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Social Sciences, Humanities and Liberal Arts: China and the West

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For the most part, modern China's institutions and modes of knowledge have been shaped and predominantly influenced by the West. Since the modern Chinese knowledge system is an integral and inseparable part of that dominant western system, an immanent critique will view Chinese problems not as extraneous, but as intrinsic to modernity, to the world-system or globalization. This article traces the genealogy of modern European modes of knowledge under the rubrics of 'liberal arts', as the origin and basis for modern China's institutions and modes of knowledge, and then examines China's 'liberal arts' as institution and modes of knowledge from the early years of the twentieth century to the present. The paper's objective is to question the relationship between (Eurocentric) universalism and Chinese exceptionalism within the dominant modern Western institutions and modes of knowledge today.

Introduction

On 27 June 2016, at the Annual Conference of Academia Europaea held at Cardiff University, I attended the Erasmus Lecture by Lord Martin Rees, entitled 'From Mars to the Multiverse', His lecture probed into the fascinating question of possible multiple universes, and the limit of our human 'observational horizon' or epistemology to understand the infinite and beyond. Rees believes that the concept of a 'multiverse' is 'speculative science but it is science, not metaphysics.'[1] Rees's thinking on the 'multiverse' challenges not only the notion of a 'universe' in its etymological root to the Latin '*universum*',[2] but also the division of science and metaphysics as the dominant mode of knowledge. The idea of one, single sum total, or wholeness reverberates well within the context of monotheistic Judea-Christian tradition, from which modern modes of knowledge and institutions, 'university' in particular, have derived. 'Universalism' is another related concept, with Judea-Christian and European roots and is especially associated with the age of Enlightenment. 'Multiverse' seems to set in motion, etymologically, and epistemologically, the cluster of

ideas and concepts, or what Foucault would call *episteme*, of universe, universalism, university, and so forth.

As someone growing up in China, albeit educated in a modern Western system of knowledge, I cannot but wonder how my Chinese perspective can add to the debate that 'multiverse' versus 'universe' triggers, let alone the ongoing intellectual controversies about knowledge, power, sciences, social sciences and humanities that have swept across the world for decades. I can certainly pursue the relativist, multicultural perspective with an emphasis on the attributes and contributions of the indigenous cultures to the humanities and social sciences, as shown by, for instance, by Wang Ning's 'reconstruction of Neo-Confucianism as an alternative discourse to various postmodern discourses in the new framework of global culture.'[3] Or I can tacitly acknowledge what Immanuel Wallerstein considers to be 'the dilemmas of social science', namely Eurocentrism as universalism, or as a necessary evil, to think about the relationship between (Eurocentric) universalism and Chinese exceptionalism within the dominant modern Western institutions and modes of knowledge today.[4] For the most part, modern China's institutions and modes of knowledge have been shaped and predominantly influenced by the West, from Anglo-American and German, over Japanese, to Soviet Russian examples. The indigenous Chinese intellectual and educational traditions have never become a dominant force in modern times, notwithstanding incessant clamours for the indigenization of the Chinese knowledge system. As Wallerstein embarks on his critique of the dominant epistemological paradigms or 'unthinking social sciences', he is keenly aware of the contradiction of 'an all-embracing epochal *Weltanschauung*' and a 'dominant but optional western ideology' as 'a central inescapable social reality that we must live with'.[5] Since the modern Chinese knowledge system is an integral and inseparable part of that dominant western system, an immanent critique will view Chinese problems not as extraneous, but as intrinsic to modernity, to the world-system or globalization. Yet such an immanent critique requires rigorous self-reflection, as Wallerstein continues, 'none of us can escape reflecting the epochal *Weltanschauung* —including non-Europeans—and yet all of us can make serious efforts to analyze the world in a non-Eurocentric manner.'[6]

We now enter a new era of upheavals marked by subversive reversals and uncertainty about globalization and modernity. At this moment, it is interesting to observe the re-emergence of a garden variety of exceptionalism, not as re-articulation of postmodern cultural relativism and multiculturalism, but as some sort of return to, or reaffirmation of, cultural essentialism. These assertions of exceptionalism are not merely jargon-ridden academic discourses. They are sanctioned by nationalist, populist political and ideological powers. New Anglo-American versions of exceptionalism find their voices from the Brexit to Donald Trump's presidency. Meanwhile, an ambitious, and increasingly nationalistic Chinese leadership, backed by a euphoric public for China's ascendency to the world's second largest economy, is proselytizing Chinese exceptionalism as the Chinese Dream, or revitalization of its glorious civilization. Western universalism is among the most salient antagonists that this latest state-sanctioned Chinese exceptionalism goes against. Ironically, such assaults on western universalism

draw their ammunition largely from an assortment of conservative Marxist-Leninist and Maoist orthodoxies, as an optional and radical (in the European context) version of Western universalism. Needless to say, the social sciences and humanities or liberal arts are always at the forefront of the ideological and political battles.

