Professor Elizabeth Perry

“Chinese Higher Education: A New Great Leap Forward?”
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In the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, China under Premier Zhu Rongji adopted a new policy in 1999 to significantly expand university enrollment as a way of unleashing private spending and boosting GDP, while improving the education level of the younger generation. As a result of this policy and subsequent mergers of smaller schools, mega universities have emerged with multiple campuses, glittering new buildings and cutting-edge technology. Today about 30 percent of China’s college-age cohort is enrolled in universities, whereas the equivalent number in 1979 was only one percent. This ratio is projected to grow to 40 percent by 2020. Is this boom another Chinese “Great Leap Forward”?

Professor Elizabeth Perry of Harvard University’s Government Department analyzes the similarities and differences between this contemporary expansion and Mao’s Great Leap Forward of the late 1950s. Perry also delineates methods of Party control over the system of higher education amidst China’s quest to build world-class universities. Finally, she calls for a very different kind of Great Leap Forward in which Chinese universities could and should lead the world in overcoming social inequalities.

Both now and in the 1950s, the Chinese state is driven by a keen sense of international competition. Whereas China under Chairman Mao tried to expand industrial production to catch up with the Soviet Union, the PRC now aspires to build world-class universities to contribute to a knowledge economy through major investment in initiatives like Project 985 and Project 221. In both periods, higher education reform is driven by an economic motivation; state investment in universities is intended to stimulate economic growth. There is also a mentality of "the bigger the better", pursuing ambitious quantitative targets as quickly as possible. The resulting statistics are sometimes fictitious and often misleading. But unlike Mao’s Great Leap Forward, characterized by autarky, today there is a massive exchange of talent between China and the outside world: hundreds of thousands of foreign students and scholars are studying in Chinese universities, and many more Chinese are studying abroad, partly through generous state funding from the China Scholarship Council.

This spring President Xi Jinping called for building world-class universities with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese leadership hopes to foster economically beneficial intellectual innovation without endangering the Communist Party's survival. Perry notes that the campuses of Chinese universities have been uncharacteristically quiet since 1989, whereas students in Hong Kong and Taiwan have recently been very vocal about political issues. Why? The Party's control over universities in the mainland has tightened in a number of ways. One is through expansion of the system of "guidance counselors" (fudaoyuan). Chinese administrators sometimes liken the guidance counselors to Harvard's resident tutors, but Perry points to a key difference: unlike Harvard's resident tutors, guidance counselors are expected to promote politically correct
thought and behavior.

Another way of intensifying the Party's control is through use of modern technology, such as asking all Communist Youth League (CYL) members to download a special cell phone app to receive and disseminate CYL approved messages. In addition, local Party propaganda departments have set up journalism schools jointly with renowned universities to encourage a more compliant media. Faculty research funding in the humanities and social sciences is also controlled by the propaganda departments, which establish thematic priorities in line with central ideology.

Perry criticizes all universities around the world, including Harvard, for paying undue attention to the world rankings. In this global competition, China may enjoy a comparative advantage due to its powerful party-state, while Harvard President Drew Faust laments the "unraveling partnership" between the U.S. federal government and American universities. In the common pursuit of higher rankings determined by universal metrics, universities around the globe try to do similar things, resulting in standardization and homogenization among previously diverse institutions of higher education.

According to Perry, institutional diversity – encompassing private research universities, large state universities, small liberal arts colleges, as well as a variety of vocational schools and community colleges – has traditionally been a key strength of American higher education. But global competition and convergence threatens the American model, too. Perry notes that in a situation where we do not know what is actually the best model to promote higher learning, institutional and curricular diversity is critically important.

In Perry's view, the greatest challenge facing higher education is not whether attain or retain top billing in the absurd system of global rankings, nor whether they remain wellsprings of political stability, or even whether they will be engines of economic competitiveness, but rather whether our universities will serve to alleviate or exacerbate social inequality. Despite the massification of Chinese higher education, regional and class disparities in the quality, access, and cost of higher education have increased.

The inclusion of higher education under GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) of the WTO, which China joined in 2001, indicates that education is considered a global market commodity rather than a right of citizenship. Instead of a public good provided by governments for the betterment of society, higher education is increasingly a private good, disproportionately available to the wealthy and the well connected. It is in this respect of overcoming social disparities and bucking the global trend of commercialization of higher education that Perry thinks China could and should lead the world in a new Great Leap Forward.