The Dream Is Over
Simon Marginson

Published by University of California Press

Marginson, Simon.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63413

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2274529
Will science and higher education in East Asia equal or overtake that of the United States, or even the United States and Europe together? Much is said about state authority, university autonomy, and academic freedom in East Asia, particularly China, and the implications for creativity. This is not a simple problem. China is not like Soviet Russia was in higher education and science. Kishore Mahbubani observes: “Although China is still a somewhat politically closed society, it is a closed society with an open mind.”

The universities welcome visitors and learn freely from abroad. They publish in the global literature. Stereotyping claims that East Asian classrooms are inherently didactic, and critical thinking is absent, are not confirmed by research. Given the growth of high-citation papers in the sciences, it is difficult to argue that East Asian science in general lacks critical thought or creativity, though recurring interventions by China’s officials in what should be academic peer decisions about research are a serious problem (one that is not confined to China, or to East Asia). The evolution of higher education in China is more top-down than in America, but as noted in the previous chapter, universities sustain a devolved authority within the comprehensive Sinic state. At the same time, for good or ill, the central state retains the scope to intervene in individual institutions as it sees fit.

In Singapore and Japan, the university president is selected by the governing council of the university, not the state. Nevertheless, in all East Asian systems, normal operations depend on a high degree of synchrony between institutions and the state. This can be conservatizing, particularly in relation to disciplines that touch the work of government, though from time to time, state intervention may also contribute to creative output by lifting the performance bar, encouraging
internationalization measures, and shaking up conservative academic cultures. In China, government appoints the two university leaders, president and party secretary. Both are invited to regular party schools. Leading research universities are never far from national purposes. This is not the California Idea based on arms-length autonomy and civil society-like mechanisms of coordination. It is closer to the regulated autonomy of neoliberal systems with principal-agent relations, but with active potential for direct intervention. Yet Chinese universities exercise local autonomy and have scope for strategy, including considerable freedom in their day-to-day dealings with American and other non-Chinese universities. There are cases of institutions advised by government to merge that have refused to do so, citing their preference for their own, different development plan, and doing so without penalty. From time to time, the state media carries sharp criticisms of policy by university presidents. Three times when the central government intervenes unexpectedly in local affairs. It is difficult to discern a permanent, clear-cut pattern. Both local autonomy and central agency are active.

However, there are two larger difficulties facing the post-Confucian model. First, education and research in North America and Western Europe benefit from an open zone of free conversation between academic research, public discussion, and the take-up of new ideas in industry and government. This zone is smaller and less stable in East Asian countries. Civil traditions are weaker, and intermediate organizations, public but not governmental, such as think tanks and foundations, are thinner than in the United States. In China the state limits the Internet as an independent space, and media are constrained. Here the post-Confucian model is both a strength and a weakness. On one hand, the universities are understood as a semiautonomous branch of state and, at best, new data and ideas readily move into government and can have real impact in policy and its implementation. Some state officials have PhDs. They value intelligent advice. On the other hand, in the absence of universities with a broad public role and adequate means of dissemination, including unimpeded access to old and new media, ideas that are not immediately potent in government and acceptable to it can sink from sight.

The second problem is the episodic repression of individual scholars, especially humanist critics of the regime. Here again the issue is more ambiguous than it may first appear. In China, more so than Singapore or Japan, feisty political debate is normal to the interior cultures of state institutions (as often the case in dynastic regimes). There is routine criticism of party decisions, sometimes of individual leaders and ministers, inside leading research universities. These universities are part of the state. Criticism behind closed doors is accepted and often welcome, part of the process of debating policy options and generating new ideas for government, a within-state version of what Jürgen Habermas calls the “public sphere,” an ongoing site of reflexivity on the periphery of the decision-making core. However, when similar criticisms are made in open public forums in China, that is...
a different matter. What was seen as constructive criticism of particular policies inside the state becomes a destructive public attack on the general authority of the state. In Chinese tradition, sharp public criticism by persons with the authority of university professors has always been seen as significant, a high-stakes challenge to the regime.

