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Sino-US Relations: Universities entering the age of strategic competition

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Abstract

This paper highlights selected historical and contemporary circumstances that situate US-China university cooperation during a significant downturn in Sino-US relations.

Keywords: Sino-US relations, decoupling, bifurcated academy, cooperation, responsibility

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This paper provides a brief introduction to Sino-US relations in higher education amid the threat of decoupling. There is hardly a greater issue with implications for international higher education than the potential decoupling of the academic research enterprises of China and the US. Tensions over trade and technology kicked off an age of strategic competition that is affecting cooperation between the world's two largest economies. The deterioration in Sino-American relations is unaffordable at a time when the current pandemic, a global economic slowdown, an impending climate crisis, and the likelihood of future pandemics all demand a strengthening of cooperation across the global academy. When science and truth take a back seat to domestic politics, international cooperation can spiral downward. Universities remain crucial institutions for peace and international security. Chinese and US universities have an enormous responsibility in the midst of Sino-US tensions. A unipolar world will not return but decoupling is a race to the bottom.

University systems are increasing prominent in sustaining worldwide development.¹ The largest and most influential systems, China and the United States, respectively, are intertwined and interdependent.² Knowledge knows no boundaries and the academic research enterprise depends upon open and cross-border communication of ideas. Universities take on more functions as they become internationalized. They provide new discoveries and innovations, as well as expertise and skills. They prepare future leaders and strengthen democracy. They enrich the value systems of national and ethnic cultures, help people learn more about themselves and others, and through their research endeavours such as vaccines, they help protect the world from disease.

A modern university has aspects of a national character but its structure and operation is universal and grounded in the sciences and humanities.³ Universities set standards of merit and use impersonal criteria to establish scientific facts. They

¹ Altbach, Philip A. 2016. "The Logic of Mass Higher Education," *Global Perspectives on Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 29-47.

² Zhou Ji. 2006. *Higher Education in China*. Pearson; Bastedo, Michael, Philip A. Altbach, and Patricia A. Gumpert (eds.). 2016. *American Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

³ Wang, Qi, Ying Cheng and Niancai Liu (eds.) 2013. *Building World Class Universities: Different Approaches to a Shared Goal*. Boston: Sense Publishers.

favour organized scepticism and question anything that resembles dogma. They create new knowledge with the provision of an infrastructure that includes technology, laboratories, and research libraries. They guarantee free and open communication of ideas and allow for criticism through open and public exchanges. They promote free inquiry that constantly questions orthodoxies. They use peer-review systems for arguments to be tested by the best in the field. They uphold a commitment to the common good and a more enlightened public. Their governance is shared among key stakeholders but they ensure that academics retain a significant voice in running the institution of which they are a part. They promote intellectual advancement so that the next academic generation can emerge better than the previous one. They maintain intellectual vitality by trying to attract the best minds without borders to the academic profession, and they recognize a diversity of types of intelligences. Universities succeed if they have these core values, integrate high quality research with high quality teaching, engage in knowledge exchanges, secure grants and contracts, raises revenue, elicit support from alumni, attract high-quality students, and select the right leaders.

The search for truth is a key virtue of universities, though not always attained. Even if universities foster open discourse and promote themselves as a marketplace of ideas, they can also gravitate toward intellectual orthodoxy. Even in the natural sciences, there is sometimes a culture of resistance to new ideas. Occasionally, new and radical ideas are unacknowledged and orthodoxy tends to hold forth. Intellectual courage in universities is at times in short supply. In his 1918 lecture, "Science as a Vocation," German sociologist Max Weber noted, "The primary task of a useful teacher is to teach his students to recognize 'inconvenient' facts—I mean facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions. And for every party opinion there are facts that are extremely inconvenient, for my own opinion no less than for others."⁴ In certain respects, Weber's dictum applies to universities in both the US and China.

⁴ Gerth, Hans and C. Wright Mills. 1952 and 1991. *From Max Weber*. Routledge Press. (1991 volume; 129-155).

