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The internationalization of faculty life in China

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This article examines one of China's top universities – Renmin University – and changes in faculty life linked to internationalization and the push to build world-class universities. Employing academic culture as a theoretical lens and case-study methodology, the authors highlight several significant changes, as described in semi-structured interviews with 27 Renmin faculty members. Some changes discussed include increasing reliance on international standards of scholarship, greater emphasis on faculty acquiring international experience, increased collaborations with foreign scholars and organizations, and the adoption of various pedagogical and curricular facets associated with Western universities. Serious attention is given to concerns raised by several Renmin faculty members apprehensive of certain forms of internationalization and concerned about the likelihood of Chinese universities becoming colonized by Western norms and methodologies.

Keywords: Chinese university reform; internationalization; faculty life; academic culture; globalization

Introduction

With increased financial support for its top universities through highly funded national initiatives such as Projects 211 and 985, the Chinese Ministry of Education seeks to elevate the operations and status of its universities to world-class standing. Project 211 was launched in 1995 to provide additional support for China's top 100 universities with the goal of advancing their overall educational capacity and international competitiveness. This includes strengthening management systems, research capacity, and key disciplines, including those contributing directly to the advance of science, technology, and culture. Project 985, initiated in 1998, focuses primarily on a smaller subset of the nation's top universities (about 40) and seeks to elevate them to world-class status, particularly in terms of research, teaching, and international engagement. These policies combine with national massification initiatives to create an academic revolution of sorts in China, the pace and scale of which calls to mind the dramatic transformation of US universities following World War II, documented by Jencks and Riesman (1969) in their classic work *The Academic Revolution*. For scholars of global higher education, the contemporary Chinese university offers an exciting laboratory for studying the impact of reform initiatives on key institutional actors such as faculty.

Internationalization is deeply implicated in the quest by the Chinese government to build world-class universities. Cutting-edge academic science demands international

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engagement, a reality clearly recognized by Chinese officials and evidenced by the nation's educational policies in the past decade or so. The realities of globalization have firmly re-situated the contemporary university as an international enterprise, tied to global markets of students, staffing, technologies, and ideas. This reality was reinforced at the 2010 Going Global conference hosted in London, where the keynote speaker Simon Marginson (2010) argued that today's world-class universities have moved beyond Kerr's (1963) vision of the multiversity: "The university with multiple constituencies that did everything, has given way to the Global Research University or GRU. The GRU is the multiversity, plus more research, much more mobility, global systems and ranking."

Given the national push by the Chinese government to build world-class universities as well as broader global impulses influencing higher education in China, the goal of this paper is to better understand the impact of such dynamic forces on the working lives of professors at one of China's top universities – Renmin University of China (RUC), also known as "The People's University" and colloquially as "Ren Da". As one of the nation's very best universities, Renmin has been a major recipient of both Project 211 and 985 funds. Additionally, former Renmin President Ji Baocheng made the elevation of Renmin to world-class standing his primary goal during his presidency beginning in 2000; this goal is captured in President Ji's three-fold vision: "da shi, da lou, da qi", which is literally translated as "big masters, big buildings, big environment", but perhaps is best understood as building a great faculty, improving facilities, and embracing a broad vision. Consequently, the basic question we seek to address in this paper may be expressed in the following manner: With efforts underway at Renmin to advance the university to world-class status, how is faculty life changing? More specifically, in what ways is the internationalization of faculty life evidenced? Our focus is primarily on possible changes during the first decade of the twenty-first century, given that both Projects 211 and 985 were initially implemented during the latter part of the final decade of the twentieth century.

Reform of Chinese universities and changes in faculty life

The Chinese university has undergone a series of major reforms since their reopening at the end of the Cultural Revolution (Cheng, 1986; Hayhoe, 1989, 1995; Huang, 2005). In many ways, the present reform initiatives are an extension and intensification of the Open Door initiatives pushed by Deng Xiaoping. A system once steeped in the values and norms of the Russian university model is rapidly giving way to university ideals grounded in nations such as Germany, the UK, and the US.