Outspoken public dissent by Chinese scholars is not read in terms of academic freedom but in terms of a second tradition in China, that of heroic challenges to the state by single scholars on the grounds that the regime has lost the mandate of heaven, the right to govern. Historically, such scholars often paid a severe price for making the challenge.⁵ Thus what appears as China’s heavy-handed management of individual scholarly dissidents rests not only on the Leninist instinct for political monopoly but on the longstanding beliefs, going back to the Han, that what scholars say is important, that the proper conduct of the scholar is to advance the public good and orderly social conduct, and that scholars criticize the ruler only when they believe that the regime must be overthrown. This tradition has some resonance across the whole Chinese civilizational zone. Even in multiparty Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, public academic critics are less strident and carry more weight than in the United States (where public dissent by faculty is freely tolerated and largely ignored). East Asian professors tend to be supportive of the state and consensual in public values. Hence while networked discussion on the Internet has changed the terms of politics all over the world, the Internet’s ease of trivial criticism and its quicksilver messages and data flows are particularly challenging for China. Free Internet is at odds with the state’s long supervision of political conduct, as part of its duty to social order, and the Internet’s style of conversation is at odds with the traditional gravity of political matters.

On the other hand, the embrace of the Internet in South Korea shows that its normal operations can be compatible with East Asian society without fracturing the flexibility of state-maintained order and the maintenance of East Asian family and social values.

In Western terms, jailing academic critics for what they say in public is suppression of academic freedom. This is consistent with the definition of academic freedom as negative freedom, freedom from constraint (usually understood as constraint by the state). No scholars in any country in the world want to be told by government what they can say. Chinese scholars are not different in that respect. However, in China academic freedom is also seen in another way. Academic freedom is understood in positive terms. In this practice of academic freedom, scholars enjoy strong traditional authority and a formative responsibility not only to their discipline but as models of personal conduct. This positive notion of academic freedom is empowering and attractive for professors and would not be set aside lightly.⁶ The coexistence of the two traditions that affect scholarly conduct—the tradition of positive academic freedom, which obliges the scholar to speak his
or her mind in forums in which public authority is not affected, and the other tradition about high-stakes challenges to the regime—makes it difficult to find a middle path in which critical noise is normalized. This robs China of some creative possibilities. But the point is that in China, dissident scholars are an issue not of academic freedom but of political conduct. What is at stake is the space for self-determining forms of individuality and the evolution of forms of social order and public space. China is slowly liberalizing. In the long run, that trend seems unstoppable. Urbanization, the higher education of the middle classes, and the internationalization of the universities are part of the process of liberalization. This will eventually lead to the development of new customs. China is not there yet.

The party-state in China, many of whose leaders had a cosmopolitan higher education and know the United States, has set this liberalization in train itself, with unknown consequences. Nevertheless, from time to time, persons within the leadership hesitate and balk, part of the longer-term pattern of oscillation between centralized liberalization and centralized control. The regime has yet to find a way to consistently accommodate open criticism. As Qiang Zha puts it: “As long as one doesn’t challenge the legitimacy or capacity of the CPC to rule China, a scholar will be free to follow the normal routines of scholarly and social life.” Nevertheless, the problem of public order is always threatening to spill out from under the blanket of state order. “Ordinary Chinese people now do assume the liberty to discuss the wrongs of the CPC in the past six decades.” China is unlikely to move soon towards a post-dynasty contestable, multiparty polity. If this happened nearly overnight in Gorbachev fashion, it would be a recipe for chaos and national decline, which nobody in China wants. It may never happen. It is not the only possible pathway for a liberalizing system. There is scope for the evolution of a more transparent party-state, a more open public order, and richer public discourse within the terms of dynastic rule, in which the management of criticism is decentralized, and ultimately reduced or evacuated, without precipitating social fragmentation. There is a lot of water yet to flow under this bridge. Relationships between universities in China and universities in the United States are among the factors that will shape the future inside and outside China.

