

velopment.

However, East Asia's century-long hard and bitter work has begun to bear fruit. Defining the values of the university is gradually taking root throughout the region, most evidently at the individual level. An overwhelming majority of participants in my research acknowledged growing autonomy granted to their institutions. Even those who were concerned about the negative role of traditional culture and called for "seeking truth and freedom," agreed that much progress has been made. Such progress contributes to the narrowing the conventional gap between Western and East Asian ideas of a university. It interrogates mainstream views that predict an impasse of East Asia's higher education development due to a complete lack of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

CULTURAL EXPERIMENT

As a latecomer, East Asia's modernization involves a response to Western challenges. The desire to catch up with the West has always been fervent. All participants mentioned major global universities frequently and, without exception, those were Western institutions. It was common to hear them refer to Western universities when talking

East Asian higher education systems have been fast improving in both quality and quantity.

about their international networks, strategic partners, and positions in global rankings. The fact that all participants showed a rich understanding of Western society in their talks has to be understood in a context of a contemporary East Asian society and culture that have been profoundly influenced by the West. Western learning has become part of East Asia's knowledge system. It is already impossible for East Asians to talk about education without mentioning the West.

East Asia's higher education elites and scholars believe that the conflicts between traditional and Western values can be resolved. This confidence was repeatedly confirmed during my fieldwork. East Asia's intellectual tradition has its strength, and good potential to contribute to the idea of a university. After painstakingly learning from the West during more than a century, East Asians are now well positioned to get the mix right. Their flexible and open perspective allows them to appreciate opposing poles as a driving force and see opportunities in contradictions. Their prag-

matic approach to life enables them to use whatever helpful means are available to solve problems. They do not have to choose between the East Asian and the Western university models: they can use both simultaneously and flexibly.

Both traditions are deeply incorporated into the daily operations of elite East Asian universities. East Asia is making a cultural experiment with emerging signs of hope. East Asian universities appear increasingly able to turn scars into stars. Unlike their prestigious cousins in the West, who have a poor knowledge of other parts of the world, East Asian academic elites know the West as well as their own societies. While Western universities operate in a largely monocultural environment, East Asia's flagship universities work in a combined culture that includes at least East Asia and the West. Such a combination is globally significant and historically unprecedented.

CONCLUSION

With enormous progress in spite of serious challenges, growing evidence shows that East Asia is likely to reach further by integrating Western and traditional cultural values. Premier universities in East Asia are exploring an alternative path to a future development with global implications. Their experiment has demonstrated the possibility of striking a balance between East Asian and Western ideas of a university that are conventionally perceived as mutually exclusive. While it is too early to predict East Asia's success, the process is certainly full of promise.

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The Slow Path to General Education in Chinese Universities

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General education is an important theme in the context of current university-level education reform in China. The main purpose of this reform is to broaden students' general knowledge, extend their vision of the world, and strengthen their capacity to solve complex problems. Many universities have launched their own general education programs, while others have taken steps to improve general

education programs already in operation.

General education has a long history in Chinese higher education. Prior to 1949, university education was mainly regarded as general education, since economic and social development until that point had been constrained, and the need to employ a high-level, specialized work force was limited. After 1949, China entered a phase of large-scale economic development, with a pressing need to increase the numbers of professional specialists and technicians. As a result, universities established a model of professional education, in order to produce a specialized work force. This model has made a deep impact on Chinese universities, and is to this day the main education model.

General education has a long history in Chinese higher education.

It has become an increasingly important task for universities in China to reform their overly specialized education model, with its rigid structure consisting of (mainly) compulsory courses. This rigid model was established in accordance with the planned economy system. But given the current reform movement, leading to a nascent market economy, higher education needs to become more flexible. Early attempts to reform higher education date back to the late 1970s, when some universities adopted elective and credit systems that opened the door to the development of general education. In the early 1990s, some Chinese universities, notably Huazhong University of Science and Technology, began to offer courses or lectures on cultural quality (*wenhua suzhi*). The main content of these courses or lectures emphasized traditional Chinese culture, social sciences, a basic knowledge of natural sciences, and the latest cultural developments, with a particular emphasis on Chinese classics.

FIRST-CLASS COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES AS PIONEERS OF GENERAL EDUCATION

At the turn of the twenty-first century, some first-class comprehensive universities began to develop cohesive general education models. For example, in 1998, Nanjing University set up a special undergraduate college focused on general education, initially named College of Basic Subjects Education, then renamed Kuang Yaming College in 2006, in honor of a former president. In 2001, Peking University launched the “Yuanpei Program” (also named after a former president), providing general education to a very small number of freshmen in their first two years of college edu-

cation, regardless of their major. Beginning in 2002, Tsinghua University sought to expand its high-caliber professional education across disciplines, and in 2014 established Xinya College, a residential liberal arts college, to explore comprehensive education reform based on general education principles in addition to formative education. Lastly, in 2005, Fudan University set up “Fudan College” to develop general education for undergraduate students. Yet other universities launched their own general education programs. There is no evidence to prove that their attempts drew on experiences from the historical general education practice in China. Contemporary general education curricula have been developed in the context of new challenges faced by China’s higher education system, including sustainable development, social equity, reconstruction of social value and morality, internationalization and globalization, etc.