Rather than seeking in traditional Chinese learning some alternatives, I try to situate China in the historical context of world-system and globalization spearheaded by the West, in order to detect conceptual and institutional contradictions, fissures or cleavages in China's transformation and integration into the modern world. In what follows, I first trace the genealogy of modern European modes of knowledge under the rubric of 'liberal arts', as the origin and basis for modern China's institutions and modes of knowledge. I offer some preliminary comparison between the Western and Chinese traditions. The following part discusses the translation and transformation of the European ideas and concepts into Chinese ones, followed by a brief historical overview of China's 'liberal arts' as institution and modes of knowledge from the early years of the twentieth century to the present.

Liberal Arts as Modern Modes of Knowledge

The modern division of social/human knowledge in universities under the rubric of liberal arts bears a fundamental contradiction of modernity: the ascendance of science and technology and the decline of metaphysics and the humanities, or *Naturwissenschaften* versus *Geisteswissenschaften*. Around the turn of the twentieth century, this was a topic of impassioned debate in Germany. Wihelm Windelband argues that the natural sciences are based on law-governed (nomothetic) methodology to discover general laws of the natural and physical world, and social sciences only deal with non-recurring, unique and particular events. Wilhelm Dilthey, on the other hand, defends the independence of the human sciences and draws the distinction between natural sciences and human sciences. According to Dilthey, the natural sciences explain (*erklären*), while the human sciences seek to understand (*verstehen*). The human sciences therefore rely on interpretations of human expressions. Understanding and interpretation then become quintessential objectives and methods of the social and human sciences, even though in the German debates of *Naturwissenschaften* versus *Geisteswissenschaften* the further division between social sciences and humanities was not apparent.[7]

A Genealogy of Knowledge Formation: The West and China

A genealogical tree of the Western institutions and modes of knowledge may help clarify things – see Figure 1.

In medieval Europe, theology was the ultimate subject of learning, as the earliest European universities, such as the University of Bologna and Oxford University, all centred their core curriculum on theological learning. The European Enlightenment challenged the supremacy of theology, and philosophy took over as the age of reason brought down 'the Queen of the Sciences' or theological learning from universities.[8]

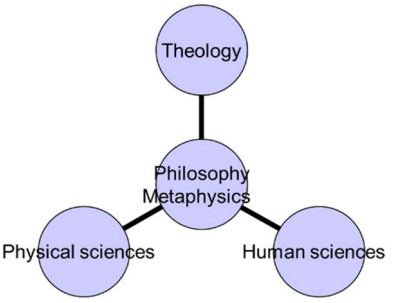

Figure 1. Genealogical tree of Western institutions and modes of knowledge.

The separation of physical or natural sciences and human sciences occurred in the late eighteenth century, with the revival of the university as the major institution of knowledge. About a century later, when the German debate on *Naturwissenschaften* versus *Geisteswissenschaften* was raging on, the structure of the modern European university as we know it today took shape. Medieval European universities, or their predecessors, Christian cathedral schools or monasteries, studied and learned about the universe as primarily explained and circumscribed by biblical scriptures. Universalism, universal truth and values are thus linked to, and more precisely produced by, European universities. The modern university as an institution of knowledge does not constitute a complete break from its medieval predecessors. While the modern knowledge system and the world we live in are secularized, Judea-Christian religions remain deeply enmeshed everywhere in the West, let alone the powerful role religion in general is playing in today's world.

It is interesting to observe here a historical parallel between medieval European institutions of knowledge, Christian monasteries and universities, with those in ancient China, namely the Confucian *shuyuan* (academy of classical learning system) and *keju* (imperial examination or civil service examination system). Medieval European institutions studied theological and biblical truths and universal values, whereas the Chinese classical education system learned truth from Confucian classics and histories. European Christian monasteries trained monks and nuns and priests, while the Chinese classical education system prepared the students for the imperial examinations that selected the regime's bureaucrats. The objectives are similar: training the ruling elite, either as clergy or mandarins. These two completely unrelated systems, however, differ in the subjects of learning: Medieval European universities studied such subjects as physics, logic, astronomy and mathematics, but Chinese institutions of learning confined their subjects exclusively to classical Confucian texts of metaphysics, history, music, and poetry. Physical sciences and engineering were almost completely absent from their curriculum, even though the Chinese contributions to science and technology over the millennia are widely known.[9]

It should be noted that, while there is a clearly detectable lineage from the medieval monasteries and universities to the modern university system in the West, the university as an institution of knowledge has no indigenous roots in China and is a

thoroughly western import. The emergence of the modern university in China in the late nineteenth century constitutes a historic break with the traditional Chinese education system. The argument that university education in China is indigenous and can be traced back to its antiquity can only be viewed as politically and ideologically motivated, based not on any historical evidence but on a fundamental misnomer or mistranslation of 'university' as *daxue* (literally 'big school'). The Chinese term *daxue* has Confucian etymological roots, referring to schools of nobility in China's antiquity, but it has nothing to do with 'the university' as a modern Western institution. It is disquieting to note here that a history textbook of Chinese university education recently endorsed by the Chinese state as 'comprehensive and authoritative', spends more than one third of its space giving a completely false account of 'ancient Chinese university (*daxue*) education' based on wrong nomenclatural confusion.[10]

The Twentieth-Century Division of Social Sciences and Humanities

The Chinese university system emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. This was the time when academic disciplines and fields began to take shape, and the modern division of social sciences and humanities as we know them now became institutionalized. Such a division of knowledge can be seen in the pyramid shown in Figure 2.