Robert Rhoads and Katalin Szelenyi argue that “Just as we have used our sharpest university minds to advance science and technology, we must do the same in terms of advancing global social relations.” If there is to be a stable world society and polity capable of handling the major challenges ahead, it is likely that it will be a hybrid between Anglo-American traditions and Chinese civilizational traditions in political culture and social organization. At the global level, each bloc is too weighty to be decisively subordinated to the other. In the evolution of a productive hybrid, universities will be crucial in drawing together policy makers and intellectuals, combining projects, sustaining long-term cross-border conversations, and fostering bilingual concepts and ideas. This suggests that part of the
internationalization strategy in American higher education must be the building of a broad highway for two-way exchange with universities in East Asia, especially but not only in China.

Many research universities in the United States have developed programs focused on East Asia. UC San Diego’s Graduate School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, founded in 1986, was an early and successful example. American initiatives within China itself are numerous and include joint programs and purpose-built branch campuses and international study centers. U.S. universities have been more active in China than those from Canada, the United Kingdom, and most of Europe. The data on research paper collaborations show that only Germany and Australia have pursued relations in China with a similar energy, while the United States is well ahead of other non-Asian countries in dealings with South Korea and Taiwan. Australia is stronger than the United States in Singapore. Nevertheless, and although American higher education is well known in China, Chinese and East Asian higher education remain largely unknown within the mainstream of U.S. higher education. Flows of personnel are predominantly one-way, primarily Asian students coming to the United States. The flow of ideas and influence is almost entirely in the reverse direction. Relations continues to verge on the neocolonial, despite the fact that the East Asian systems now together constitute one of the world’s three principal zones of higher education and science and deserve greater respect. Certain factors are holding back the evolution of fuller relations.

AMERICANS ABROAD

One factor is the small scale of American study abroad in Asia. In 2012–13 a total of 289,408 U.S. students engaged in study abroad, but only 3 percent stayed for the full year, with 60 percent spending just summer or eight weeks or less. This was just over one-third of the number of incoming international students, 819,664, who stayed in the United States for a full year. Of the total study-abroad group, whether involved in short or long stays, only 14,413 (5 percent) went to China, 5,758 to Japan, and 3,042 to dynamic South Korea. Much the largest group went to the United Kingdom, followed by Italy, Spain, and France in Western Europe. The 14,413 American students who spent time in China in 2012–13 compares with the 235,597 Chinese students who enrolled to study for a year in the United States. To encourage American students to travel to East Asia in sufficient numbers, it is necessary to subsidize them until critical mass is reached and the flow is normalized.

Second, as noted, there is the same asymmetry in language learning. Chinese students all learn to read and write in English and many have some conversational English. Less than 0.4 percent of American students learn Chinese at university. Surveys by the Modern Language Association show that in the year of the Master
Plan in 1960, 16.2 percent of all students in higher education were enrolled in a foreign language. In 2013 that proportion stood at only 8.1 percent, the lowest level since 1998. The majority of students studying a language other than English were learning Spanish. Of the 1,522,070 students studying a language, 61,055 (4.0 percent) were learning Chinese, an increase of just 1,179 since 2009, and 12,299 were learning Korean. The lack of bilingual fluency limits not only the potentials of future American graduates but also the present capability of faculty and executives. While many people in China’s higher education are familiar with America, China below first-level tourist contact is a mystery to most of their American counterparts.

Third, as these problems suggest—and despite the exchange schemes, joint programs, and branch campuses—contact with East Asia remains largely peripheral to the core business of American institutions. Few universities have taken decisive steps to bring East Asia into the mainstream of American university life in the way that East Asian universities have profoundly internationalized themselves by drawing on the strengths of the American university tradition. One exception is the global strategy of New York University (NYU). NYU students spend at least a semester in each of NYU’s three campus sites, in New York, Abu Dhabi, and Shanghai. NYU Shanghai is in partnership with East China Normal University, the final member of the 985 group in China and as such one of the top thirty-nine research universities in the country. NYU Shanghai entails deep engagement. It brings the formation of future leaders in China together with a parallel group of students from the United States, while also embedding NYU in the Chinese higher education system at a senior level. In this kind of prolonged encounter, many students will begin to develop language skills and knowledge of culture, society, and the economy in China. Faculty and administrators will live in China for long periods and will also develop language competence.