In addition to increased openness towards the West, China's expanding role as a global economic leader also affects its universities in unique and important ways. Growing ties between universities and the world economy have contributed to the marketization and commodification of higher education with numerous scholars discussing and debating the significance and benefits of such a trend (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Peters & Besley, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Rhoads & Liu, 2009; Rhoads & Torres, 2006; Rhoads, Wagoner, & Ryan, 2009).

In terms of the scholarship on Chinese higher education reform, Mok (2003, 2005) has contributed significantly to capturing the vastness and complexity of the most recent reform processes as well as their connection to the broader global context. Mok (2002) noted that a key facet of higher education reform in China involves a move towards decentralization; others have examined this trend, while also exploring the massification of Chinese higher education (D.Y. Chen, 2004; Cheng, 1995; Pretorius & Xue, 2003;

Yang, 2004). Massification reflects widespread social pressure from the world's most populous society increasingly in need of educated workers capable of operating in ever diversifying and global businesses (Cheng, 1999; Huang, 2003; Mok, 2003; Yang, 2004). Thus, decentralization often comes with both a social charge to better serve the nation's needs, but often with little to modest financial support from Beijing, shifting the burden of educational cost – to local and provincial sources (Mok, 2000, 2001). The current funding structure is particularly challenging for those universities not among the top 100 or so, rendering them ineligible for Project 211 funds, while also fuelling widespread institutional pursuit of higher status and ranking within the Chinese higher education system. Furthermore, changes in the nature of higher education funding, combined with policy changes enabling the rise of people-run, non-governmental tertiary institutions (known as *minban* schools), has given rise to what some scholars describe as the privatization of higher education in China (Cheng, 1999; Mok, 2005).

Key to understanding contemporary efforts to reform China's universities is the importance that the national government places on advancing world-class universities. At the centre of such a push is the importance of elevating academic research. The connection between world-class standing as a university and academic research is made clear in Altbach's (2009) discussion of research universities in developing countries: "Research is increasingly competitive, with researchers and universities rushing to present results and patent or license potentially useful discoveries or inventions. Science, in short, has become a 'high-stakes' and intensely competitive international endeavor" (p. 21). Altbach went on to add: "Scientific globalization means that participants are linked to the norms of the disciplines of scholarship that are established by the leaders of research, located in the major universities in the United States and other Western nations" (p. 21). Hence, a focus on advancing world-class universities implies to some extent linking various faculty norms to international scholarly communities and their accepted practices.

Twenty-first century university reform in China has produced a variety of changes related to how the academic profession is practised and the related evolving norms of academic culture. For example, X. Chen (2003) noted: "The introduction of market mechanisms has brought about great academic freedom, attention to quality, and transparency of promotions in the academic profession, but the old forces of central planning and official interference are still at work. The Chinese academic profession faces the challenge of deciding what to keep and what to discard from its traditions, and what to adopt and modify from the world trends of modernity" (p. 107). X. Chen went on to argue that increased marketization has resulted in a greater focus on improving the quality of the Chinese professoriate, in part by elevating standards of performance. This latter change in academic norms is reinforced by Yan's (2010) findings that faculty recruitment and promotion increasingly place greater emphasis on qualifications and performance. Yan (2010) also reported that egalitarian approaches to determining faculty salaries are being replaced by more performance-based methodologies. Additionally, and supported by findings from Rhoads and Liang (2006), the traditional socialist *danwei* (workers' unit or collective) is giving way to forms of academic life and culture more influenced by marketization.

In terms of internationalization as a force acting on academic life and culture, Mohrman, Geng, and Wang (2011) pointed out that it is one of several important changes in Chinese higher education, although their discussion was limited to highlighting Chinese students going abroad and Chinese universities increasingly serving as hosts of foreign students. They also alluded to other facets of internationalization, noting the growing pressure on faculty to publish journal articles, especially in "those [journals]

appearing in international indices” (p. 93). Other scholars have studied job satisfaction among faculty members, but the findings are somewhat mixed in this area (Lu, 2005; Zhao, Zhu, & Kuang, 2007).