RETHINKING GENERAL EDUCATION

Increasingly, various types and levels of Chinese universities recognize the value of general education and are exploring models that are suitable to their particular profile. According to a study on the “985 Project” universities, the four main areas of development of general education are as follows:

- *Defining objectives:* As an example, Fudan University has defined the purpose of general education as, in particular, breaking down barriers between academic disciplines; developing the common foundation of intellectual exploration and knowledge; and facilitating student development with a comprehensive understanding of different cultures and ways of thinking. At Xiamen University, the aim of general education is to promote the comprehensive development of students in the humanities, arts, science, morality, and other areas.
- *Developing a core curriculum:* Peking University, for instance, introduced 30 core courses in general education through 2015, promoting classical reading and teaching through discussion. Fudan University has built up six modules of general education core curriculum, with a total of nearly 180 core courses.
- *Exploring teaching methods:* Beijing Normal University has established freshman seminars in general education to create a comprehensive course of study including literature reviews, cooperative discussions, and group presentations. Tsinghua University has actively explored “small class” teaching in general education, aiming to increase sustained and in-depth communication among faculty and students.
- *Setting up mechanisms for general education:* Universities typically offer general education programs at special

colleges or centers, but Fudan University has established a General Education Board to design and plan the core curriculum.

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS, WITH A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Although general education is under development at first-class universities, the majority of Chinese universities are only now beginning to establish a relevant framework. They still face a number of problems and challenges, including, first, recognizing the value of general education. A widely held view among many university staff and students, as well as among the general public, is that liberal education is useless, while professional education is considered valuable. Second, the disciplinary foundation of general education is problematic. Many Chinese universities have developed from specialized colleges with a relatively weak basis of expertise in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Third, the pedagogy has to be improved, as many teachers are accustomed to transferring knowledge on various topics to students, with lectures as their main method of instruction. Fourth, the number of academic hours and credits dedicated to general education is limited; the curricula of general education programs need to be revised, allocating more academic hours and credits to general education.

These problems will not be easily solved. Chinese universities need to increase curriculum resources allocated to general education, to improve the capacity of faculty and to reform the professional education model. The road ahead for general education in China remains long.

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New “Startups” in a Rigid Higher Education System: China’s Young Elite Institutions

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In the past decade, several elite institutions have been established in Mainland China with ambitious visions of becoming world-class, small-scale research universities.

Typical examples include Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) opened in 2011, ShanghaiTech University (ShanghaiTech), established in 2013, and Westlake Institute for Advanced Study (WIAS), founded in 2016 to prepare for the establishment of Westlake University. With limited intervention and zero financial support from the central government—as opposed to China’s other existing universities—these three young elite institutions have unique development strategies, funding models, and admissions policies. They were started primarily with the purpose of establishing world-class Chinese universities based on alternative models. Adequate funding is primarily provided by the local municipal governments or the private sector. Admission policies tend to be more flexible, with some degree of independence from the existing system based on the national college entrance examination (*gaokao*). The establishment of such institutions can be regarded as a bottom-up innovation in China’s higher education development. However, considering the respective institutional visions and science-focused strategies, it might also be the result of a new utilitarian direction chosen by stakeholders—including local municipal governments and higher education practitioners—probably driven by global university rankings.

THREE YOUNG ELITE INSTITUTIONS

SUSTech is a public, small-scale research university located in Shenzhen, originally founded by the local municipal government in 2011. In 2012, its establishment was endorsed by the Chinese ministry of education and the university was acknowledged as a platform for “experimenting with, and catalyzing, Chinese higher education reform.” In 2011, without permission from the central government, SUSTech recruited its first cohort of 45 undergraduate students based on its own standards. In 2016, it recruited its first cohort of graduate students. Presently, SUSTech has 260 faculty members and 3,228 undergraduate students in 14 academic units (i.e., departments and schools), mainly concentrating on science and engineering disciplines such as physics, chemistry, biology, and electronic engineering.

ShanghaiTech is a small-scale, public research university in Shanghai, established jointly by the municipal government and the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2013. In 2014, ShanghaiTech recruited its first cohort of 207 undergraduate students from nine provinces, based on its own admissions criteria. ShanghaiTech has four academic schools (physical science and technology; information science and technology; life science and technology; and entrepreneurship and management) and two research institutes (Advanced Immunochemical Studies and iHuman Institute). It now has 849 undergraduate students and 1,272 graduate