On top of the pyramid there is the trio of economics, political science and sociology. These three disciplines constitute the core of the social sciences in today's western universities. The justification for being scientific at first came from what Wallerstein calls the 'past-present cleavage', between history and these three fields. In order to seek universal, scientific truth about human behaviour, empirical and quantitative data would be preferable, and the study of contemporary societies rather than past history would yield more reliable data for generalizations. Moreover, the important countries to be studied, in the period when these disciplinary divisions took shape, were: France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and the United States. General, universal and scientific truths that these three disciplines discovered from studying these five countries, according to Wallerstein, are 'partly pragmatic, partly social pressure, and partly ideological: these are the important countries, this is what matters, this is what we should study in order to learn how the world operates.'[11]

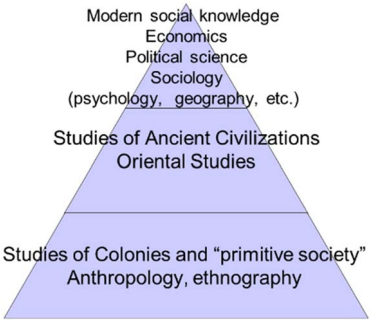

Figure 2. Division of knowledge.

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At the bottom of the pyramid we find anthropology and ethnography, invented to study the primitive world, which was 'defined in a very simple way: in practice, as colonies of the five countries.'[12] In the middle, we encounter so-called Oriental Studies, which examines the ancient, non-European and non-Christian civilizations of China, India, the Arab-Islamic world, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other non-Western religions. Under the rubric of 'liberal arts', modern European and American universities institutionalized the tripartite division of natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. This occurred around the end of the Second World War. In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States became the dominant force in the world, During the Cold War era (1950s–1980s), the political and ideological battles and geopolitical conflicts between a US-led West and the Soviet Union and its communist allies created a major split between the Soviet and Western models of knowledge. The first three decades of the People's Republic of China (1949–1979) coincided with the Cold War; I will have more to say about the effect of the Cold War on Chinese university system later. It should be noted here that the post-Second World War period ushered in the post-industrial age when scientific and technological innovation and discoveries in space science, life science and information technology were truly revolutionary. The unprecedented achievements in the natural sciences and in engineering affected the modes of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities. Scientific, quantitative, and nomothetic modes of inquiries that befit the social sciences obviously came to be privileged over 'arts and humanities'.

Table 1 summarizes different modes of inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962)[13] and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960)[14] address some fundamental principles of the social sciences and humanities, even though the former volume largely confines itself to paradigm shifts in the natural sciences.

Since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s to the present, the discrepancy between the social sciences and humanities in terms of their modes of inquiry has increased in Euro-American universities. While mathematical, quantitative modes now dominate

Table 1. Different modes of inquiry in the social sciences and humanities.

Social sciences	Humanities
Nomothetic, empirical, rational, positivist, and scientific (drawing on natural sciences models based on principles of math and physics)	Idiographic, interpretative, textual, historical, impressionistic, metaphysical (philosophical)
Thomas Kuhn *Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962)[13]	Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* (1960)[14]
History of science and scientific revolution as paradigm change: norm/methods—abnormality (discovery)—crisis—new norms/methods	Hermeneutics as human sciences Intersubjective dialogue as basis for human understanding

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the social sciences, and economics in particular, humanities disciplines have been greatly affected by poststructuralist, postmodernist and postcolonialist theories with strong radical, leftist, even neo-Marxist proclivities. Social science research leaned ever further towards mathematical and statistical models, seeking to erect more refined, sophisticated, math-based theorems, postulates and algorithms, whereas the humanities became more ideologically and politically motivated and combative. The effect of such a polarization actually spills over into the real world, beyond the academic ivory tower. In the United States, in particular, the political and ideological battles over 'political correctness', identity politics and multiculturalism played significant roles in the 2016 presidential election, in which liberal and leftist ideologies clashed head on with a right-wing Conservative Movement that eventually catapulted a nationalistic, populist, Donald Trump, to the presidency. Humanities disciplines in the United States, as the knowledge hub for the discourse of political correctness and identity politics, now confront a powerful right-wing politics that promises to dismantle everything that the academic Left have laboured to establish over the last few decades.

Chinese Translation of Western Concepts of University and Liberal Arts

Prior to a historical overview of the university and social sciences and humanities in China, a discussion of related concepts, terms and translations is in order. Translation is of the foremost importance, since modern university and disciplinary divisions were imported from the West at the advent of modernity, when most modern ideas, concepts, practices and institutions were translated and then transformed in China. The late Qing Reform period (1870s–1910s) saw massive translations of modern western works into Chinese, as the first major intellectual encounter between Chinese and Western modernity. In the meantime, the Japanese engaged in massive translations of European works. Japanese translators utilized Chinese characters or *kangji* extensively to render English, German and French concepts and terms into what is known now as *wasei-kango* (Japanese made Chinese). The Chinese, in turn, borrowed profusely these *wasei-kango* terms, or Chinese terms that the Japanese used as translations of European terms. It is estimated that about 70% of Chinese terms for modern western concepts, especially abstract and central nouns such as 'society', 'revolution', 'science', 'nature', 'democracy', to name just a few, are borrowed from those *wasei-kango* (Japanese made Chinese).[15] This in itself is an important topic concerning Chinese modernity, insofar as modernity in China is translated and imported from the West, and the Japanese mediation through *wasai-kango* is crucial in the formation of Chinese modernity.

