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**IDEAS OF THE UNIVERSITY IN CHINA:
A CRITICAL REVIEW**

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In last few decades Chinese universities have developed tremendously in material, technical and professional terms. During this period there has been another change that is perhaps more important, though less prominent, one I would like to call a “cultural turn” of Chinese universities, which is expressed most clearly in the fact that many people, especially university leaders, are talking about the idea of the university in general and the ideas guiding particular universities. In this chapter I try to describe this phenomenon and explain its background and implications.

1. SCHOLAR, SPACE AND SPIRIT: GROWING INTERESTS IN “THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY” IN CHINA

Although in 1983 a book in Chinese with the title of *The Idea of the University*¹ was already published by Jin Yaoji, then the vice chancellor of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and similar discourse was started in Taiwan slightly later,² when I proposed to a young editor of a journal in Shanghai towards the end of 1999 that it might be interesting to write something on the idea of the university, the phrase “the idea of the university” seemed to impress her very much as something quite new in the Mainland. I was too busy to write on it after I proposed this title, so the young editor pushed me again and again, and the strongest argument was that she had invited several scholars to write on this topic and Professor Xie Xide, the former President of Fudan University, was one of them, and although she was too ill to write herself, she had agreed to publish her interviews with that editor in which she expressed her last

¹ Jin Yaoji (1983) *The Idea of the University* [da xue zhi li lian.] Taibei: Times Cultural Publishing Company [shi bao wen hua chu ban gong si.] This book was later reprinted many times in Hong Kong and Beijing.

² See for example Huang Junjie (1999) *The Idea of the University and the Selection of the University President*. Taibei: Society of the General Education in Republic of China.

views on the university. Xie died one month before that issue of the journal³ was published in April 2000.

Just a dozen years later, the expression “the idea of the university,” or *da xue de li nian*, is not only frequently used in writings by scholars and journalists on college education,⁴ but also frequently talked about by university leaders. This cannot be better illustrated by a book published earlier this year with the title of *Voices from Universities*. This book is composed of interviews with leaders of 24 best universities in China, conducted by Huang Daren, the former president of Sun Yat-sen University. In his Introduction to this book, Huang said that the most important lesson he got both from his own personal experience as a university president and from his interviews with other university leaders is that “As a university president you must have your own idea [*li nian*] of your university.” (Huang *et al.*: 7) “In my interviews,” he said, “I was most impressed by the fact that everybody I talked to emphasized the spiritual dimension of a university. Many university presidents regarded ‘forming an idea that is widely accepted by the staff on the campus’ as the most important work that he or she had done to give a print on his university.” (Huang *et al.*: 7)

How should we understand this phenomenon, the phenomenon that university leaders in China show growing interest in talking about the idea of the university?

In Xie Xide’s last talk on the university mentioned above, she discussed four phenomena that characterized the situation of higher education in China at that time, and I think it is at least partly as a reaction to these phenomena that university leaders have more or less reached the consensus on the importance of the idea of the university. These phenomena are: the expansion of enrollment of college students, the merging of several colleges even universities into larger ones, the reform of the way how college students are enrolled, and the tendency that the higher education could be turned into an profitable industry. (Xie Xide: 15-19) Yang Wei, the president of Zhejiang University, said in his interview with Huang Daren that “the three most important things about a university are ‘3ss’ in English: Scholar, Space, Spirit.” (Huang *et al.*: 295) The growing interest in the idea of the university in China,

³ *New Knowledge of the Ocean of Words* [ci hai xin zhi,] N° 5, April 2000, Shanghai. On this issue my paper is titled “The Idea of the University,” and Xie Xide’s interview is titled “Last Talk on Education.”

⁴ See, for example, Gan Yang (1999) *Civilization, Nation and University* [wen ming, guo jia, da xue.] Beijing: SDX Joint Press.

therefore, can be explained with regard to the relation between the “spirit” and the “space” on the one hand, and with regard to the relation between the “spirit” and the “scholar” on the other.