Globalization and mass higher education have increased the scope of international understanding. International academic and educational exchanges not only help colleges and universities to raise revenue, they also add new perspectives to the learning process, create long-term social networks, and deepen academic and research cooperation. Amid the mutual accusations and threats of economic nationalism and technological independence, the decoupling of China and the United States would be in no one's interest. This paper examines selected aspects of universities in China and United States at a time when there is an urgent need for them to be more collaborative in addressing global problems.⁵

Decades of successful cooperation

There are historical and contemporary circumstances that situate US-China university cooperation, (too many to be covered in detail, so a quick review will have to suffice and set the stage). Yun Wing's study at Yale in 1854, the first group of students sent in 1872, the establishment of Western missionary colleges, the Boxer Indemnity, and the flagship universities with roots in US-China relations during the Republican Period are some of those cited in the early history of US-China university cooperation. Of greater significance to the current era is the 1978 phone call at 3:00 am Washington time to President Jimmy Carter by his science adviser in Beijing, as Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping demanded quick approval to send several hundred Chinese to study at US universities.⁶

Since then, diplomatic relations between the US and China have steadily improved, though not without periodic strains over economic, political and military issues. Nevertheless, economic interdependence and finely tuned statecraft ensured that cool heads prevailed in times of stress. Economic progress for both countries continued for several decades but changes were inevitable.⁷ Over that time, study in the United States by Chinese students rose steadily, and a small but steady stream

⁵ See also Li, Cheng (ed.) 2005. *Bridging Minds Across the Pacific: US-China Educational Exchanges, 1978-2003*; Johnstone, Christopher J, and Ji, Lili (eds). 2018. *The Rise of US-China International Cooperation in Higher Education: Views from the Field*. Boston: Brill Press.

⁶ Vogel, Ezra. 2013. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁷ Overholt, William H. 2018. *China's Crisis of Success*. Cambridge University Press.

of US students and scholars went to China. The student uprising of the late 1980s slowed cooperation until Deng's Southern tour of 1992 reopened the economy and China regained most favoured nation trading status in 2001. Before long, educational and academic exchanges grew rapidly. As a member of the professoriate in Hong Kong, I witnessed a period of rapid acceleration in academic exchanges.⁸

The late 1990s and early 2000s ushered in a lively atmosphere of academic exchange --- an intellectual renaissance among China scholars, according to Ezra Vogel, professor of Asian studies at Harvard University.⁹ Chinese higher education experienced unprecedented reform, including massification, consolidation, decentralization, marketization, privatization, and Sino-foreign campuses.¹⁰ This was also a turning point for China's top tier universities. On May, 4, 1998 when President Jiang Zemin announced to an audience that included the presidents of leading universities from around the world that China would build world-class universities.¹¹ At first, changes were largely quantitative and organizational. But enrolments grew rapidly, the authority over colleges and universities shifted from various ministries to provincial governments. University campuses were transformed overnight. New buildings, science laboratories, schools of business management, and high tech classrooms suddenly appeared. More professors had their own offices and many began to drive themselves from their new off-campus homes to their offices. Many universities acquired bank loans and were generously funded if they were included in the 211 or 985 excellence initiatives. Richard Levin, former president of Yale University and a frequent visitor to China, was probably thinking about China and the US when he said: "As never before in their long history, universities have become

⁸ In 1992, I organized a conference that resulted in Postiglione, G. A. and Wing On Lee (eds.) 1995. *Social Change and Educational Development: Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*. HKU Centre of Asian Studies.

⁹ Vogel, Ezra. 2003. *Washington Post*. December 5.

¹⁰ Postiglione, Gerard. A. 2005. Higher education in China: Perils and promises for a new century. *Harvard China Review*, Spring, 138-43; Postiglione, G. A. (2011). *Higher education: University challenge*, *China Economic Quarterly*, 15(2), 22-25.

¹¹ Postiglione, G. A. 2015. Research universities for national rejuvenation and global influence: China's search for a balanced model, *Higher Education*, 70(2), 235-250. As a visiting professor at Peking University, I attended the 100th Anniversary at the Great Hall of the People.

instruments of national competition, as well as institutions of peace.”¹² China’s top tier universities began to appear in greater numbers in each of the three international ranking indices.¹³

While China moved to mass higher education, significant changes were also taking place in US higher education, but of a different kind. There was a new emphasis on research about the quality and efficiency of college and university teaching, creating a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning. New ideas about learning pointed at the social construction of knowledge. New fields emerged, including women studies and ethnic and racial studies. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted the first international survey of the academic profession in 1993, shortly after it published *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990), a re-conceptualization of faculty roles and rewards.¹⁴ For Director Ernest Boyer, Carnegie scholarship came to mean more than research and publications. It also included the scholarship of teaching and service. Many colleges and universities set up centers for teaching and learning. The turn of the Century saw about a third of the curriculum consisting of liberal studies or general studies. The list of soft skills was broadened to include communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, technology and information literacy, recognition of diversity, multicultural and intercultural competencies, civic, global, and environmental responsibility, teamwork and group cooperation, ethics and moral reasoning, and pluralistic modes of inquiry in the mathematics and natural sciences. As income inequality grew in the United States, tuition fees at Ivy League universities skyrocketed. They increased by 1,400 percent from 1980 to 2020. Ivy League attendance became a status symbol for wealthy families, and less accessible by

