

## World-Class Universities and Chinese Higher Education Reform

**KATHRYN MOHRMAN**

*Kathryn Mohrman is executive director of the Hopkins-Nanjing Center, in the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, at Johns Hopkins University. Address: 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20036 USA. E-mail: kmohrman@jhu.edu.*

China's leaders are eager to have a higher education system of international stature, in part to provide top-quality education for future leaders of the nation and in part to earn greater respect in the global community. In 1998, then President Jiang Zemin announced the goal of building world-class universities in China; subsequently, several top universities received special three-year grants for quality improvements under what is called the 985 Project. For example, Peking and Tsinghua Universities both received 1.8 billion yuan (U.S.\$225 million) in the first round of special 985 funding, while Fudan, Zhejiang, and Nanjing Universities received 1.2 billion yuan (U.S.\$150 million) each. These grants are awarded in addition to special support provided by the 211 Project, an effort to develop 100 top universities for the 21st century. The 985 Project reflects a conscious strategy to concentrate resources on a handful of institutions with the greatest potential for success in the international academic marketplace. Also, the 985 Project implies recognition that China will probably fail to develop 100 internationally recognized institutions, at least in the short run.

### INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS

No agreed-upon definition exists of what constitutes a world-class university, although Chinese academics point most often to greater acceptance of research in international journals, especially in the natural and physical sciences. Other criteria for excellence parallel the wish list of American universities—more buildings, more publications, up-to-date laboratory equipment, star professors, and, always, more money.

The consideration of world-class status within China seems largely imitative rather than creative. In striving for international standing, top Chinese universities compare themselves with Oxford, Yale, and the Sorbonne, although they lack the centuries' long history of Western universities. In addition, many European and North American universities enjoy financial resources that Chinese universities can only envy. Thus it is unlikely that even the top universities in China can compete directly in many areas of academic life.

At the same time, China has a long tradition of scholarship, albeit of a different kind than Western research, yet few Chinese academics today talk about areas in which Chinese scholars have a comparative advantage. The emphasis on the natural and physical sciences forces Chinese professors to play

catch-up to Western research; greater attention to the humanities and social sciences could draw upon China's traditional strengths. It would be quite interesting to learn of a new definition of a world-class university that is not simply an imitation of Harvard but a creative blend of the best of East and West.

### DEFINING THE WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

The definition of a world-class university is a topic on which many university leaders have commented. Ambrose King, former vice chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, provides three characteristics of a great university. First, it has faculty regularly publishing their research in the top "defining" journals in their respective disciplines. Second, the graduate student body is truly international in origin. And third, the graduates are employable anywhere in the world.

A different perspective comes from Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University, in an article entitled "How to Make a World-Class University" (*South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2003). She believes that an excellent university system must be grounded in the culture of the society in which it is located. Universities, she believes, are important institutions to help societies further their specific goals. She emphasizes that "the bedrock of university quality in the United States is peer review, a system in which standards are set by leaders of the field and those leaders are themselves challenged and judged by this process."

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Simmons continues by looking toward the future. "Universities promote the capacity of scholars to develop original work that is not immediately applicable or useful. Great universities are not only useful in their own time but in preparing for future times. What allows a great university to do that is as little interference from the state as possible. The role of the state is to provide resources but to give wide latitude to universities' leaders to decide how scholarship is to advance." And, finally, she cautions that "education should never become an assembly line. Once it does, you may have a certain level of production, but you will never get the volume of creative thinkers that make a democratic society work."

A third description of world-class universities is presented by Philip Altbach in "The Costs and Benefits of World-Class Universities" (*Academe*, January-February 2004). He lists a series of characteristics as benchmarks for an analysis of international competitive status: (1) Excellence in research; (2) excellent faculty with job security, appropriate salaries and benefits, and adequate facilities; (3) academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement; (4) freedom to pursue knowledge; (5) a significant measure of internal self-governance; and (6) consistent and substantial public financial support.

In each case, these academic leaders are talking about qualitative and quantitative factors, an ethos of intellectual exploration and creativity, and a focus on the long-term role of universities as well as the short-term contributions that institutions can make to their society. An internationally recognized scholarly ethos, however, may take longer to develop than many academic or political leaders in China are willing to admit. Simply buying state-of-the-art laboratory equipment or pushing for more journal articles will not guarantee the kind of intellectual atmosphere that has developed over centuries on European and American campuses. A number of Chinese academic leaders acknowledge this reality when they say that it will take a generation to create truly world-class universities in China.

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#### THE DESIRE FOR WORLD-CLASS STANDING

The discussion of world-class universities has led analysts of Chinese higher education to ask about the long-term consequences of grafting Western academic practices onto a Chinese base. Will these changes also lead Chinese universities to adopt the highly individualistic ethos that characterizes American institutions, with all the institutional frustrations that ethos entails? Will those values spill over into the larger society with unintended consequences? Will government bureaucracies allow practices that promote academic freedom in the Western sense? Will Chinese academics continue to look outside their borders for standards of excellence, which would imply that Western educational norms are superior and that Chinese universities remain inferior? And, at the extreme, what will distinguish a Chinese university from its international peers once it achieves world-class status?

This article is based on a chapter in the forthcoming volume, *Bridging Minds Across the Pacific: U.S.-China Educational Exchanges, 1978–2003*, edited by Cheng Li, to be published by Lexington Books in March 2005. ■

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## Catholic Universities in Central Europe

### MARIJAN SUNJIC

*Marijan Sunjic is professor of theoretical physics, head of the Centre for Academic Development and Cooperation, and former rector of the University of Zagreb. He was formerly Croatia's ambassador to the Holy See. Address: Faculty of Science, University of Zagreb, P. O. Box 331, HR-10002 Zagreb, Croatia. E-mail: msunjic@phy.hr.*

In most Central and Eastern European countries, universities and the rest of society were ruled by the Communist Party, with the curriculum and the faculty heavily indoctrinated by a totalitarian Marxist ideology. After the collapse of communism, the region initiated the process of modernization and structural reform when possible. However, after the initial period of enthusiasm, the efforts were soon blocked or delayed—as it became obvious that the inherited problems and resistance to reforms constituted a greater challenge than anticipated. Frustration grew in many segments of society, especially among Catholic intellectuals, who were foremost among the victims of the communist regimes.

This state of disillusionment led, among other things, to the idea of establishing Catholic universities. In 1992, Peter Pazmany Catholic University was established in Budapest as a successor to the educational institutions started by the Catholic Church back in 1635. In 2000, in Rúomberok (Slovakia), a new Catholic university was set up with just two faculties (philosophy and pedagogy). In Croatia, the Bishops' Conference recently decided to establish a Catholic university, although specific details about the institution have yet to be provided.

### HIGHER EDUCATION TRADITIONS

It should be noted that Catholic universities in Central Europe do not share the traditions of countries that have a long history of private higher education. This article refers to countries where public universities traditionally dominate, though many of the oldest and most prestigious universities were established centuries ago by Catholic Church authorities. In fact, the original religious schools usually form parts of public universities in Central Europe (e.g., in Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia), with the exception of Poland and Hungary. Some of these institutions faced many difficulties in the past: the Faculty of Theology, from which the University of Zagreb developed in the 17th century, was expelled from the university by the communist authorities in 1952, though this decision was never officially accepted by the academic community. After 1990, the process of reintegration started and was formalized in 1996 with the Agreement on the Status and Activity of the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Zagreb.