In the past ten years or so, the “space” of Chinese universities has been tremendously expanded. In 1979 there were only 633 higher education institutions. In 2010, however, there are altogether 2723 higher education institutions. The “space” of Chinese universities in the literal sense also greatly expanded. There are approximately 60 “university cities” in China, home of many new universities or new campuses of existing universities. My university, East China Normal University in Shanghai, for example, got a new campus in suburb area in 2004, which is two times as large as the original one in downtown.

At the same time when the number of universities and university campuses were increased, the number of students has also grown tremendously. In 1979 there were only 1,002,000 registered students, in 2010 the number is 31,050,000, with 6,000,000 graduates, and the gross rate of enrollment to higher education is 26.5%. China surpassed the USA around 2005 as the country that ranks first in this respect.

The space of universities not only grew domestically, but also internationally. From 1978 to 2011 there were 2, 245,100 overseas students and scholars, and 818,400 of them came back home to work. At the same time in 2011 we have 292,611 students from 194 countries and regions all over the world. And we have established 350 Confucius institutes in 105 countries and regions in the world. In addition to these, more substantial progresses have been made in sharing of courses, mutually recognizing of student credits between Chinese universities and their overseas counterparts, and even in jointly running higher education institutions. ECNU, for example, is building up a brand new university in Shanghai together with New York University, and this new university is going to enrol its first students in 2013.

In terms of “scholar,” there have also been great improvements. First I should mention the “Project 211,” a project initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education of China with the aim of raising the standards of research and teaching of a group of selected universities. The name for the project comes from an abbreviation of the 21st century and approximately 100 participating universities. Then I should mention the “Project 985,” a project aimed to promote the development and reputation of an even more selective group of Chinese universities. This project was announced by then Chinese President Jiang Zemin at the 100th anniversary Peking University on May 4, 1998, and hence its

codenaming. In addition to these large scale projects supporting universities, there have been many projects aimed to attract talents from abroad and support scientists and professors at home, such as the “Changjiang Scholars Program” and “China National Funds for Distinguished Young Scientists,” both involving billions of funding.

Against these developments of “space” and “scholar” universities, many problems have occurred that suggest the lack of “spirit” of the university might be a possible key cause of them.

First is the problem of the imbalance between the quality and the quantity of scientific research. According to an article published on *Science and Development Network* on November 25, 2005, Chinese research “is plentiful but not original,” for although the number of the papers published by Chinese scientists continues to grow, they are rarely cited in later studies.⁵ The situation has been gradually improved since then, but compared with our achievements in the economic field, the situation in the scientific field is far from being satisfactory.

Second is the problem of the imbalance between the mission of research and the mission of teaching. Many students and their parents complained that professors, especially those leading ones, are busy in conducting scientific research and lobbying for funding, but neglect teaching and tutoring students, especially undergraduate students.

Third is the problem of the imbalance between the growth of higher education and the growth of the people’s expectation for higher education. According to the plan of the State Council, by 2020 the total number of registered college students will be 35,500,000, with a gross rate of enrolment of 40% , and the percentage of those who have received higher education among the labour population from 20 to 50 years old will be 20%. So “going to colleges” will less and less be a problem in China. The central government has decided in its budget that government spending on education will account for 4 per cent of the country’s GDP this year, and this does not only mean larger government budget for universities, but also mean higher expectation of the ordinary families for “going to good colleges” or for better quality of higher education.

In order to solve these problems and to compete with each other for better students and better scholars, university leaders in China are eager to improve their universities’ public images and to increase their appeal

⁵ See the website: <http://www.scidev.net/en/news/chinese-research-is-plentiful-but-not-original.html>.

to prospective students and their parents by talking about the “idea” of the university in general and about the ideas of their own universities in particular on occasions like commencements and freshmen greetings. Their speeches on these occasions, especially those by presidents of prestigious universities, frequently attract wide attentions and incur various comments on mass media and websites.

