Critical Issues Confronting China: 
Who Will Lead? 
China and the World of Universities in the 21st Century 
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After serving Harvard University as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences during 2002-2006, William C. Kirby, Spangler Family Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and T. M. Chang Professor of China Studies in Harvard’s History Department, has been engaged in a series of case studies of universities throughout the world. He is deeply interested in the changing fortunes over the long run of once leading universities.

Whereas about eight out of ten top universities in the world in the 19th century and early 20th century were German, indisputably setting the global standards for higher education, today rarely any German university makes the top 50 in world ranking. Ebbs and flows over time have made Kirby, an eminent historian of modern Chinese history, question if American universities will maintain their leadership position of the 20th century in the 21st century? Or will China surpass the U.S. to become the front runner in higher education? What are the chances of China’s success in this regard?

Kirby began his examination of these issues with the University of Berlin. It was established in 1810 in the midst of the Prussian Reform Movement, which was spurred by a major military defeat by Napoleon’s France in 1806. Prussia was determined to make up in intellectual strength for what it lost in military might. Against this background, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), a liberal philosopher, founded the University with a vision that universities should not only be engaged in mere transmission of knowledge, but also in bringing it up to date and applying it to the real world. Thus, the University integrated intensive research with teaching, while emphasizing the centrality of its faculty and ensuring academic freedom for all. This freedom implied a considerable autonomy from the state. The University aimed at educating students to become “whole persons,” i.e., not necessarily to become technicians through drill exercises, but to become responsible citizens with independent minds as well as problem solvers able to address real world challenges. Some American universities, such as Johns Hopkins University and Stanford University, emulated this German model and embraced the spirit of academic freedom.

Yet in the 20th century, the prestige of the University of Berlin withered with the
country’s political transitions. With the rise of the Nazi Party, some 20,000 books from the University library were burned at the Opernplatz in 1933. The separation of Berlin into East and West Berlin in the Cold War also divided the University of Berlin into Humboldt University in the east and the Free University of Berlin in the west. While the East German regime limited the freedoms of the faculty to teach and conduct research at Humboldt University, the Free University of Berlin perhaps had too much freedom. Widespread student unrest in the 1960s and early 70s made the Free University of Berlin almost ungovernable.

Meanwhile, Harvard University made significant strides under President Charles William Eliot, the university’s longest-serving president, at the helm from 1869 -1909, who transformed Harvard into a true research university on the German model. Harvard was further strengthened under the tenure of President James Bryant Conant (1933-1953), who aggressively expanded Harvard’s land holdings and physical plant, as well as the number of fields of study and degrees granted.

For American public universities, the landscape varied. The University of California (UC) used to represent the best of American public higher education in the mid-20th century. But as California’s public financing dwindled in recent decades, the University’s reliance on state funds required an overall retrenching mode. This backdrop, combined with dysfunctional internal governance, made even the flagships of the UC system experience various degrees of decline.

Kirby deemed this decline of American public universities as “not good news” for private universities like Harvard, because it means less vigorous competition for the core resources of academia: faculty and students. A bright spot in this otherwise gloomy picture is Duke University, a rising private research university with an expanded endowment and a sleek Kunshan campus outside of Shanghai.

Kirby then turned to two leading Chinese universities as examples of China’s rapid catching-up with the West. Peking University was established in 1898, with an original campus designed by an American architecture firm. Its president, Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培, 1917-1927), was a German-trained Chinese philosopher, who insisted on intellectual and institutional autonomy from the state, and believed that the purpose of education is not for students to become officials or to become rich, but to become learned people with a broad world view. With this vision, he brought into the University a diverse faculty, including such notable communists as Li Dazhao (李大钊) and Chen Duxiu (陈独秀). He also recruited Hu Shih (胡适, 1891-1962), a leading intellectual of the New Cultural Movement in the 1920s and a student of John Dewey at Columbia University. Hu came to Harvard’s 300th anniversary celebration in 1936 and received
an honorary degree. He later served as President of Peking University from 1946-48.

More American-oriented in origin than Peking University was Tsinghua University. It was founded in 1911 to send bright young Chinese students to America for education., The Schwarzman Scholars program now at Tsinghua, modeled on the Rhodes scholarships aims to bring the best and brightest students around the world to China. Papers produced by Tsinghua’s faculty and researchers in science and engineering are frequently cited. Tsinghua’s overall ranking among the world’s universities is in the teens.

Kirby stated that these top Chinese universities already have worldwide recognition among the leaders of higher education. In science and engineering, some Chinese universities have eclipsed Harvard University by a number of measures. Harvard, Stanford University, Yale University, Chicago University, NYU, and Duke University all have their respective centers or campuses in China.

Kirby identified two advantages that China has over other countries in the area of higher education: more financial resources and greater human capital. Tsinghua’s annual budget is more than $4 billion, not much less than Harvard’s $5-billion operating budget for this year. China’s large and excellent human capital is not only due to its large population pool and its meritocratic examination system, but also to its increased ability to recruit worldwide, through offering attractive research funds and platforms, Chinese nationals who have been highly trained in developed countries.

Will unparalleled financial and human resources, combined with a breathtaking ambition, propel Chinese universities to global leadership in higher education? Kirby was uncertain because of China’s increasingly restricted academic freedom, which inhibits free and open inquiry on campuses. Censoring faculty’s syllabi and requiring students to attend regimented classes on “Marxism” (where little of Marx is taught) are counterproductive to China’s goal of building world-class universities, he argued. Two recent presidents of Peking University were dismissed, having appeared too liberal in their treatment of student and faculty activism. The university’s current Party Secretary has a background in national security and the judicial system.

Worried that students emerging from this increasingly illiberal educational system would be either cynics or opportunists, Kirby also took into account counterbalancing factors at work. The Yuanpei College at the heart of Peking University and the School of Economics and Management at Tsinghua University all aim to give students broader liberal arts education.

“To forecast leadership [in any field down the road] is necessarily a comparative enterprise.” Kirby said. He implied that the story is not over and the jury is still out. He
concurred that the new President of Harvard, Lawrence Bacow, recognizing the increasing importance of China, had rightly decided to visit that country on his first international trip after his inauguration in March.