¹² Levin, Richard. 2006. Universities Branch Out From their student bodies to their research practices: universities are becoming more global. *Newsweek International*. Aug 21-

28. https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Public_Affairs/PresidentLevinArticle.pdf

¹³ I witnessed the rise in global visibility first-hand as a speaker over a decade at the biannual events of the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), one of the three most cited global rankings agencies. See: The 8th International Conference on World Class Universities. <http://www.shanghairanking.com/wcu/speakers.jsp>

¹⁴ Boyer, Ernest. 1990. *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Princeton, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Postiglione, G. A. 1997. The Hong Kong academic profession in a period of profound change. In P. Altbach, (ed.), *The academic profession: Studies of 14 countries*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer, Ernest L.; Philip G. Altbach and Mary Jean Whitelaw. 1994. *The Academic Profession: An International Perspective*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. I was part of the team for the international survey of the academic profession.

students from poor households. International students, especially those from China, became essential for many US colleges and universities.¹⁵ State governments reduced their contribution to the annual recurrent expenditures of universities. Only a minority of junior academics could find tenure track appointments. For-profit colleges took advantage of these changes and the issue of public trust became more salient.¹⁶

Despite the different higher education trends in China and the US, joint ventures in higher education followed on the heels of joint business ventures. Vice premier Li Lanqing took note of the community college movement in the US as China was expanding higher education and the Education Minister Chen Zhili mentioned community colleges in her annual work report.¹⁷ In 2003, China promulgated the Law on Sino-foreign Cooperation in the Running of Educational Institutions.¹⁸ It opened the door to several Sino-US campuses. Even earlier, Johns Hopkins University had a program with Nanjing University. New York University and Duke University partnered with East China Normal University and Wuhan University, respectively, to establish campuses in China. When compared to their home campuses, they experienced more reporting requirements in China. They also retained enough institutional autonomy and academic freedom to retain their US based academic degree accreditation. As the numbers of Sino-foreign degree programs grew, the Ministry of Education made efforts to manage them, check financial accountability, evaluate quality, and close some of them.¹⁹

After the 2008 Wall Street debacle and the global recession that followed, the Obama administration announced a long awaited “100,000 Strong” initiative

¹⁵ NYU Professor Scott Galloway quoted on Amanpour and Co. 2020.

¹⁶ Levin, Arthur (Ed.). 1993. *Higher Learning in America 1980-2000*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Cole, Jonathan R. Cole 2006. *Toward a More Perfect University*. New York: Public Affairs.

¹⁷ Li Lanqing. 2004. *Education for 1.3 Billion*. Pearson Education. In 2000-01, as a senior consultant to the Ford Foundation in Beijing my portfolio included a US community college initiative.

¹⁸ Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education. 2003. <http://www.crs.jsj.edu.cn/news/index/3>

¹⁹ 林金辉。2017.中外合作办学：提质增效，服务大局，增强能力。厦门大学出版社。As a member of an advisory committee on Sino-foreign cooperation in running educational institutions, I witnessed the growth of thousands of Sino-foreign ventures.

designed to significantly increase the number of US students studying in China. It was launched officially in 2010 in Beijing. The original target was reached, but enrolments dwindled since hitting a high of 14,887 in the 2011-12 academic year.²⁰ Within three years, the figure had dipped to 12,803, according to the Institute for International Education, while the number of Chinese studying in the United States rose to a half a million.

In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative. After it withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the new administration in Washington skipped the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2019, and did not support China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. As trade and intellectual property disagreements intensified and geo-strategic issues arose in the South China Sea, decades of US-China cooperation in higher education operated in a new atmosphere, one that would eventually affect study visas and cooperation in academic research enterprises in both countries.

The post-Cold War economic isomorphism gave birth to a world divided into neoliberal capitalism and political capitalism.²¹ The two capitalisms created their own elites who prospered, often together, through joint ventures in business, commerce and industry. Since 2016, there has been a threat to undo 40 years of Sino-US progress with leaders in both countries immersed in a similar domestic discourse about returning their countries to greatness.