The Chinese translations and Japanese *wasei-kango* of modern western concepts inevitably bear the imprints of their respective linguistic, cultural traditions and reflect the political and ideological contingencies and circumstances. More often than not, these specific circumstances prevailed in the understanding and rendering of Western ideas and concepts. The genealogical and etymological roots and meanings in the Western source language are often ignored and, in the long run, lost in the

target language of Chinese or Japanese. Such is the case in the cluster 'universe', 'universalism' and 'university' that I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

'University' in Chinese now is translated as '*daxue*'. It means 'great learning' or 'high learning', which has Chinese etymological roots in one of the four core Confucian classics, namely *Daxue* (the Great Learning), and is semantically similar to traditional '*taixue*' or 'imperial academy' from the Han (206BC–AD220) to Song (960–1279) Dynasties. The claim that Chinese university education began as early as its legendary antiquity is based entirely, as I discussed earlier, on the confusion of the meaning of *daxue*, which is the modern rendering of 'university', with the Confucian classics and the ancient imperial academies. However, *daxue* today refers specifically to 'university' as an institution of higher education, as opposed to *zhongxue* (middle learning or middle school) and *xiaoxue* (little learning or elementary school). The genealogical lineage of universe, universalism and university in the western source language is therefore completely lost in the discrete Chinese terms of *yuzhou* (universe), *pushi jiazhi* (universal values) and *daxue* (university) with no etymological and semantic connections whatsoever. During the PRC era, especially the Mao era, Chinese universities were transmogrified into political and ideological instruments, bearing the responsibility of teaching and disseminating Chinese Communist Party (hereafter the CCP) ideology. More will follow on this crucial function; suffice it here to note that recently the former Chinese Education Minister, Yuan Guiren, has repeatedly insisted that Chinese *daxue* (universities) should resist *xifang pushi jiazhi* (western universalism). There seems no apparent self-contradiction in Mister Yuan's announcement in Chinese, as hardly anyone noted the linguistic slippage in invoking these concepts.[16]

'Liberal arts' is another case in point. It is translated into Chinese as *wenke* or 'literary/cultural disciplines', referring to the social sciences and humanities, whereby the 'science' component is absent. In today's US universities, the umbrella category 'liberal arts' includes both natural and social sciences, and the college of liberal arts (or college of arts and sciences) is the centre of the university system, with a core curriculum for undergraduate and graduate education. The college of liberal arts is home to natural sciences, social sciences and humanities departments, and it normally stands for the academic reputation of the university.[17] However, as professional schools such as business schools, medical schools and law schools have become dominant for bringing in revenue, networking and fame within the university system, the nomenclature of liberal arts as the academic centrepiece has come increasingly under attack. Allan Bloom, in his explosive bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*,[18] in 1987 rebuked American higher education as being aimless and soulless for its failure to cultivate the higher existential yearnings of the nation's most gifted and intelligent youth. Almost three decades later, the eminent India-born American journalist and commentator Fareed Zakaria took up Bloom's outcry in his book *In Defense of a Liberal Education*,[19] in which he argues for the revival of liberal arts as 'a good liberal education' and 'the best way to prepare for today's global economy'. However, such a pragmatic approach to liberal arts is only a weak defence against the onslaught of business and professional programmes that proliferate, not only in the US universities but indeed all over the globe. China clearly is no exception.

Liberal Arts in Chinese Universities: A Historical Overview

Wenke (liberal arts) in the Chinese university system, from its early days has been confined to social sciences and humanities, and separated from the natural sciences and engineering. In fact, there had been no clear distinction and division between social sciences and humanities under the umbrella of *wenke* from the outset. Briefly, the history of the Chinese university can be divided into four phases: first, the emergence of the modern university around the turn of the twentieth century; second, the Republican period from the 1920s to 1949; third, the Mao era from 1949 to 1976; and fourth, the Reform era from 1978 to the present.