Although China’s higher education reform efforts reflect numerous broad global trends, we contend that changes in China may be best examined and understood in a localized context, as Rhoads and Liang (2006) did in the case of a university in southern China. Here our position is consistent with that of Luke and Luke (2000), who argued that globalization is best studied as an interactive process grounded in the localized experiences and expressions of local actors. They argued for the need to resist the tendency to define globalization as a one-directional (north to south or west to east) deterministic form of domination. Consequently, we see the need to examine more closely the impact of higher education reform at the local level, through the lived experiences of key institutional actors – namely, faculty members.

Methodology: exploring academic culture

The goal of this paper is to better understand the working lives of faculty at Renmin University, given the context of broad national and international pressures to fundamentally alter the basic structures, policies, and practices of Chinese universities. To more fully comprehend the ways in which the working lives of faculty may be changing demands attention to the details of their daily lives and lived experiences. To pursue such a goal, we turn to a long-standing line of inquiry and theorizing best captured by the phrase “academic culture”.

Academic culture intersects in important ways with the idea of organizations as cultures – meaning that organizations, like societies, often reveal unique patterns of behaviour, consistent with commonly accepted norms, values, and attitudes. Key organizational theorists such as Morgan (1986), Ouchi and Wilkins (1985), and Smircich (1983) advanced organizational culture as a theoretical lens, but its roots in the study of higher education can be traced back to the early work of Snow (1959) and his classic *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, wherein he delineated normative differences among faculty working in the sciences versus those working in the humanities. For Snow, the “hard” quality of science was reflected in the stability (hardness) of the general theories and facts brought to bear on scientific concerns, while the humanities was termed “soft” because theories and opinions were often challenged and overturned (they were on soft ground, so to speak). Biglan (1973a, 1973b) later built on Snow’s original idea of the two cultures, adding additional layers of complexity to the framework by including pure versus applied and life versus nonlife systems, thus creating a multidimensional model for considering the nature of scholarly work.

Scholars such as Clark (1970, 1972) took up the idea of academic culture, pushing matters a step further by suggesting that universities, as unique organizations, reveal observable patterns reflected in common norms, values, and beliefs. Understanding the complexities of university life necessitated understanding academic culture. For Clark (1987a, 1987b), and Becher (1987, 1989) as well, this required a focus on faculty, given their key role in shaping the norms, values, and attitudes of particular colleges and universities. Others have followed the path largely paved by Snow and Clark, including Tierney (1988a, 1988b), as well as Tierney and Rhoads (1993), with the latter two scholars furthering this line of inquiry by examining faculty socialization as a cultural process. To better understand the cultural complexities of academic life, many scholars working in this area tend to adopt methodologies consistent with the interpretive tradition in social

science. Case study methodology is particularly well-suited for examining the cultural facets of the professoriate.

Case study

Case study methodology, as Yin noted, is “an empirical inquiry that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (1989, p. 23). To strengthen the power of a case study, Arnold (1970) advised social scientists to identify key dimensions of a study in advance and then select sites that might best highlight such dimensions. Arnold referred to this process as dimensional sampling. In this study, we selected Renmin University for several reasons, some of which relate to key dimensions of the study. First, it is one of China’s top universities and is included as a target university in both Projects 211 and 985. In nearly every ranking we examined, Renmin consistently appeared as a top university (often among the top 10) in China and is especially well-known for its humanities and social science programmes. Second, Renmin plays a critical role in Chinese society, having been founded by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1937 to train communist cadre. Although its mission has evolved over the years and is no longer limited to preparing party officials, Renmin still maintains a high profile with the Beijing government and is targeted as one of the universities that must gear up to achieve world-class standing. Finally, with its tradition of training communist cadre, and its current highly ranked programmes in the fields of business, economics, journalism, and law, the university is in many ways emblematic of the broad changes taking place throughout Chinese society, including the shift from a socialist-planned economy to a socialist-market economy.

