

# **Engagement With Chinese Universities in 2012**

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For the past 5 years, I have had the privilege of serving as an academic administrator within Peking University, China's oldest and most distinguished university. It has been a profoundly gratifying experience for me, an American who speaks no Chinese. I feel truly fortunate to have been given a special view of a remarkable country that is moving rapidly to invest in, and to upgrade its higher education system to international standard.

I want to state clearly at the outset of my remarks that I am an optimist about Chinese higher education. I am especially optimistic about the idea of Western institutions engaging with their Chinese counterparts for mutual academic benefit. But I also think it is important that those who choose to engage this opportunity do so with a clear understanding of what the project will entail.

I will divide my remarks this afternoon into three sections.

First, I will review the essential facts about the development of higher education in China over the past 120 years – the basics that frame the context of engagement.

Second, I will try to describe a sequence of waves of emotion that many Westerners feel wash over them as they begin to do work with Chinese universities. I think that understanding this sequence will help you progress to what I call “the Fourth Wave” – the one that can buoy you forward into a healthy and productive partnership.

And then, finally, I will share some specific pointers that may help your work with China to be maximally satisfying.

### I. A Quick Overview of Chinese Higher Education.

University education in China dates to the end of the nineteenth century, when the Qing Dynasty established the forerunners of today's top universities. These efforts reflected a concerted effort to learn from foreign experience as China recovered from a series of humiliating defeats by colonial powers.

During the first half of the twentieth century, these first universities expanded in significance, notwithstanding substantial social and political turmoil in the larger society. By 1949, 205 universities were in place, of which 49 could be described as comprehensive universities.

In 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the country restructured its universities along Soviet lines. That meant (a) breaking up most of the comprehensive universities, (b) dramatically expanding the number of specialized institutions of higher learning, and (c) slashing instruction in the humanities in order to focus on engineering and technology.

After China concluded in the 1950's that the relationship with the Soviet Union was dysfunctional, some of those Soviet-style features were relaxed. Much more importantly, the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 placed the entire system of higher education into a state of almost-suspended animation.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the modern period of Chinese higher education began. Building upon almost no active foundation, the country has sought to draw inspirational links to the past, while creating a new structure appropriate to modern China.

At a general level, the key features of this modern period have been (i) significant new investment in both mass education and elite education, (ii) a primary focus on the relationship between economic development and higher education, but also some modestly expanding attention to the humanities and social sciences. It also has meant efforts to establish quantitative benchmarks against which to evaluate progress (efforts

that sometimes backfired), an enormous openness to learning from overseas, and a tremendous sense of urgency.

But permit me to take just a few moments to give you a little more detail about how these efforts in the modern period have unfolded.

Many of the processes of disaggregation and specialization that occurred during the 1950's were reversed in the 1990's. For example, a number of schools like Tsinghua University that had become technically specialized institutions were restored to their 100-year-old standing as comprehensive universities.

The 1990's were also a time when the country worked to expand access to higher education. In 1990, fewer than 4% of 18-to-22-year-olds were enrolled in any form of tertiary education. By 2005, however, the number was up to 22%. To be sure, most of this tertiary education is not a true university education, but the expansion is nonetheless exceptional.

The modern period has also been a period of investment in elite education and research. To understand this process, it is necessary to understand the stratified structure of Chinese higher educational institutions. The following numbers are now about 5 years old, but I believe they remain roughly accurate.

Almost 3000 institutions of higher education do not grant government-certified degrees. They include purely private higher education institutions, adult education programs, and so-called short-cycle programs of vocational training.

About 700 institutions are true degree-granting universities, but among them 600 are very local in their orientation. Only 104 are supervised directly by the central government – the Ministry of Education or other Ministries – and, in addition to being the most highly regarded venues for undergraduate education, they are also responsible for the lion's share of graduate education in China.

In 1995, the national government launched two programs of serious investment in upgrading these 104 universities.

The first one was called "Project 211" – "21" for the 21st century and "1" for the 100 top institutions. The goal of the program was to invest in

a focused way in the institutions that would establish national standards for quality and research and build true spires of excellence. Importantly, this investment was described as promoting the country's economic development. Project 211 continues forward, and the investment under it remains significant – about \$500 million US dollars a year.