1. The Formative Period (late nineteenth century to the 1920s)

It has been argued that the first university in China and in East Asia was St. Paul College, founded in Macau in 1594, by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits).[20] But Macau was by then a Portuguese colony, so its status as the first university in China is disputable. Scholars from China generally believe that the first batch of Chinese universities appeared in the late 1890s. In 1895, Beiyang Gongxue (Beiyang Engineering University, now Tianjing University) was established in Tianjin, and then, in 1896, Nanyang Gongxue (Nanyang Engineering University, now Shanghai Jiao Tong University) was established in Shanghai, both by the Qing Imperial Government. In 1898, Jingshi Daxuetang (Imperial University of Peking) was set up by the Qing government, which changed its name to Peking University (or Beijing University) in 1912.[21] However, European and American missionaries and others set up several Christian-related colleges and universities pre-dating the Qing imperial government institutions. In 1879, St. John's College was founded in Shanghai by William Jones Boone and Joseph Schereschewsky, Bishop of Shanghai, and changed its name to St John's University in 1905. Tsinghua University was established in 1911 by the Americans as a preparatory school for training Chinese students to study in US colleges; it was funded by the Boxer indemnity paid by China to the United States, with the approval of the US Congress and President Theodore Roosevelt. Yenching University in Beijing was formed through the merger of four Christian schools over the course of five years, from 1915 to 1920, and John Leighton Stuart was appointed as the principal of the university in January 1919. John Leighton Stuart (1876–1962) is a legendary figure in US–China relations in the twentieth century. As the last US ambassador to the Chinese KMT (Nationalist) government before 1949 and the foremost American educator in China, his role in China's politics, intellectual movements, and education epitomizes the complex and intense involvement of the United States in China. In 1928, the Harvard-Yenching Institute was jointly founded by Yenching University and Harvard University for the teaching of the humanities and social sciences in East Asia. In Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai and other cities in China, a host of colleges and universities were established by American and European missionaries, and these universities invariably became the role models for university education in China. At first, the Qing imperial universities largely based their curriculum and institutional structures on Japanese and German models, as Japanese

universities such as Tokyo University drew heavily on German university system, and Tokyo University had a decisive impact on Peking University in its formative years.[22]

What propelled the late Qing reform-minded Emperor Guangxu and his officials to set up modern universities on the German/Japanese model was clearly the political imperative of reforming the Qing Empire to develop its technological and economic strengths in the face of formidable challenges from the Western powers. The late Qing reformers associated with Emperor Guangxu, such as Kang Youwei, Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, were the leading intellectual leaders for China's modern enlightenment. European and American missionaries promoted western style education as a way to disseminate Christian-centred western values as well as modern sciences. The emergence of the modern university in China thus should be understood within the historical context of China's encounter with western-induced modernity, and the newly established universities, regardless whether sponsored by western missionaries or the Qing imperial government, immediately became hotbeds of reform and enlightenment. Of course, the foremost mission of China's universities during their formative years was pragmatic, and politically motivated to meet the urgent need of reform and modernization. Liberal arts from the very beginning took centre stage as the modern institution for new, modern ideas, concepts and practices indispensable for China's passage to modernity. From a historical perspective, liberal arts (social sciences and humanities) in the earlier years was in fact the privileged mode of inquiry in Chinese universities over the natural sciences and technology. It was estimated that there were about 11,000 college students in 1909, of which 50% studied politics and law, 35% studied humanities, 7% arts, 5% medicine, and only 3% studied sciences and engineering.[23]

2. The Republican Period (1920s to 1949)

The history of Chinese university and intellectual movements, like anything else from China's economy, society and culture, is inextricably entangled with politics. The university in modern China is not simply an institution of education and knowledge; it is first and foremost a political and ideological instrument. Universities have always been at the forefront of political and ideological battles, first between the warlords and the KMT–Communist alliance, then between Chinese nationalists and the Japanese invaders, and, above all, between the Communists and their enemies, ranging from the remnants of the Qing nobilities and bureaucrats, warlords, and urban bourgeoisie, to pro-Western liberal intellectuals.

Peking University was arguably the pre-eminent institution in the early years of Republican China. It is the embodiment of social, political revolution and upheavals, as well as the intellectual and cultural movements of Chinese modern enlightenment. China's leading intellectual leaders such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei and Li Dazhao were all on the faculty of humanities at Peking University. The May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919) started from there. Congregated at Peking University were the proponents of democracy (Mr De) and science (Mr Sai), as the two celebrated icons of Chinese modernity and enlightenment; the leftist

intellectuals proselytizing Marxism and radical communist revolution; and the advocates of Anglo-American liberalism; champions of the revival of traditional Confucian values, and so forth. Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao became the founding leaders of the CCP. Hu Shi and Cai Yuanpei, two very important Presidents in the history of Peking University, served in the KMT government as prominent political figures.[24] Last but not least, the independent, left-leaning, and maverick writer Lu Xun taught literature at Peking University. He was lionized posthumously by Mao as 'the Sage of Modern China', primarily for his relentless assault on China's tradition and his espousal of social and political revolution.