GLOBAL SYMMETRY

It is not easy for any university to take a step as bold as NYU has done—the kind of initiative that involves setting aside customary habits and ways of seeing. Edward Said notes: “We are all taught to venerate our nations and admire our traditions: we are taught to pursue their interests with toughness and disregard for other societies.” John Dewey remarks that “the notion of an inherent universality in the associative force at once breaks against the obvious fact of a plurality of states, each localized, with its boundaries, limitations, its indifference and even hostility to other states.” People normally look at the world through the lens of “methodological nationalism,” which is the idea that “the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world,” and that one’s own nation-state should color the lens. It takes a leap of the imagination to understand all culture
as multiple and relational, to understand one’s own society as just another culture, albeit one’s own, and to see life as others see it.

The United States is entering a world in which it will no longer be overwhelmingly dominant, though for the foreseeable future it will remain the strongest power. In learning how to navigate the new balance of power, American universities will make a crucial contribution. It is a large effort to understand life from more than one viewpoint at the same time, for Americans to cease to be nothing but American, becoming more plural in their thinking while still being American. However, in the longer run that capacity for what Amartya Sen calls “transpositional” thinking is essential if we are to grapple with the challenges of a world in which diverse histories come together in a common space, and people can build on the achievements of each other’s societies without setting aside the virtues of their own. As Peter Singer states: “Our newly interdependent global society, with its remarkable possibilities for linking people around the planet, gives us the material basis for a new ethic.” Higher education is a place where people learn to think differently and where new thinking can flourish. This is one of the principal reasons for the existence of universities—to help their nations to innovate as conditions change. In the future American universities will be crucial to the larger kind of worldwide thinking that will be needed.

NYU’s framing of learning in multiple locations creates favorable conditions for the development of graduates with the capability of multiple, global thinking. The most important feature of the NYU experiment is that in it, Chinese and American students, and American and Chinese faculty, meet each other on equal terms. The suggestion that East Asian higher education and research might have something to teach American higher education, as well learning from America, would have carried little weight in 1960. The question for Clark Kerr’s generation was how American educational soft power could help to install a dynamic of self-improvement in higher education and science in East Asia. The world has changed. Clark Kerr’s mission has succeeded in East Asia in remarkably short time. As a result the Eagle and the Dragon now have something to offer each other. They also need to find ways of living together and to educate their societies accordingly.

In the worldwide radiation of the California Idea, Chinese universities have already drawn from America its practices of access, the multiversity, the system forms, and global science. They have yet to fully explore the creative benefits of free critical discussion and of the public discursive role of universities and to develop a rounded approach to the nonscience disciplines as well as the physical sciences. Perhaps American higher education could take from China and Korea ideas about how to strengthen student engagement in the STEM disciplines in settings in which law and finance are all too alluring and the benefits of uniting education in the home with the school and college. And there are the gains to be
made by setting plain hard work, grit, and mental exercise above habits of party school “networking” and grade inflation.

Dewey also makes the point that it is an illusion to suppose that there is “a model pattern which makes a state a good or a true state” or that we can meaningfully rank states according to how close they are to our own. Though it is a mark of strong organic traditions that they have a sense of certainty about themselves and see no need to open their horizons to elements which have no history in their own affairs, in reality no way of life has all the answers to the needs of the human condition. In the encounter between higher education in the Sinic and American traditions, East Asian countries might consider how American universities work the broad public space around them to engage dynamically and creatively with economy, society, and government, and how higher education is central in the advance not just of human capabilities and of technological applications, but of self-determining freedoms. English-speaking countries might think about their present difficulties in surmounting the great issues such as climate change, the fact that people in those societies seem to work together properly only in wartime or depression, and the way that East Asian states, societies, and higher education systems routinely take a longer-term view than do societies in the English-speaking world. Anglo-Americans might also consider how it is that East Asian higher education seems to be able to meet public and private objectives simultaneously—rather than defining private good as something to be achieved separately from the good of all, the public good.

Clark Kerr and the 1960s California Idea harmonized individual needs and the collective good in a society that then found it comfortable to combine the two. This is something that has been lost. In working towards a new American synergy between private interest and public goods, a synergy that is essential for the health of any society, the high points in other traditions can help to illuminate the way.