China's universities and Western academic models

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Abstract. China's Cultural Revolution began in the universities where Mao was able to gain strong support for his vision of radical societal transformation by a focus on two issues: the need to uproot persisting traditional values and patterns, summed up under "the four olds," and a call to "shatter the shackles of all foreign dogmas" which was clearly directed at prominent Soviet influences in Chinese higher education. This essay briefly summarizes the main characteristics of China's traditional scholarly institutions, then considers the western academic models introduced by foreign missionaries, those selected and implemented by Chinese modernizers and finally the Soviet academic model adopted by Chinese Communist leaders in the fifties. The historical lessons drawn from this overview provide a context for some critical reflection on the ways in which western academic models are once again affecting reforms underway in Chinese higher education since 1978.

Chinese universities and Western imperialism

In October of 1949 Mao Zedong and his comrades-in-arms in the Liberation struggle stood at Beijing's Gate of Heavenly Peace and declared that the Chinese people had stood up. They were now to take their destiny into their own hands and build a socialist nation after a century of humiliation and betrayal from the imperialist powers, both the West and Japan. Seventeen years later at the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution Mao stood again at the same spot facing a million young Red Guards from China's universities and secondary schools. He encouraged them to "dare to rebel" and contributed his own large character poster to the collection they had pasted on university walls: "Bombard the headquarters!" This young generation was invited to take into their own hands a cultural revolution which, it was suggested, had not been achieved by either the political revolution of 1949 or the economic revolution of industrialization and agricultural collectivization of the 1950s.

The events of the turbulent ten years that followed are well known on one level, yet on another they remain a mystery never satisfactorily explained. China was probably the only nation in Asia, perhaps in the world, which dared to dismantle its whole modern education system, in hopes of establishing completely new institutions suited to an independent socialist nation. All universities were effectively closed for five years, except as centers of revolutionary activism and short-term training. When they reopened in 1970–71,
they were administered by "three-in-one revolutionary committees" made up of worker-peasant representatives, soldiers and revolutionary students and teachers. All entering students had to have behind them some years of practical experience working in the countryside or in factories. They were recommended by their work units on the basis of revolutionary spirit as much as intellectual potential. Study programs had been completely overhauled with the narrow specialization of an earlier period replaced by broader programs directly linked to local and regional industrial, agricultural and social conditions. In place of the unified teaching plans and textbooks which had been developed with Soviet assistance during the fifties and centrally regulated through the Ministry of Education, local mineographed teaching materials prepared by students and faculty were constantly adapted to changing needs. One of the models for reform was the Anti-Japanese Resistance University (Kangda) which had trained military cadres in Yan'an during the Liberation struggle, another was the workers' college attached to the Shanghai Machine Tools Plant which was upheld as a model for integrating higher learning with industrial production.1

The rhetoric of these years convinced many foreign observers that China had succeeded in creating a truly egalitarian higher education system which embodied the central values of socialism and could be a model for other Third World countries. The reality, however, has been progressively revealed by the Chinese themselves since 1978. The loss of personnel educated at a higher level for scientific and industrial leadership over the period is staggering. In 1965, 164,212 students were recruited to enter the regular higher education system and for the next four years there were to be no more regular recruits – a loss of over 650,000 young persons who might have received a higher education if the Cultural Revolution had not taken place. Recruits for the three years from 1970 to 1972, inclusive, totalled 217,841, that is about 275,000 fewer than the recruiting level of 1965.2 It would thus not be difficult to demonstrate the loss of one million university-educated young people as a result of the upheavals of these years. Many of those who did get into universities between 1970 and 1976 used the "back doors" provided by cadre relatives, so ensuring the virtual exclusion not only of genuine worker-peasant youth but also of young people from intellectual and professional families.3 To this has to be added the destruction of scientific and laboratory equipment, the desecration of libraries and the demoralization of higher intellectuals who were forced to do manual labor for long periods of time in remote areas. These is no accurate count of the loss of life due to conditions of virtual civil war, or of the share of university intellectuals in this toll.

In an attempt to explain the Cultural Revolution, the "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party" (1981) 4 has placed the blame squarely on the aging Mao Zedong and the infamous Gang of Four, who used his prestige to their own power-hungry ends. This admission fits well with