

China's approach toward a liberal studies university model for the mid-21st Century **Gerard Postiglione, The University of Hong Kong**

Thirty-five years after Deng Xiaoping launched the economic reform and opening to the outside world, China finds itself inching closer to becoming the world's largest economy (Jacques 2009, Beardson 2013, Telegraph 2014). To sustain the pace of economic growth, higher education is increasingly expected to play a more powerful role in China's rise (Postiglione 2011, Kirby 2014). It already has the largest system of higher education, as well as more scientific publications and a larger R&D budget than any other country except the USA (University World News 2007, Guardian 2011, Royal Society 2011). It also bodes well for China's universities that secondary school students in the largest city outperformed their counterparts in the 60 countries involved in the Program for International Student Assessment of mathematics and science achievement (OECD 2013).

The higher education system is expected to elevate its flagships into the ranks of the world class universities, uplift creativity and innovation in science and technology, produce a technically skilled workforce to support an upgrade of production capacity, and address issues that could potentially threaten social stability, such as graduate unemployment, unequal access to university due to socio-economic and ethnic disparities. The role of liberal arts and science education in this set of expectations is highly relevant.

This paper argues that China is hamstrung in addressing these expectations and concerns by a lack of consensus about how to approach the global movement for liberal studies. Specifically, this is nested in the dilemma and precarious balance about how to promote internationalization, while protecting national sovereignty, and gradually seceding institutional autonomy to universities. While it can handle any two, it does not easily managing all three at once. This puts it at a disadvantage in competing with other university models, including that of its own Hong Kong SAR.

Moreover, symptoms of this problem appear in different sectors of higher education. The problem is typified by the increase in overseas campuses in China that cater to the growing middle class but have little impact on the rest of the higher education system. It is typified by the limitations of the South China University of Science and Technology in its experimental effort to be an autonomous university and offer a reformed governance model to the higher education system. It is typified by the shrinking number of students from poor rural areas in top tier universities. It is typified by the growing number of university students trying to find a job by the time they graduate.

This paper argues that a deeper global integration of the China university model with liberal studies and science education would make China's university system far more globally influential but would require governance reform. With one of the youngest cohorts of academic staff of any system of higher education, and a national demographic profile that will tilt toward the elderly, the time to undertake governance reform in higher education is limited.