Apart from intense involvement in politics, Chinese universities began to build up their research and academic disciplines. By 1923, college student numbers increased to 34,880, almost three times those of 1909. Liberal arts majors predominated. It was estimated that, in 1930, 36% studied politics and law, 22% literature and arts, 11% engineering, 9% sciences, 6% business, 6% education, 4% medicine and 3% agriculture.[25] In 1928, the KMT government merged several universities and established the National Central University in Nanjing as China's highest institution of higher learning. During the Sino-Japanese War, it moved from Nanjing to China's provisional capital Chongqing. Meanwhile, Peking University, Tsinghua University and Nankai University moved to the Southwestern province of Yunnan, and formed Southwestern Associated University (*Xinan lianda*). It was during the Sino-Japanese War period that Chinese universities experienced their greatest growth, despite the unimaginable difficulties and hardships. In 1930 there were 85 universities in China, with 37,566 students. By 1945 and the end of the Sino-Japanese War, the number of universities grew to 141 and students totalled 83,498.[26]

The Southwestern Associated University (*Xinan lianda*) in PRC's history textbooks is enshrined as 'the fortress of democracy'. Because of its geographic location in Yunnan, far removed from Chongqing, the provisional capital, leftist intellectuals and CCP activists had a great deal of freedom to advocate radical revolutionary ideas. A significant cohort of prominent leftist and pro-communist writers, philosophers and historians were on the faculty, and the majority of its students embraced radical leftist ideas. The glorification of *Xinan lianda* during the PRC years testifies to the significant, special status of the liberal arts in Chinese universities, serving political and ideological objectives.[27] By contrast, the National Central University had an entirely different fate. It stood at the height of Chinese higher education during its first two decades and then, after 1949, its prestige plummeted as the result of a series of dismemberments. During the Sino-Japanese War period, the KMT government assigned the largest funding to the National Central University in order to boost its research in natural sciences and engineering. It was estimated that the budget of the National Central University exceeded the sum total of the four other major Chinese universities, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Jiao Tong University and Zhejiang University. More than two thirds of the college applicants from areas unoccupied by the Japanese applied to the National Central University as their first choice. The emphasis on the natural sciences served the needs of war-time engineering and technology, aimed at educating the scientists and engineers urgently needed in the Sino-Japanese War. Liberal arts research

and learning thus took a back seat. Moreover, the KMT war-time government under the Commander-in-Chief Chiang Kai-shek was tough on political dissent and liberal ideas, let alone leftist, pro-communist ideologies, so there were hardly any political debates in Chongqing. After 1949, a significant number of faculty members of the university left for Taiwan, and the PRC government changed its name to Nanjing University. In a major university restructuring in 1952, the former colleges and schools and sciences and engineering faculty and facilities of the university were dismantled and dispersed.[28]

3. The Mao Era form 1949 to 1976

The Communist Revolution resulting in the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 is not only a political event. It turned everything upside down, from the economy to society and culture. The cultural and ideological arena had been a fierce battleground for the CCP under Mao's leadership, for Mao's revolution relied on two fundamental forces, namely the military and ideological forces. In Mao's own words, the 'army with guns and army with pens'.[29] I have argued elsewhere that culture holds a central position in the Chinese Communist Revolution, and to subsume culture under the rubric of a political power struggle only sidesteps inquiry into the dynamic interaction between the political and cultural spheres that characterized the Chinese Revolution.[30] The revolutionary agency, namely the CCP, at its inception during the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919), with Peking University as its nerve centre, largely consisted of radical intellectuals. Marxist–Leninist ideology provided the indispensable weapon for these intellectuals or the 'army with pens' to mobilize and, indeed, to create a revolutionary subjectivity from China's peasantry. In the absence of an urban proletariat, the peasantry served as the second revolutionary agency of the 'army with guns', along with the CCP intellectual elite. These two armies eventually led the Chinese Communist Revolution to its political victory, and in the decades of the Mao era the revolution continued, and escalated in the cultural and ideological terrain, culminating in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

The university, and especially the liberal arts as a modern institution and mode of knowledge, must conform to Mao's overall scheme and to the ultimate goals of Chinese Communist Revolution, that is, 'to change the objective world and in the meantime to change the subjective world'.[31] During the pre-PRC period, the CCP devoted considerable efforts to make liberal arts education serve the purpose of 'changing the subjective world'. Apart from the critical role of the CCP early leaders such as Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao at Peking University during the May Fourth Movement, the CCP set up Shanghai University in 1921, immediately after the establishment of the CCP itself. Social sciences were the only subjects taught at Shanghai University in its short-lived existence (1921–1927). During the Yanan period (1937–1945), coinciding with the Sino-Japanese War, the CCP set up in Yanan several colleges and universities, primarily in liberal arts disciplines, the most important one being *Kangda,* or the Counter-Japanese Military and Political University for training the CCP army's military officers. Its history can be traced back to the Jiangxi Soviet period (1931–1934) for training the Red Army officers.

After 1949, however, a top priority for the CCP was to completely change the education system and replace it with a new one, as part of Mao's scheme for a thorough transformation of China. The most significant move took place in 1952, when the CCP began its massive 'university restructuring plan'. By the end of 1951, all missionary universities and colleges in China were closed down, merged, renamed, or completely eliminated. The principal objectives of the restructuring plan included the following.