The growing interest in the idea of the university has both contributed to and been encouraged by the anniversary celebrations widely held by universities all over the country in the last decades. On the occasions when Peking University celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1998, and Tsinghua University celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2011, for example, the ideas and efforts of Cai Yuanpei, the most famous one of presidents of Peking University, and Mei Yiqi, the most famous one of presidents of Tsinghua University, were recalled with great interests and admirations both by university leaders and education officials, on the one hand, and by university professors and education commentators on the other. Most frequently quoted are Cai’s remark that “what is called a university is an institution for higher and deeper learning” (See Yang: 324), and Mei’s remark that “a university is an institution of great learning not for great buildings in it but for great scholars in it.” (See Yang: 353)

During these anniversary celebrations university leaders tend to emphasize the importance of the “mottos” of their universities. For Peking University, for example, the motto is “Patriotism, Advancement, Democracy and Science;” for Tsinghua University, the motto is “Self-discipline and Social Commitment.” For Fudan University, the motto is “Rich in Knowledge and Tenacious of Purpose; Inquiring with Earnestness and Reflecting with Self-practice,” and for East China Normal University, the motto is “Seek Truth and Creativity, Live up to the Name of Teacher.” All these mottos are regarded as expressions of the “spirit” of these universities.

2. CREATIVITY, CHARACTER AND COMMUNITY:

MAJOR ELEMENTS IN THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

The “spirit” of a particular university is related to, but not the same thing as, the “idea of the university.” We should differentiate the constitutive idea of the modern institution of higher education called “university” from the distinctive idea guiding the practices of a particular university such as ECNU. The idea of the university in general, in my view, provides a standard by which we judge the value of the guiding ideas of particular

universities. These two types of “ideas” are very often mixed up; when Huang Daren said that in the 12 years in SYSU when he was its president, he was most proud of the fact that together with his colleagues he had developed some core ideas of the university, and these ideas in my view are important especially because of their relevance to SYSU. These ideas are: “a university is an academic community,” “a university is nothing but its professors,” and “taking good care of our students.” (Huang *et al.*: 7)

The best presentation of the idea of the university, in my view, was given by Meng Xiancheng, the founding president of East China Normal University. In 1932 he published a book with the title of *University Education*, in which he gave a presentation of the idea of a university that is still very valuable even now in my view: “The university is an academic institution of highest level, and this is so not only because as an institution of education it reaches the highest level of them; it is so especially because in the university human beings show their utmost efforts in searching for the true, the good and the beautiful by means of their wisdom, and in promoting the upward development of culture and society by means of what they have achieved thereby.” (Meng: 1)

University is important, according to Meng, because of three ideals embodied in it.

First is the ideal of “creation of Knowledge:” “Conservation of knowledge is important, and the scholars in medieval times have done their best in fulfilling their mission in preserving and sticking to ancient classics. But the totality of the systematic knowledge of modern mankind has suddenly enlarged and grown purely as a result of the scholars’ efforts in discovering and inventing, rather than their conservative and perfunctory efforts. The establishment of the University of Berlin in 1809 is the earliest manifestation of this new ideal.” (Meng: 2)

Second is the ideal of “cultivation of characters:” “A university is a school, and teachers and their students there should have their school-like group life. Teachers and their students are traditionally regarded as the intellectual elites of the society, they are supposed to embody the most beautiful ideal of morality in the society.” (Meng: 3) It is noteworthy that here Meng refers to the tradition of education in China: “Just as what was said by the ancient educator of our nation: ‘In the system of teaching at the Great college, every season had its appropriate subject; and when the pupils withdrew and gave up their lessons (for the day), they were required to continue their study at home [...] Therefore a student of talents and virtue pursues his studies withdrawn in college from all

besides, and devoted to their cultivation, or occupied with them when retired from it, and enjoying himself. Having attained to this he rests quietly in his studies and seeks the company of his teachers; he finds pleasure in his friends, and has all confidence in their course'." (Meng: 3)

The third is the ideal of contribution to the "development of the nation and the community:" "A university's contribution to the society lies in its research and teaching. But there has also been a movement of 'university for the people' in which universities, following the demands of democracy, make efforts to extend their knowledge to the world outside the ivy tower." (Meng: 7)

During the celebration of the 60th anniversary of East China Normal University, these three ideals were summarized into "3Cs": Creativity, Character and Community. Yu Lizhong, ECNU's current president, quoted Meng's words in his keynote speech at the celebration assembly and said that they expressed "not only a commission from our predecessors, but also a call from our times." (Yu 2011)

The discourse of the idea of university in contemporary China can be discussed in more detail with regards to these three "ideals of university."