Renmin, like most Chinese universities, had its normal educational operations shut down during the Cultural Revolution, but reopened in 1978 with an expanded mission as one of the nation’s leading comprehensive universities. Of Renmin’s 22 schools, several are among the nation’s very finest, although its hard/natural science programmes are not nearly as strong as those in the social sciences and the humanities. The university has an overall student enrolment of approximately 23,500, including nearly 11,000 graduate students (about 3300 are doctoral students). The student population is served by over 1800 faculty (lecturers, associate professors, and professors), thus constituting a student-faculty ratio of about 13 to 1.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected at Renmin during the academic years of 2008–09 and 2009–10, primarily during two site visits lasting six and three weeks, respectively. Data collection strategies followed commonly accepted practices delineated in key qualitative and case study methodological texts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yin, 1989). The primary data collection tool used was the semi-structured interview. All interviews were approximately one hour in duration and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. A total of 27 faculty were purposely selected across the three primary ranks – lecturer/assistant professor (8), associate professor (10), and professor (9) – from 17 different schools or departments (most are schools but a few are standalone departments). In terms of gender breakdown, 15 women and 12 men participated in the semi-structured interviews.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, numerous informal interviews were conducted during both site visits. These interviews primarily served to clarify various

points and interpretations formulated throughout the data collection process. Observations of numerous campus events and activities, relating mostly to daily life at the university, also were conducted. Points of confusion were later discussed with key informants as part of moving back and forth between outsider and insider perspectives (Aguilar, 1981), thus strengthening the overall authenticity of the findings and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Finally, documents and institutional data were gathered and these were used to clarify various facets of the university and faculty life. This broad array of data collection strategies is consistent with Denzin's (1989) discussion of the use of triangulation as a strategy for strengthening social science research.

Data analysis involved coding hundreds of pages of transcripts, field notes, and documents and then organizing such data around key themes. Several initial themes were deductively derived from the basic research questions framing the construction of the study. Internationalization was one of the deductive themes that came from the study's focus; this facet of the study was built into its design, evidenced by several interview questions focused on internationalization issues. But additionally, several sub-themes emerged from the data related to internationalization, many of which we did not anticipate; these themes form the basic structure of the Findings section of the article and are more inductive in nature. Findings and tentative conclusions were reviewed by several interview participants who offered constructive feedback in a manner consistent with what Guba and Lincoln (1989) described as member checks, a strategy they recommended for increasing a study's authenticity.

Findings: changes in academic culture related to internationalization

The findings that emerged are reflected in the following key sub-themes:

- (1) impact of international standards on scholarship;
- (2) relevance of experiences abroad;
- (3) collaboration and partnerships with foreign scholars and organizations; and
- (4) pedagogical and curriculum implications of internationalization.

The preceding speaks of changes in various norms, attitudes, and practices that in essence define key aspects of academic culture. An additional key finding relates to serious concerns several faculty members voiced as part of a critique of internationalization as a form of colonialism.

Impact of international standards on scholarship

A consistent theme of discussions with faculty about present-day changes in faculty norms and practices focused on the growing impact of international standards on scholarship, typically expressed in terms of two major issues: closing the gap between Chinese scholarship and that of the West and the importance of publishing in international journals.

Faculty consistently discussed the challenge China faces in closing the "scholarly gap". For example, an assistant professor in history discussed his growing engagement and collaboration with foreign scholars in his field and commented on what he had learned:

I realized that there is a big gap between Western social science and Chinese social science. It is a big difference that is not easy to be resolved. I mean Western education or Western ways of thinking about social science are different. There's a big gap there.

A professor in the same department alluded to greater demands now being placed on Chinese scholars, as the nation seeks to enhance the quality of academic science. This

historian pointed to great pressure on Chinese scholars to not only publish, but to publish in top journals:

I don't know, maybe six years ago we began to evaluate professors by where they publish their papers. Now it matters very much in the evaluation of the professors. That means, you know, you have to publish in the right places, based on the phase of your career.

Publishing in the "right places" is often defined as publishing in international journals. A law professor alluded to various scoring systems now used to evaluate faculty, noting that publishing in an international journal may lead to more points:

Such kinds of trends exist in law. So, let me say, for the university, if you publish an article in this international journal you will have, for example, 10 points. And if you publish an article in another journal, maybe you only get one or two points, so there is a big difference depending on where you publish.

