

- The PU personnel reforms illustrate the complexity of the internationalization of Chinese universities and how traditional Chinese academies are being transformed into modern universities.
- This lively experience illustrates how any discussions of reforms in non-Western universities invokes crucially important and academically fascinating issues of Westernization and indigenization.
- The reforms extend well beyond the personnel sphere and far beyond the university campus. They take in the fundamental issues underlying Chinese higher education reform.
- They illustrate tellingly what Chinese higher education is confronted with, and what it can bring to bear, in its process of re-entering the world community.

## End Remarks (ii)

- China's recent efforts are already paying off:
  - China's universities beat India's in almost every international ranking. According to the Academic Ranking of World Universities conducted by Shanghai Jiaotong University (2007).
  - China has Tsinghua in the top 200, Nanjing, Peking, Shanghai Jiaotong, the University of Science and Technology of China, and Zhejiang in the top 300 while India had none.
  - China features fourteen times in the top 500 and India only twice.

## End Remarks (iii)

- Chinese universities are confronted with two major challenges:
  - The first is market-oriented short-term behaviours. In the present great leap forward in Chinese higher education, what has often been missing is attention to institutional establishment.
  - The second major challenge for Chinese universities is the Chinese administrative system that is based on official authority and rank. Chinese universities leaders are more politicians than academic leaders.

## End Remarks (iv)

- China has a considerable distance to go before its aspirations to create truly world-class universities are fulfilled.
- China's universities have been able to improve their hardware considerably, while, as is always the case in China, the software building takes much longer.
- Chinese universities need to develop their distinctive "Chineseness" that distinguishes them from others, both at home and abroad.

## Thank You!

- Your comments are warmly welcome!
- My E-mail: [yangrui@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:yangrui@hkucc.hku.hk)