

World-Class Universities in China's Heroic Past

Rui Yang

Abstract

China's early modern higher education institutions achieved tremendously in terms of integrating Chinese and Western ideas of higher learning. This proves that it is possible, albeit extremely difficult, for Chinese educators to adapt a Western model of the university to the Chinese situation. As a revealing facet of modern Chinese history, this achievement has great implications for university development today and deserves much more research.

Recent decades have seen China's intensifying aspiration to catapult its premier universities to the forefront of global rankings. Precisely a century ago, newly established higher education institutions in China had already gained a global reputation as world-class. Although early modern times were disastrous for China as a nation, they were a golden age for higher education modernization. Unlike the Western idea of a university, which developed as practical experience accumulated, the Chinese understanding of modern universities predated practice and rapidly achieved maturity during the Late Qing reforms (1901–1912). Its high achievement in learning from the West was never surpassed later—neither by the Communist mainland, nor by nationalist Taiwan, nor by colonial Hong Kong.

Missionary Colleges

Starting from the early twentieth century, missionary colleges were established in China and quickly reached an international level. Confronting China's millennia-old culture and sophisticated intellectual traditions, they pursued cultural conquest with utmost vehemence and served as a conduit for introducing core Western values and knowledge. Tengchow College, in 1882, was the earliest Christian higher education institution. By the early 1940s, 13 Protestant and three Roman Catholic institutions were established in China. Set up by the Methodist Episcopal Church South in 1901 and seen as the first fully Western-style university in China, Soochow University played a significant role in projecting American influence into China's earliest stage of modern higher education development. St. John's University is also known for having introduced an American model of higher education in China.

Exerting a historical influence on the early development of Chinese higher education, missionary colleges set examples in educational patterns within essential dimensions, including the purposes and ideals of a university. Both the Chinese students who studied and lived at the colleges and the foreign educators who taught and administered there, reached a considerably high level of sophistication of cultural hybridization of Chinese and Western intellectual traditions. Some became renowned centers of research on China, including Yenching University, Shantung Christian University, and St. John's University. Through incorporating Chinese traditions into an otherwise basically Western curriculum, they developed a global vision of scholarship and a unique educational model.

Graduates from missionary colleges became pillars of the nation in the first half of the twentieth century. Owing to their academic excellence, many colleges gained a reputation at a world-class level and were acknowledged internationally. They developed many of China's first academic programs, including anthropology, economics, journalism, law, and sociology. Yenching University was ranked as one of the two best universities in all of Asia by an international review carried out in 1928 by the University of California, allowing its graduates to be directly eligible for graduate studies in the United States. They conducted cutting-edge research, in fields such as agriculture at the University of Nanking, cultural history at Shantung Christian University, folklore, folk art, and music at Fukien Christian University, and museum studies at the West China Union University.

Higher Education Institutions Founded by the Chinese

By 1895, when China lost the war to Japan, establishing modern higher education institutions to learn from the West became even more imperative to rebuilding the nation. New colleges were set up by official and gentry elites alike to offer training in Western science and technology. During the period from 1862 to 1898, the reformists founded

44 new institutions to offer, for the first time in China, courses on Western learning, including foreign languages, natural sciences, and practical technologies. The first was the Tongwen Guan in 1862, to train interpreters in Western languages. A new department of mathematics and astronomy was added in 1866 to teach Western science. It was merged into the newly established Imperial Capital University in 1902.

One such institution with a historical niche was the Imperial Tientsin University in 1895. Patterned after Harvard and Yale and later remodeled on the Japanese Imperial University, it was China's first "perfectly justifiable" modern university in which it was possible to learn Western knowledge in a comprehensive and systematic manner. It was also China's first government-run modern university to fully adopt a Western university education model to train engineers in a way that would look familiar today. With a constitution clearly stating its mission, vision, and foundation—the first one in China—it demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of a university in all its essential dimensions.

China's modern higher education institutions were established to absorb Western learning in order to respond to pressing needs of national unity and economic progress required to withstand an increasingly aggressive imperialistic threat. Successfully and comprehensively introducing Western learning into China, they trained professionals to support a disaster-ridden society, and conducted pioneering research in all disciplines. When the flames of battle raged in most parts of China, it is amazing to see how they steadfastly maintained their high academic standards. Joseph Needham hailed Zhejiang University as the "Cambridge of the East." Even more legendary was the Southwest Associated University, which produced a remarkable quality of scholarship across disciplines.

Noteworthy Historical Experience

Responding to the sharpening crisis facing the nation, China's modern higher education institutions aimed to judiciously combine learning from Western traditions and the ideological, intellectual, cultural, and educational specificity of the Chinese. Their development in early modern times was characterized most prominently by these endeavors, with sophistication at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels in managing relations between China and the West in education, scholarship, and university operations. These achievements were reached soon after the Western concept of a university was introduced into China. They set high bars even for today's practice.

Due to the lack of a strong central government, China's heroic past was a time of turmoil and chaos, yet marked by a real effort to establish a "university" in the sense of its defining values of autonomy and academic freedom. The inconvenient truth is that such achievements were rarely exceeded over the ensuing half century—neither in Mainland China, nor in Taiwan, nor in Hong Kong. Intermittent spasms and outpourings of resources do not guarantee sustainability. Neither finance nor ideology is the root cause here: The crux is cultural. China has much to learn from its own history, especially from modern times, when early encounters between Chinese and Western traditions occurred. ▲

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Rui Yang is professor and associate dean (research) in the Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. Email: yangrui@hku.hk.