(1) To install a new university system that would 'base its core curriculum on universities in the Liberated Areas (the pre-PRC Yanan and other CCP controlled areas); incorporate useful experiences from the old system; and draw on the Soviet experiences.' In fact 'draw[ing] on the Soviet experience' became the cardinal principle for the systemic restructuring. The 'Soviet experience' refers primarily to the Soviet Russian institutions and modes of knowledge that favour highly specialized, science and engineering-centred, rather than American liberal arts-centred disciplinary divisions. Based on the Soviet model, the number of universities was reduced from 227 to 184, with only 14 comprehensive universities retaining natural sciences and *wenke* (social sciences and humanities). The overwhelming majority of universities became specialized engineering, technical, medical and agricultural colleges and institutes. The former professional schools of comprehensive universities based on the American model were all dismantled, and then re-established into 39 engineering colleges, 33 teachers' or normal colleges, 29 medical colleges, six finance colleges, four law colleges, eight foreign language colleges, 15 arts and music colleges, four sports colleges, and three ethnic minority colleges.[32] Chinese university education and academic research since then focused essentially on technology and engineering, related primarily to the CCP's needs to modernize Chinese industry and agriculture.

(2) To completely overhaul *wenke* (social sciences and humanities), and to substitute the liberal arts curriculum of the pre-PRC universities with the Soviet and CCP curriculum. Marxism-Leninism-Maoism acquired sacrosanct status, guiding and dictating all disciplines including natural sciences and engineering (through primarily the 'infallible truths and universal laws' discovered by Marxist dialectical materialism).[33] As a result, the most devastating blow was dealt to social sciences. After the restructuring, almost all social sciences disciplines except economics were eradicated from the university system. Political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, communication studies were summarily condemned as anti-Marxist and counter-revolutionary, and disappeared altogether as academic subjects. These disciplines were gradually reinstalled in the post-Mao era after 1976.

The 1952 university restructuring plan that altered the fate of the social sciences and humanities in China was part and parcel of Mao's overall strategy to change both 'the objective and subjective world'. Chinese universities became the fiercest political and ideological battlegrounds, with as front line inevitably *wenke* – liberal arts. Narratives of Chinese *wenke* during the Mao era therefore amount to nothing less than a political and cultural history of the period, shaped primarily by political and ideological battles. Universities during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) took much of the spotlight in the early days when the Red Guard rebels, consisting largely of university and high-school students, smashed virtually everything in the cultural arena, from classical literature to historical relics. During the apex of the Cultural Revolution the universities were all closed down, until Mao ordered them to be reopened for the purposes of 'remoulding the bourgeois education system' and 're-educating the bourgeois professors', who became students of the newly selected 'worker-peasant-soldier students' in an uncanny reversal of roles. Professors attended ideological struggle-sessions monitored by students, who then took elementary and minimum instructions in their fields by the faculty.[34]

4. The Reform Era from 1978 to the Present

Since the *gaige kaifang* (Reform and Opening Up) era, from 1978 on, China has largely abandoned the Maoist agenda of ideological revolution and embarked on economic modernization. In a short span of less than 40 years, it has risen miraculously to the second largest economy in the world, irreversibly integrated into the modern world-system and globalization. By most historical accounts, the reform era started with the CCP's Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. An obvious yet often neglected fact is that about a year earlier, in January 1978, Chinese universities reopened, and through the national college entrance examinations, reinstated after ten years' lapse, the famous '77 and '78 Classes were recruited, a group of students who were destined to take up leadership roles in the decades that followed. The current Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, attended Beijing University as a '77 class major in law. (Xi Jinping, the CCP 'core leader', however, was a 'worker-peasant-soldier student' of the Cultural Revolution era.) Chinese universities, with hindsight, pioneered the Reform Era in initiating a series of significant debates about the orientation of the reform, and in opening up intellectual inquiries to the world. American and European university systems now reappeared in China, and social sciences disciplines such as political science and sociology returned. The field of economics soon substituted Soviet-style Marxist–Leninist political economy with modern western economic theories and methods, providing powerful ammunition for China's market-oriented economic reform.

When China reopened its door to the world during the 1980s, a general feeling of euphoria permeated China's cultural scene. Universities in China took up the spotlight again, especially in *wenke* (social science and humanities) fields. After the Maoist dominance, Pandora's Box was ripped open again, and a plethora of novels, poems, films and theories, from Sartre to Hayek, from Derrida to Bakhtin (indeed it

was the point of entry for the Russia-Soviet thinker) were devoured by Chinese intellectuals and young students in a festive and fervent mode of emancipation and creativity. This became known as the decade of Culture Fever or Culture Reflection, rethinking and debunking the age-old tradition from Confucianism to Maoism. The massive translation of foreign literature, arts and theories, and the incredible enthusiasm for the newly emerged field of comparative literature for instance, all seemed to signal the arrival of a new era of China's opening up and integration into the world of globalization, a genuine state of heteroglossia, as Bakhtin would have it, that 'wash over a culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to its core, relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprive it of its naïve absence of conflict.'[35]

The 1980s can be considered, again borrowing Bakhtin's words, this time describing the European Renaissance, as the period of 'the fundamental liberation of cultural-semantic and emotional intentions from the hegemony of a single and unitary language, and consequently the simultaneous loss of a feeling for language as myth, that is, as an absolute form of thought.'[36] The decade marks the second 'golden age' for China's liberal arts research and education, echoing the pre-PRC period, particularly the early twentieth century. The political storms of 1989 did not entirely reverse the course of economic reform and opening up, and CCP's pragmatic policies in the following decades actually paved the way for the economic miracle amidst the global economic slowdown. China's intellectual scene, however, inevitably lost its vibrancy in the following decades, and became quickly drowned in the formidable waves of commercialization and political cooptation and oppression.