A finance professor reinforced this trend, noting that previously,

Research results, the academic papers were published in domestic journals . . . and now, more and more, the research results are published in wider areas, including foreign academic journals. And professors, they are trying more and more to publish their research results in international academic journals. This is the trend to internationalize academic research in China.

Relevance of experiences abroad

Renmin administrative leaders place much relevance on faculty having international experience and have in fact co-sponsored many overseas experiences for faculty in combination with the Ministry of Education. This is shifting the norms of academic work in that more and more faculty members spend significant time abroad. This change in academic practice is consistent with some of the key objectives of Project 985 as well as President Ji's vision of "creating big masters" (*da shi*), which essentially means creating world-class professors. A lecturer explained:

Big masters is the second slogan that relates to this issue of globalization. We want to have great professors and be known around the world. But most professors at Renmin are only famous in China. So the president wanted to change this. He started first by travelling to the US and making contacts with lots of universities around the world. He then encouraged the faculty to make international contacts and go abroad. Now we have more and more international programmes and are increasingly known around the world.

An associate professor in history added:

I can say that it wasn't like this before, so much international emphasis . . . You know, Renmin University could be a first-class university and so the president encouraged staff to go abroad, professors to go abroad to study and to learn, and, you know, try to have a significant experience.

Another aspect of the emphasis on having experiences abroad relates to the norms associated with hiring practices. Several faculty members pointed to recent trends in some of the university's schools to seek new faculty who are trained abroad, particularly those who received their PhDs in Western countries. One faculty member pointed out that until President Ji joined Renmin, many internal doctoral graduates were considered or even hired by the university, but such a practice has largely stopped. As this senior professor explained:

Now we look for PhDs from outside Renmin University. We no longer hire our own except in rare exceptions. So before this president came many of the faculty were relatives and their children and grandparents worked here but that has changed. Now many of our faculty have their PhDs from abroad . . . or they have had a postdoctoral or teaching experience abroad.

International experience is also an added plus when faculty are reviewed for promotions and increasingly, such experience is becoming the expectation. In fact, many

schools and departments have created partnerships with universities in the West so that Renmin faculty can easily travel abroad to participate in exchange opportunities. The School of Public Policy, for example, has a programme in which faculty can teach at the University of Michigan for a semester and vice versa. Faculty explained that participating in such programmes is looked upon quite favourably during the promotion process.

Collaboration and partnerships with foreign scholars and organizations

In terms of international collaboration and partnerships, Renmin faculty tended to focus on international conferences, writing and research collaboration, and seeking foreign funding opportunities. In terms of international conferences, an associate professor offered the following:

Another way that internationalization is advanced is that we just have more international conferences and engagement with international colleagues The universities support us to participate in international conferences. We have more chances to communicate with the scholars in other countries.

Related to this point, several faculty members described very specific experiences at conferences abroad and the positive outcomes evolving from such participation. One described an invitation to write a chapter in an edited book, another became a participant in a larger international research project, a third was invited to be a discussant at a future international conference, and yet a fourth was included in a major US-based initiative to improve foreign language teaching involving 15 countries.

Writing and research collaboration with foreign scholars and organizations were also stressed as aspects of international collaboration. In fact, faculty members at Renmin often are expected to report on such activities as part of their department promotion meetings. This is especially important for junior faculty. As one lecturer explained:

Every year we have a meeting where we present what we are doing – it’s like a small seminar where the junior professors present their work and what they are working on, what they’ve published, if they have any grants or not. They talk about whether they are collaborating with other international colleagues or working on stuff internationally.

Other faculty members also spoke of the importance of international collaboration, often in specific terms. For example, a foreign language professor described a scholarly collaboration to develop better English-language text books (for Chinese students) with a colleague in Los Angeles. A professor of law noted a joint research project with scholars he met in New Delhi, and an associate professor in sociology described an ongoing working relationship with a scholar at the University of Chicago. Faculty spoke of these types of opportunities as adding a great deal to their overall academic experiences and as enhancing the quality and impact of their work.