²⁰ It transitioned into an independent, non-profit organization The Ford Foundation took a major role. It was rebranded as the US-China Strong Foundation:<https://asia.nikkei.com/Location/Rest-of-the-World/North-America/American-students-lose-interest-in-China-studies>; Wang, Huiyao (2012) *Globalizing China: The Influence, Strategies and Successes of Chinese*, Emerald Publishers. Wang, Huiyao, Miao, Lu (2019) *China's Domestic and International Migration Development*. Springer Press. Statistics from the Ministry of Education showed there were 36.99 million students in 2016, accounting for one-fifth of the world's total. GEER increased from 42.7 percent in 2016 from 30 percent in 2012. More than 660,000 Chinese students studied in 2018, about 50,000 more than in 2017, according to the Ministry of Education. About 370,000 student in US in 2019 from China. The number of US students studying in China totaled about 11,600 as of 2018, down more than 2 percent compared with the year before. Feb 12, 2020

²¹ Milanovic, Branko.2020. The Clash of Capitalisms: The Real Fight for the Global Economic Future. *Foreign Affairs*. 99:1:10-21.

The leaders of universities in both countries recognize the importance of sustaining relations. In the changing atmosphere of Sino-US relations, many joined the September 27th 2017 US-China University Presidents Forum: Relations Over the Next 50 Years held at Columbia University. At the meeting, Vice Premier Liu Yandong said China and the United States should enhance exchanges to build stronger ties. "We hope that universities and think tanks of the two countries will carry out strategic and forward-looking research and jointly cultivate high-quality talents so as to make positive suggestions for the development of China-US relations," he said.²² At the same Forum, Henry Kissinger, the architect of US-China relations that led to normalization in 1979, said: "the only alternative to positive relations between Washington and Beijing is global destruction." Two decades after the end of the Cold War, there is talk of a new cold war. These views give pause to the leaders of top tier universities in both countries about their role in advancing and safeguarding the global common good.

Avoiding a binary world and a bifurcated academy

Solutions to sustainable development goals require close Sino–US cooperation, especially in higher education. During the global pandemic, voices railed against the downward spiral and deterioration in cooperation. In a letter addressed to the US president and members of Congress, a group of a hundred US academics, foreign policy experts and business leaders expressed their "concerns about the well-being of all people in China, the United States, and every country on Earth," They cited the need for all nations to work together to defeat the pandemic. The unpredictability of the China-US relationship does little to strengthen academic and scientific interdependency that can address the pandemic, as well as climate change, health care, and inequality.²³

Sino-US friction may become a long-term norm of neo-globalization. If so, it will not only be a drag on the world's economic development. It is also likely to show

²² Columbia University Programs (2017) U.S. - China University Presidents Forum: Relations over the Next Fifty Years. Retrieved February 6, 2018 from <http://universityprograms.columbia.edu/us-%E2%80%93-china-university-presidents-forum-relations-over-next-fifty-years>.

²³ Opinion, 2019, *Washington Post*, July 3.

changes in student and scholar visa approvals, educational exchanges, revenue streams and international research cooperation.²⁴ Of greater concern has been a change in the atmosphere on university campuses with the development of a mood of suspicion and mistrust. In an unstable world order, academic staff may be pressured to line up on one side or the other, leading to a binary world and a bifurcated academy. University leaders have a greater responsibility than ever to ensure that their institutions can attract the best minds without borders and guarantee the free exchange of ideas to enrich their intellectual vitality.²⁵

²⁴ **Application rates:** <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200736.shtml>;

Educational exchanges: <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/05/us-ends-exchange-programs-with-china-calling-them-propaganda.html>;

Visa approvals: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200975.shtml>;

Revenue streams: [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00451-](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00451-z#:~:text=The%20University%20of%20California%2C%20Berkeley,the%20company%20on%2028%20January)

[z#:~:text=The%20University%20of%20California%2C%20Berkeley,the%20company%20on%2028%20January](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00451-z#:~:text=The%20University%20of%20California%2C%20Berkeley,the%20company%20on%2028%20January)

Research collaboration: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02015-y>

²⁵ Postiglione, G.A. (2020) Expanding Higher Education: China's Precarious Balance. *The China Quarterly*. 244. 920-941. Doi: 10.1017/S0305741020000995