With regards to the ideal of "creativity," I should mention the debate triggered by a question posed by Qian Xuesen, the founding scientist of China's Space industry, to Wen Jiabao, when the Premier paid a visit to the national scientific hero in 2005: "Why does China produce so many clever people, but so few geniuses?" Shortly after Qian died on October 31, 2009 at the age of 98, 11 professors in Anhui province published an open letter to the Minister of Education Yuan Guireng and the professional educators in general, in which they are appealed to seriously think over the "Qian Xuesen Question." This appeal received wide and enthusiastic responses, including from the Ministry of Education in Beijing.⁶

With regard to the ideal of "character," I should mention the recent efforts in providing a general education in Chinese universities. Since early 1990s there has been a growing movement critical of what is called a "test-oriented education" and in favor of "personality-oriented education," and the efforts from the above and those from the below were then converged into what I would call a "movement of general education" or a "movement of liberal arts education" on university campuses in China. In Fudan University, for example, the curriculum of

⁶ See http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2010-05/05/c_1273985.htm.

general education is composed of six categories of courses, 300 in total according to the plan: literature and history classics and cultural heritage, philosophical wisdom and critical thinking, dialogues among civilizations and the world-wide vision, scientific progresses and the scientific spirit, ecology, environment and the concern for life. Almost all the general education programs would include a course called “Introduction to Philosophy.” When I started to teach this course in 1991, I was probably among the first ones to teach this kind of course in the Mainland China after 1949, when Marxist philosophy started to be regarded as the only possibly true form of philosophy. But now this course is not only part of the standard curriculum at every department of philosophy, but also a popular course provided to non-major students in all major universities.

With regard to the ideal of “community,” I want not only to mention the continuity between the past call to “rescue the nation with science and education” in the first half of the 20th century and the current mission of “reviving the nation with science and education” widely publicized since mid 1990s, but also to emphasize the social and cultural mission of universities and their professors and students. Since the New Culture Movement started in 1915 and resulted in the May 4 Movement in 1919, university professors and students are typically expected both by themselves and by the society at large to become forerunners of the general public, and the university campus is very often regarded as a place for experiments of societal progress at large. In the words of the “motto” of Renmin University, a major part of the university education in China is to produce “Examples to the Citizens and Pillars of the Society.” Considering this dimension of the idea of the university in China, the following remark made by Xie Heping, the president of Sichuan University in his interview with Huang Daren, is of special significance: “I’m always of the view that the most important condition for a school’s deserving the name of a university is it has the spirit of the university and the culture of the university, and the core values of the culture and spirit of the university is the unlimited pursuit for freedom, truth, democracy and justice.” (Huang *et al.*: 254)

It is because of the social and political mission of Chinese universities in this sense that the issue discussed in the next and last section of this paper deserves special attention.

3. PARTY, PRESIDENT AND PROFESSOR: PURSUIT FOR AN INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK CONSISTENT WITH THE IDEA OF UNIVERSITY

When people are talking about the “spirit” or the “idea” of the university, especially when people are reflecting upon the history of prestigious universities like Peking University, Tsinghua University, Nankai University and the university composed of these three universities during the war time, the Southwest United University [xi nan lian da], many of them, especially higher education scholars, journalists and public intellectuals, tend to be highly critical of the current practices and achievements of the Chinese universities not only after 1949 in general, but also Chinese universities at present in particular. But many university leaders expressed their disagreement. Gong Ke, the president of Nankai University, for example, said in his interview with Huang Daren: “When you think of the opportunities that the ordinary people now have got to send their kids to colleges, when you think of the contributions that universities have made to the economic and social progresses of China, when you think of the level of the teaching and scientific research as well as their contributions to the progress of science in the world, and when you think of the national projects of higher education and the conditions for the development of universities themselves, it is hard to understand that some people would say that the universities now are inferior to those in the period of the Republic of China.” (Huang *et al.*: 309) Huang Daren echoed by saying that “in the field of higher education, we do not need ‘to speak nothing without Greek,’ because in today’s China we do not lack great educators, and they have contributed their best to the development of their universities, and to the higher education in China in general. Engaged in a great cause, they represent the main stream of the higher education in China, and they have deep understanding of the development of the higher education.” (Huang *et al.*: 309)

