



The Argument for Academic Engagement with China

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We live in a world of interconnected universities. Institutions known as universities are medieval in origin, but the modern research university is in historical terms quite new and inescapably international. Universities were reimagined, first in Germany, and then on German models, across the globe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Why else is Stanford's motto in German? (*Die Luft der Freiheit weht*—"The wind of freedom blows.") How else did the great president of Peking University, the German-educated Cai Yuanpei, make "Beida" a bastion of the liberal arts and sciences during China's cultural renaissance in the first quarter of the twentieth century?

My new book, *Empires of Ideas*, asks this question: If German universities defined global standards in the nineteenth century; and if US universities—building beyond the German experience—came to lead all global rankings by the end of the twentieth century; are Chinese universities—having taken lessons from both Europe and America—poised today to lead the twenty-first century?

China's Ascent

Today, as Germany reimagines its universities through its Excellence Initiative, and as the United States disinvests, at least from its public institutions, China has shown an unmatched ambition to build more world-class universities than anyone else. For this effort, Chinese universities have access to more of the best human capital—Chinese scholars at home or in the diaspora—than any university system on Earth. The 2023 QS World University Ranking places Beida University ahead of all but one of the US "Ivy League" universities, with Tsinghua University right behind; five of its top 50 are Chinese institutions. In the coming years, innovative universities such as Southern University of Science and Technology, Westlake University, and ShanghaiTech seem poised to make their mark. Within China, cooperation with US institutions has founded ambitious enterprises like NYU-Shanghai, Duke Kunshan University, and Schwarzman Scholars at Tsinghua University.

True, the United States remains home to more world-class universities than anywhere else. This is due in good measure to our global recruitment of faculty and graduate

Abstract

In education as in other areas, the US and Chinese governments privilege self-interest over shared concerns. Mutual paranoia takes precedence over reciprocal benefit. This places at risk the robust—and successful—collaboration between Chinese and US universities, which has been a powerfully positive force for both countries. Now is the time to remain engaged—indeed to deepen our engagement with our Chinese partners, for history tells us the perils of academic self-isolation.

students. US research universities have been strengthened greatly by Chinese doctoral students. Our faculties, too, have recruited extraordinary Chinese scholars. In 2018, 26 percent of US internationally coauthored articles in science and engineering included researchers from China.

US Challenges

Yet the United States’ status as the preferred destination for overseas talent is fragile. As Chinese President Xi Jinping told his US counterpart, Donald Trump, “If you restrict Chinese students from going to the United States, you are doing a great favor to Europe.” A 2022 report from the Center for China and Globalization, a Beijing think tank, anticipated that “more Chinese students may switch to countries in Europe and Asia where the study environments and visa policies are friendlier.” In the first six months of 2022, the number of US student visas issued to Chinese nationals had decreased by more than 50 percent, compared to pre-COVID levels.

We restrict these students and colleagues at our peril. But as Philip Altbach, Xiaofeng Wan, and Hans de Wit have shown, US campuses are increasingly perceived as violent, politicized, and unwelcoming to overseas students. Trumpism and the pandemic brought out the worst of US insecurities and racism. Deteriorating US–China relations and the high-profile arrests in the United States of prominent Chinese-born scientists have fed anxieties on both sides of the Pacific.

Adding to the United States’ challenges is the systematic disinvestment in public higher education in 44 of 50 US states. I write this article from the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, the flagship of the University of California system, which has been the greatest system of public higher education in the world. In my book, the chapter on Berkeley is titled “Public Education, Private Funding.” UC-Berkeley is a case study of great US public universities in systemic financial peril. And our more well-endowed private universities suffer not from competition with China but from what Richard Brodhead, the former dean of Yale College and president emeritus of Duke, calls “the inertia of excellence.”

US universities, public or private, came to lead the world by learning from others. But when was the last time you saw a US university president or dean look abroad for new models for research, teaching, or anything? Leadership, we must remember, is a comparative concept: The story here is not only about China’s rise in the world of universities, but also about the potential for US decline.

Reactions and Counterreactions

In education as in other areas, the United States and China today seem to privilege self-interest over shared concerns. Mutual paranoia takes precedence over reciprocal benefit. In 2018, faculty members at Cornell University forced the suspension of a program with Renmin University after Renmin disciplined students who had formed independent Marxist reading groups and advocated for workers’ rights. But Cornell’s self-righteous faculty did not know how hard Remin’s leaders tried to protect these students—or indeed how proud they were of these idealistic youths. By cutting ties to their universities, we hurt the people who share the values of university leaders the world over. The grandstanding of “sanctions” is easier than the hard work of empathy.

There are pressures to decouple in China, too. As a result of China’s zero-COVID policy, in-person international academic exchange within China has dried up. In the classroom, there is pressure to critique Western political theory (except of course Communism). This global pandemic could have been an opportunity to strengthen US–China collaboration. Ever since the two nations signed the US–China Agreement on Cooperation in Science and Technology in 1979, scientific cooperation between Chinese and US scholars has produced breakthroughs in the development of cancer treatments, AIDS research, influenza tracking, and climate change technology. Much of this collaboration is now on ice.

Intertwined Histories

Tsinghua University was founded in 1911 as a prep school to send young Chinese to US colleges. It would rise to be China’s leading research university by the 1930s. It was, in the words of a famous memorial still on its campus, home to “Spirits Independent and

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Minds Unfettered” (*duli zhi jingsheng, ziyou zhi sixiang*). My mentor in Chinese history, John K. Fairbank, the father of modern China studies in the United States, learned his Chinese history at Tsinghua under the great historian and later diplomat Jiang Tingfu, who himself was educated at Oberlin and Columbia. Fairbank told me that one of his greatest regrets was the cutting off of academic ties with China in the 1950s, in an earlier era of mutual isolationism. These ties have taken decades to rebuild.

Earlier this year, under great political pressure, three Chinese universities withdrew from global rankings to pursue “education with Chinese characteristics.” But there is no such thing as a “China model” for universities. Over a century and a quarter, Chinese universities have grown on international models and in partnership with their European and US counterparts. They have risen to the first ranks in science and engineering, while—whenever political circumstances have permitted—promoting the values of open inquiry that have marked the world’s leading universities. They have seen political campaigns come and go. They must take the long view. So should we. ▲

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