A handful of faculty discussed opportunities to tap into foreign sources of research funds. A professor of public policy explained:

One thing I should mention is also that Chinese professors use international funding to do research They actually are able to get funds from sources outside of China. This is definitely a new development For example, we have some who participate in the Fulbright programme. We get some funding from the World Bank, and international labour organisations and foundations. That’s never happened before That’s new For the last 10 years, we’ve been getting funding from abroad.

This professor was particularly enthusiastic about his university’s participation in the Fulbright programme, noting that his school had “hosted three Fulbright’s over the past eight years” and had sent two to the US.

The types of collaborations and partnerships discussed in this section point to significant changes in the nature of academic practices, as described to us by our research subjects. The reality that the Renmin faculty are increasingly engaged with international colleagues, and can potentially seek research funds from foreign and international organizations, offers telling evidence of a shift in the academic culture of the university. Such a shift reflects the kinds of faculty behaviours typically associated with the emerging global model of world-class universities (Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008).

Pedagogical and curriculum implications of internationalization

Several faculty spoke of how teaching and the nature of classrooms at Renmin were changing as a consequence of international influences. An associate professor discussed how her experiences as a post-doctoral scholar in the UK helped her to better understand Western styles of teaching and how useful that was for her teaching:

For me, that was very new, very interesting. For example, they rarely just gave lectures, from the beginning of class to the end. They allow students to speak more in class. They just asked them questions and the students answered. The relations were more equal. But in China the relations between professors and students are not equal. When I ask students questions, they should answer me but if their answer is not right, they will be afraid to get a lower grade, or something like that. So, how do you get real equal interaction? How do you build that kind of atmosphere in the classroom? I just did not know how to do that, but the experience helped to teach me how to get there, how to develop that kind of atmosphere in the classroom. So the experience helped me very much.

And a professor of history added similar remarks:

We learned from Western teachers . . . I think many Western educators like to ask whether the students have questions during their teaching. The traditional Chinese method did not realize the importance of encouraging students to ask questions in class. The students are less creative under the traditional Chinese method. Many Chinese educators now are talking about the different ways of approaching teaching. Western teachers have showed us some good experiences.

Several other faculties noted the formal teaching evaluation processes used in the West, pointing out that such processes were being adopted in China and that overall they seemed beneficial to improving teaching and classroom management. And a handful noted how technological influences were leading to different norms associated with teaching, such as the use of laptops and the PowerPoint software in Renmin's classrooms.

Although several Renmin faculty members described some advantages in what they perceived to be Western styles of teaching, a faculty member specializing in international law saw some value in preserving certain aspects of traditional Chinese pedagogy:

Traditional factors exist also and have much strength. For example, for students, when they talk with the professors, I think they really respect the professors. Yeah, and they are naturally inclined to be more obedient to the professors. So, in the matter of asking professors this or that question, their manner, their demeanour shows that it is a very Chinese style, not a European or American style.

In addition to teaching and classroom management, Renmin faculty also discussed programmatic and curricula changes reflective of international norms and practices. A change in teaching materials was commonly identified as a major outcome of internationalization. One professor noted that in economics, many of the textbooks now used are the same as those used in Western countries. Others echoed this particular point, noting that things started changing in the mid-1980s as Chinese universities became more open to the West. Some faculty described programmatic changes, such as the development of an English-based international Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme

and the adoption of a summer term with numerous revenue-generating international programmes being offered.

Critique of internationalization as a form of colonialism

Despite the many positives faculty raised relative to the influence of internationalization on academic culture at Renmin, some sceptics also noted several critical points. One set of issues that critics raised concerned publishing and over-reliance on Western norms of scholarship. For example, a finance professor pointed out that foreign pressures may alter the fundamental direction of scholarly work in China:

The foreign readers, foreign professors, their interests may be different from those of Chinese scholars. So the Chinese scholars, the professors, when they want to publish their articles, they have to adapt to the interests of those foreign scholars. Otherwise, they lose their opportunity to publish their articles or papers in those international journals.

A specific example was noted with regard to rural studies and the need for Chinese scholars to direct their attention inward, towards national concerns. A professor working in this area explained:

International experience is important and publishing internationally is good for some scholars. But it's not good for others, especially for the rural studies field. Do you really need a foreign editor, a foreign journal, to understand what you are doing in terms of local issues in China?