In May 1998, three years after the launch of Project 211, a second Project was launched – called Project 985. “98” signified the year, and “5” the month of the announcement. The goal of Project 985 was to focus even more narrowly than Project 211 on a handful of institutions that should be catapulted up to international standard. Two institutions – Peking University and Tsinghua University – were tapped as Tier 1 schools, and seven more were tapped as Tier 2 schools for Project 985 support. Later these nine institutions would be named the “C-9 League” in a bow to the Ivy League. In 2003 an additional 30 Tier 3 schools were added to the list of schools receiving Project 985 support.

So last year China invested about 70 billion RMB in Project 985 support to these 39 schools – an average of about 300 million Australian Dollars per school, although the funds were not distributed evenly across all 39.

So that is the intra-national picture of Chinese higher education. But it is also important to recognize China's connection to higher education worldwide. After the Cultural Revolution, China actively encouraged its most talented students to study overseas. Internally there was always some fretfulness about “brain drain,” as many of these students did not return to China after graduation. But that fretfulness was more than offset by a confidence that a sufficient number would return at some point, and that even those who stayed overseas always be part of the “Overseas Chinese” diaspora, a community that can increase China's “soft power” by being welcomed and admired contributors to other nations' development.

Importantly, the phenomenon of Chinese students studying outside China has continued to grow, almost geometrically, since the first students ventured abroad at the end of the 1970's. This academic year it is estimated that 250,000 Chinese students attended universities outside

China. Significantly, 75% of those overseas students were in English-speaking countries: 1/3 in America, 1/6 in the UK, 1/7 in Australia, and 1/8 in Canada.

Nonetheless, five years ago the central government decided to act more directly to bring examples of best practices from foreign universities into China in order to strengthen its home institutions. A key part of that effort was the Recruitment Program of Global Experts, popularly known as the “Thousand Talents Program.” The program is designed to bring as many as 2000 “top-notch scientists and talents” into China over a 5-to-10-year period, especially so-called “Sea Turtles” – native-born Chinese who had gone abroad to study. The Thousand Talents Program was targeted at people who “are able to make breakthroughs in key technologies, develop high-tech industries and lead new research projects.” So far, almost 1500 so-called foreign “talents” have been identified under this program. Importantly, they are not being required to forsake all ties to schools abroad; they are welcome to spend three months a year overseas maintaining those ties, thereby strengthening the bonds between Chinese universities and their overseas counterparts.

## II. The Four Waves of Emotional Engagement With China.

Now I would like to turn to the experience of Westerners who are encountering Chinese universities at this transformative moment in their development. When I speak of “Westerners,” most of my experience has been with Americans, so what I am about to say may not apply fully in Australia. But my few days in this wonderful country have led me to think that in fact you will recognize a great deal about what I describe.

In my experience, as foreign academics learn about developments in China, some of us experience a fairly predictable set of four emotional waves. Not everyone experiences all, or even any, of these ways, but I have seen enough people encounter all of them that I thought it might be helpful to describe them so that if you do go down this path you do not drown before you make it to contented Wave 4.

Wave 1 is what I might call, “Delusional Condescension.” In this phase, the foreigner tends to say things like:

“Well, well, China is a poor, backwards, authoritarian communist country that teaches by rote, whereas I come from a noble, enlightened, democratic capitalist country with the best universities in the world – places where we all swim freely in the invigorating waters of academic freedom. We might consider helping a little bit – either in the charitable spirit of *noblesse oblige*, or perhaps to pick up a little bit of useful revenue – but only if we can be persuaded that we will not somehow be contaminated by the exercise.”

In my experience, the Chinese are spectacularly adept at graciously pretending they do not notice this attitude, and then efficiently moving on to more appropriate intellectual partners.

Fortunately, we see less and less delusional condescension these days. More and more, foreigners seem ready to jump straight into Wave 2.

Wave 2 is what I might call, “Shock and Awe.” In this phase, the foreigner is simply blown away by China’s scale and pace of improvement and tends to say things like:

“Can you believe the incredible labs they have? That infrastructure is better than ours! I just heard that next year China will confer more Ph.D.’s in engineering than the US, and 7 times more bachelors degrees! Next year China will publish as many articles in peer reviewed journals as the U.S.! Surely it is only a matter of months before we see Chinese soldiers surrounding the White House!”

Foreigners who are in the midst of Wave 2 seem to be caught in a kind of limbo. On the one hand, they are attracted to this new China, so different from the impression they grew up with. On the other hand, they can become so giddy that they are prone to being victimized by Wave 3.