The fact that Chinese university leaders are self-confident about the Chinese higher education, especially about its future if not its current situation, shows that they do not accept the frequently-heard complaining that there is a fundamental contradiction between the idea of the university on the one hand, and the Chinese university system “under which the presidents take over-all responsibility under the leadership of the primary committees of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in higher education institutions,” as prescribed by the article 39 of the Law of Higher Education of the People’s Republic of China, on the other.⁷

I do not think there is no tension between the idea of the university that is basically dated back to Western educators and thinkers like W.

⁷ <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=987>.

Humboldt, Cardinal John Newman, K. Jaspers and J. Habermas, on the one hand, and the law-guaranteed leadership of the CCP in contemporary China, on the other, and neither do I think this tension can be easily resolved. But I want to clear three possible misunderstandings concerning the governance structure of Chinese universities.

Firstly, we should not mistake the system of the “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Party Committee” as the system of “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Secretary of the Party Committee.” The dual leadership system in Chinese universities is not composed of the president of the university and the party secretary of the university, but composed of the university’s president and its party committee, and the party committee can well function in the way the board of trustees function in universities in other parts of the world, i.e. as an agent of collective leadership.

Secondly, we should not mistake the system of “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Party Committee” as the system of “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Standing Commission of the Party Committee.” I emphasize this point because of the importance of the representative leadership as well as the importance of collective leadership in Chinese universities. The leadership of the party committee in Chinese universities embodies the principle of the collective leadership, which means that the party committee, of which the president is almost always one of the most important members, makes any decision on the basis of collective deliberation, and by voting if necessary. But for the sake of efficiency, in most sizable universities the everyday decision-making activities are commissioned by the party committee, whose members are usually around 20 or even more, to a standing commission under it, whose members are usually no more than 10. Since the standing commission is usually composed of the party secretary, two or three deputy secretaries, the president, and four to five of his deputies, its functioning is not based on the principle of representative leadership. That is why in recent years some universities are making experiments to make it possible for the plenary of their party committees not only to supervise more substantially the function of their standing commissions, but also to function by themselves on a more routine basis.

Thirdly, we should not mistake the system of the “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Party Committee” as the system of the “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of a Party Committee that is against the ‘idea of the university’.” It is quite possible,

and in many cases it is a reality, that the party committee of a particular university is very serious about realizing in China an idea of the university that is widely acceptable across national boundaries. This can be clearly seen in the fact that almost all the party secretaries interviewed by Huang Daren agreed that we should give a much more important role to the academic part of the university leadership in Chinese universities. It is because of this consensus that the otherwise politically sensitive call for the so-called “de-administrativization” of higher education management is quite popular in recent years in China.

In addition to pointing out the three possible misunderstandings concerning the Chinese university system of the “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Party Committee,” I want to refer to a remark by Li Yanbao, the former party secretary of Sun Yat-sen University, which explains quite well the rationale behind this system. “The system under which the presidents take over-all responsibility under the leadership of the Party committees is adopted,” said Li, “because it is suitable to the organizational structure of the modern universities with Chinese characteristics, characterized on the one hand by its ‘huge size’ and on the other hand by its double management function of ‘school plus community’.” (Huang *et al.*: 348) Then he explained: “School and community as social groups or organizations belong to two different categories. A ‘school’ is oriented to academic growth, with the higher quality of student education as its goal, therefore it is run mainly by ‘favoring what is best,’ or the so-called ‘policy in favor of elites,’ according to which you have to prefer something to something else, whereas to a community the most important consideration is its stability, with a harmonious community as the goal, so the policy is to pay attention to ‘disadvantaged’ groups, and adhere to the principles of equity, justice and fairness, taking equal accounts of everybody.” (Huang *et al.*: 348) Put in another way, universities in China should pursue both the value of “excellence” and that of “harmony,” and the best institutional arrangement in Chinese universities should make it possible to have an positive interaction between the efforts for both values, rather than to pursue one value at the cost of the other.