In a related criticism, a faculty member linked the quest to follow Western models of scholarship to the immense pressure on Chinese scholars to publish in Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals, noting some of the problems this raises:

I think the pursuit to follow the Western model creates some problems. That means the universities must encourage people to publish in SSCI journals... But for many Chinese scholars they may not want to publish in those journals, to be limited in that way. So it's more influential if you publish in some SSCI journal, but now many scholars they say, "Why should I do that? I'm not American." So for some faculty, they would rather publish in more local journals. They may want to research Chinese philosophy or maybe Chinese economic reforms and these may not be key topics for some international journals. So that's maybe another kind of problem – internationalization may negatively impact the topics and issues studied by Chinese scholars.

Another faculty member likened the pressure to publish internationally to a "serious competition ... a kind of business competition", replete with behaviours not necessarily indicative of serious scholarship:

Even if you are not capable of publishing an English paper in an American or British journal, you can possibly have some kind of joint project...and then ask a foreign colleague or assistant to help you to publish. And then if you publish, you have a better chance for promotion. But how does this help to advance knowledge in China?

A few senior professors, mostly in business and rural economics, focused not so much on the publication process but on how Western norms might limit Chinese scholars in terms of theory and methodology. As one sceptical faculty member explained:

Social science is mostly created based on the experiences of Western economic development processes. I mean, that is the historical reality. Based on that, you create knowledge of social science but it is rooted in Western economic assumptions. Do you really believe this is universal knowledge? And that it should be universally applied to any country?

This professor went on to describe social science as a form of "soft power" – "part of the propaganda and ideological system of the West. It's a kind of strategy." He believed that

the more social science knowledge, theories, and textbooks are borrowed from the world's leading countries,

then the more cultural colonization that can take place at the university. And then it's worse. Originally, the Chinese university was colonized by Russian culture and the Russian social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s. Now it changes to the US. It's not progressive. It's backward.

This professor argued that Chinese scholars employing theories and frameworks from the West was a way to gain sponsorship from important and wealthy Western organizations, which he saw as trying to shape the nature of China, as part of a business strategy for research:

Research has become a business . . . Yes, it's a business now . . . Everybody may have similar ideas, but it's become part of the business – because that is the way to have more Western foundations sponsor you – by using Western theories and ideas. Yes? The IMF, World Bank, UN, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation. So, many foundations they sponsor what? They sponsor colonized culture.

This professor tended to embrace a very critical stance when it comes to what he described as “the Western centralist knowledge system”, arguing that “the Chinese university needs to build up a new knowledge system”, one more capable of understanding and explaining the unique aspects of contemporary China, given its unique history, size, and rapid growth.

Discussion

The preceding findings offer a great deal to consider as we ponder the changes taking place in Chinese universities such as Renmin. Our findings related to internationalization support the conclusion that the basic norms and practices (academic culture) of faculty life, including scholarly practices, are undergoing a significant restructuring. In considering this basic point, one must keep in mind that Renmin is not just any university, but it was in fact founded by the CCP and holds a special place in Chinese society as the so-called “People's University”. Given this reality, combined with the fact that the CCP fills a key administrative role as part of the dual authority structure of the Chinese university, it is hard to imagine change at Renmin as an isolated case. Instead, the transformation of Renmin quite likely depicts patterns happening in other Project 985 universities, a point reinforced by nearly every faculty member with whom we interacted; the validity of their views of systemic transformation are strengthened by the fact that nearly all of them have extensive contact with faculty colleagues at neighbouring Beijing University and Tsinghua University, two universities consistently ranked at the very top of Chinese higher education.