Wave 3 is what I might call, “Disappointment, Even Betrayal.” In this phase, the foreigner tends to say things like:

“Goodness gracious, those diplomas aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on. The students are never asked to think for themselves. Even worse, the faculty have no sense of academic integrity, so most of the so-called publications are worthless – that’s why the Relative Citation Index for published Chinese

scholarship is only 0.5. I suppose that's what you get when you give tenure without any serious outside review."

Needless to say, foreigners hit by Wave 3 feel a sense of disillusionment whose intensity is directly proportional to the giddiness that they felt in Wave 2. Unfortunately, some of them want to throw up their hands and retreat from engagement, just when they are on the threshold of Wave 4.

Wave 4 is what I might call, "Patient, But Critical Admiration." And those foreigners who reach it are the most likely to build strong, sustainable relationships. The voice of this person is the voice of a balanced realist:

"China's glass is half full and the glass is half empty. In thirty years, China's universities have come an astonishing distance, but they still have a long way to go before they teach or do research at international levels. China's university leaders are not deluded about their strengths and weaknesses, and they are eager to work with strong, realistic counterparts. If you are careful to choose the right Chinese partner, it is possible to do very high quality collaborative work together."

The challenge is how best to make it to Wave 4, and to build that kind of high quality collaborative relationship with the right Chinese partner.

### III. Pointers for Engagement.

Suppose you are responsible for deciding whether to go forward with a China relationship. What should you keep in mind as you evaluate the possibility? Here are my pointers – three general ones, and ten more that pertain to the specific matter of east-west cross-cultural collaboration.

Start small. A venture in China should not be part of your "core portfolio" of academic ventures. You should instead evaluate it as a high risk, potentially high return, addition to your basket of "alternatives." If it does not go well, you need to be able to cut your losses, and that means managing the scale of the project carefully.

The partner more than the project. You should learn everything imaginable about your Chinese partner. It is important to be sure the partner is a "status peer." If the partner is perceived to be much more prestigious than you, they may not commit the energy and resources you will

need if the project is to succeed. If the partner is perceived to be much less prestigious than you, others in China may not respect your judgment.

Academic, not economic. It should be absolutely clear to everyone why cooperation will serve the academic missions of both you and your Chinese partner. If that is not the case, you are setting yourself up for failure.

Those are my general pointers. Permit me now to conclude with nine more specific pointers about the cross-cultural dimensions of a project like this:

Value the learning. Know that it may be important to walk away from the first possible project after you have done your due diligence. That will be psychologically easier if you value the exploratory process as a special opportunity for you to learn how to work in a cross-cultural collaboration with a Chinese partner. If you don't think the learning will have intrinsic value, I recommend you not even start down the path.

Properly calibrate the scale of cultural differences. The proper measure is this. Cultural differences between Chinese and Australians are substantial enough to lead to frequent misunderstandings. At the same time, cultural differences between Chinese and Australians are not so substantial as to prevent strong, productive, trusting partnerships.

Include a Chinese team member. Make sure that you have a Chinese person as a trusted member of your team. Ideally it should be someone who has lived on the mainland during the past 20 years. Without such a team member, you will be flying in the dark..

Everyone should stay themselves. The point is not for you to act Chinese or for your Chinese partner to act Australian. The point is rather for you each to be able to understand the other in a spirit of sympathetic engagement. You need to reach the point where you laugh, not cry, about your differences.

For example, be honest and direct in revealing what is really important to you, but expect your partner to be cautious and indirect in revealing what is really important to him or her. It is good for all involved to appreciate how natural these differences are.

Maintain a low equilibrium. Try your best not to get too excited if things look good. Even more importantly, and try your best not to get upset or angry when things go badly.

Expect skepticism. Even if your Chinese partner is the one who brought the idea to you, expect that partner will be deeply skeptical about your motives at first. The general belief in China is that westerners see the country mostly as a “market opportunity.” It will take time to get past that.

Pay no attention to flattery. Your Chinese counterpart will flatter you early and often. The speaker will overstate his or her true feelings about you. Understand that the speaker is not trying to trick or manipulate you. He or she has simply been taught since childhood that flattery is simply “good manners” and failing to flatter is to insult.

Hurry up and wait. Be prepared for long, inexplicable delays. Then be prepared for equally inexplicable demands that you act at breakneck speed.

Laugh often. This kind of cross-cultural partnership cannot be created overnight. Be patient. Know that you will face ups and downs. Consider the venture a unique opportunity to experience, in a new and deeper way, the remarkable tragicomedy of life.