Seen from the perspective of a top-down institutional design, according to Li, two problems should be addressed with great efforts. On the one hand, we should appropriately deal with the relation among the three “power systems:” the political power (responsible for what kind of university we want to have), the administrative power (responsible for by what means we run our universities), and the academic power

(responsible for by whom our universities are to be operated). On the other hand, we should appropriately deal with the relation between the two “decision-making systems,” i.e. the system of administrative decision-making and the system of the academic decision-making. Li admits that many problems remain to be solved, such as problems concerning the relationships between the government and the university, between the party committee and the administration, between the president and the party secretary, problems concerning the way the party secretary is elected and appointed, including the way that administrative roles that a party secretary is commissioned by the government such as the university council chairperson, chairperson of the board of trustees or of the board of directors of a university, the way a university president is searched for and appointed, the way the academic committee is constituted and its rights are defined, and problems concerning those affairs that are related to the university charter, especially the specification of the tenet of a university and its basic idea, and so on. But the existence of these problems does not mean that we should definitely in principle give up the system of the “President-Responsibility under the Leadership of the Party Committee.”

It should be noted that a university governance structure that is both in agreement with the idea of the university and applicable to the reality of Chinese society is a goal encouraged by the central government of China as well. In the “Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” promulgated in 2010, for example, it is stated that “All kinds of higher educational institutions should draft their constitutions according to law, act on such constitutions in governance and operation, respect academic freedom and furnish a friendly and relaxed academic environment, and carry out systems for appointment, teaching and work post management in an all-round way. They should establish scientifically assessment frameworks and incentive mechanisms.”⁸ The Ministry of Education in Beijing then encourages individual universities to make experiments in this general direction, and my university is one of the universities that are making experiments in reforming the internal governance structure in order to endow it with a higher level of legitimacy and efficiency.

In conclusion I want to make three points in this paper.

Firstly, in the growing interest in the idea of the university among university leaders and other people we can see that there has been a

⁸ https://www.aei.gov.au/news/newsarchive/2010/documents/china_education_reform_pdf.pdf.

“cultural turn” in Chinese universities during a period in which they were (and still are) undergoing a tremendous growth in material, technical and professional terms. This cultural turn can be regarded as part of what Fei Xiaotong, the most important Chinese sociologist in the 20th century, called “cultural self-awareness” in his last days. And in a sense this turn can also be evidenced by a widely quoted remark by President Hu Jintao on the 100th anniversary celebration of Tsinghua University in last April: “In order to raise the quality of higher education, we must energetically advance the work of cultural transition and cultural creation, and let the higher education play the role of an important vehicle to carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese culture and important sources of ideals and thoughts.”

Secondly, within this cultural turn there have been several versions of “two cultures” debates, concerning not only the relation between the scientific culture and the humanistic culture, but also the relation between the academic culture and the utilitarian (economic and administrative) culture, and the relation between the national culture and the international culture. Considering the fact the whole discourse on the “idea of a university” or “die Idee der Universitaet” was introduced from the West when China entered the modern epoch in the world history under the pressure of the Western powers, the relation between the national or the local dimension and the international or the global dimension of the idea of the university in China deserves special attention.

Thirdly, the idea of the university is important not only because it helps university leaders to run their schools in a more self-reflective way, but also because it makes it possible for all those who care about the higher education of China both to have an immanent critique and to have an immanent justification of it. To those who criticize Chinese universities without proper respect for their historical and cultural conditions, we should pay special attention to the role of the idea of the university in the immanent justification of Chinese universities, and to those who defend Chinese universities without sufficient self-reflection, we should pay special attention to the role of the idea of the university in the immanent critique of Chinese universities.

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