An obvious point to take from the findings presented in this paper is the challenge Renmin faces in building a more internationally oriented faculty. There appears to be significant differences in terms of the scholarly expectations operating at Renmin now in comparison to several years to a decade ago. A question that arises is whether or not the university and the broader system of Chinese higher education are fully committed and prepared to accept the far-reaching implications of building a world-class faculty. For example, although the university places great pressure on faculty to engage internationally, as well as increase their research productivity, little has been done to reduce a fairly high teaching load. Indeed, efforts to boost scholarly productivity coincide to a great extent with the massification of the Chinese higher education system, and at times place great strain on the nation's professoriate. Furthermore, the internationalization of faculty life is likely to lead to greater numbers of Renmin professors embracing more

cosmopolitan forms of academic citizenship. Clark (1987a), while building on the earlier work of Gouldner (1957, 1958), pointed out that cosmopolitan professors are more likely to be tied to their disciplines and professional associations and less likely to engage in localized institutional concerns. This begs the question: Is Renmin prepared to support a campus of cosmopolitan jet setters? And, will the broader system of Chinese higher education be able to accommodate shifting priorities among its faculty? As Rhoads and Szelényi (2011) pointed out, universities committed to operating in the global arena encourage different forms of academic engagement on the part of their faculty, including the possibility of professors acting on the basis of academic norms linked to more global notions of citizenship, or what they termed “global citizenship”.

Related to the potential shift toward cosmopolitanism and global citizenship are some legitimate concerns raised by several Renmin faculty about what is actually in the best interest of Chinese society in terms of the forms of knowledge production to be advanced by China’s top universities and professors. Are there important social, cultural, and economic issues important to China and its scholars that may not appeal to international scholarly arenas? Put another way, do the norms and practices associated with international scholarly practices operate in a manner beneficial to China’s national interests? Does, for example, the heavy reliance on English as the language of international scholarship as well as the dominance of Western theories and ideas, limit the potential of Chinese scholars to address China’s internal needs?

Faculty sceptics at Renmin recalled that not so long ago Chinese authorities and university officials spent valuable resources reforming their system of higher education, as the nation turned away from the highly specialized university model previously adopted under Soviet influence; many specialized campuses, for example, were merged in order to build more comprehensive universities. Presently, China once again looks beyond its own borders, to foreign models of research and scholarly activity oriented toward internationalization, and yet pitfalls once again are likely to exist. Implementing the positive facets of internationalization, while limiting the negative, may prove quite difficult to manage. Indeed, cosmopolitanism as a form of academic citizenship in many ways contradicts the idea of a “managed” university, wherein centralized authorities make key decisions impacting the working lives of faculty members; a key aspect of cosmopolitanism, as applied to the professoriate, is a high level of professional autonomy, and it remains to be seen if governmental authorities are prepared to relinquish more control.

Concluding remarks

The findings from this study offer evidence of changes in faculty life at Renmin University and are suggestive of a broad transformation of higher education throughout the country. Indeed, extended interactions with colleagues at other Project 985 universities, including Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, Dalian University of Technology, Minzu University, Tsinghua University, Wuhan University, and Zhejiang University support the conclusion that the nation’s top universities are undergoing significant changes, especially in the area of internationalization. As the Ministry of Education moves to strengthen the quality and capacity of its top universities, particularly in terms of research and scholarly productivity, faculty members, of course, become central players in the shifting landscape. Because their working lives and daily activities are reportedly changing, initiatives such as Project 985 appear to be having a significant impact in modifying the very nature of academic culture at top Chinese universities.

Many challenges and obstacles to internationalization and the elevation of research and scholarly capacity still remain. Two particular issues arise from the data and analysis included in this paper. First, the potential of colonialism to be tied to the nation's quest to strengthen and build world-class research universities, by adopting practices from Western universities, poses a serious problem. It remains to be seen if Chinese universities can successfully adopt some academic norms associated with the West, while also retaining and potentially building upon the unique qualities of Chinese academic culture. Second, as the Chinese professoriate increasingly moves toward notions of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship, it remains to be seen how the centralized role of the government can accommodate such types of professors and professional practice. These latter two issues – the potential challenges of colonialism and possible opportunities associated with cosmopolitanism – have the capability to produce contradictory strains on the Chinese system of higher education; on the one hand, solutions are likely to involve pushing back against the onslaught of Western norms (in the case of potential colonialism), while on the other hand, such as with the case of rising cosmopolitanism, greater openness on the part of governmental and university officials may be needed. The coming years will be quite telling in terms of the ability of Chinese academic culture to accommodate and adjust to such pressing challenges and opportunities.

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