Almost a decade later, in 1999, the CCP leadership launched another Great Leap Forward in Chinese higher education, implementing a massive university expansion plan, paradoxically reminiscent of the 1952's restructuring plan that contracted, dissolved and dismembered most universities. The 1999 plan, on the contrary, radically expanded the number of universities and colleges, by merging specialized technical and engineering colleges into existing universities, and then making them all 'comprehensive', and by elevating vocational, technical high schools to the status of colleges or institutions of higher education. In 1978, there were 598 universities with a student body of 850,000. In 1998 before the Great Lead Forward, the number of universities increased to 1022, and student numbers reached 3,400,000, four times larger than that of 1978. In 2015, China had 2853 universities, and the students totalled an astounding 36,470,000, more than ten times larger than that of 1998.[37] Figure 3 shows the dramatic expansion since 1998.[38]

While continuing to heavily invest in natural sciences and engineering, the Chinese government promoted the so-called 'pragmatic liberal arts fields' or *yingyong wenke*, an odd Chinese concoction derived from the Ministry of Education Changjiang Scholarship Award from the early 2000s to attract overseas Chinese scholars or returnees in economics, finance and business management. Meanwhile, business schools and MBA, and EMBA programmes mushroomed all over China, soon taking up the central stage of Chinese universities in terms of revenues, prestige and networks.

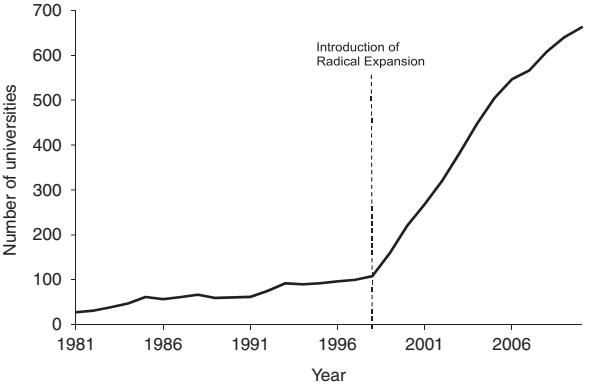

Figure 3. Expansion in the number of universities.

The traditional liberal arts education and research, including the social sciences and humanities, suffered from this overwhelming trend of pragmatism and commercialism. The humanists and social scientists, especially those in literature, philosophy and history, who once commanded China's limelight in the 1980s, were forced to undergo a metamorphosis as inconceivable as it was painful for their self-esteem. In the words of Gan Yang, the self-styled crusader of the Cultural Fever of the 1980s, 'the decade of the 1980s was the last era for *homo culture* and then from the 1990s, China entered an era for *homo economicus*'.[39] Not unlike their engineering and business management counterparts, the humanists and social scientists over the years have gradually shifted their identity from intellectuals or *zhishifenzi* to professionals, or *zhuanye renshi*. Their job is to manufacture massive quantities of papers published in SSCI (Social Sciences Citation Index in the US) or CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Index) labelled journals, or 'core journals' of the first, second and third tiers with elaborate ranking systems in China, and garner an ever-increasing amount of research funds from national, provincial and regional sources.

The National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences is the highest state agency for funding and for research agenda-setting in the social sciences and humanities (which actually is a subdivision of the Propaganda Ministry of the CCP Central Committee). It annually announces the subjects and categories for research grants and funds, covering 23 areas, ranging from Marxism and scientific socialism, economics, political sciences, literature, management sciences, archaeology, to demography, ethnography, and so forth. Each area contains approximately 30 to 50 research topics. The 2016 topics, for instance, included things such 'US and Western Export of Democracy and Ideological Safety in China', 'Improving Adjustment and Control of Real Estate Market in China', 'Theoretical System of Religion of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' and 'Evolvement of Chinese Feminist Literature in the New Era', and so on.[40] Millions of millions of yuan have been funded to liberal arts research, and numerous new grants and funds are being allocated. In the new rush for the gold mines of research grants, awards and promotions, the

intelligentsia of the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth 1919, and the traditional literati or Confucian gentry class that gave the special aura to Chinese intellectuals all but evaporate, or 'all that is solid melts into air', as it were.[41]

Along with this seemingly irreversible transformation of the intellectual's identity is the dissolution, if not disappearance, of the compelling issues and questions that China and the world face now. Chinese exceptionalism versus universalism remains the fundamental question. The current Chinese university system as the institute and mode of knowledge, and more specifically within the historical context of Chinese history as the forefront of political, ideological and cultural battlegrounds, must come to terms with this fundamental question. This is a specific dilemma of the social sciences and humanities, *wenke* or liberal arts that China confronts now. Taking Wallerstein's critique of the modern social sciences as a point of departure, we may reconceive his notion of 'an all-embracing epochal *Weltanschauung*' as universalism or universal values, not as universal truth but as intensely contested presumptions of values and meanings of humankind and the universe (multiverse?). What Wallerstein admonishes us to be mindful of, that is to say the 'dominant but optional western ideology', can be seen as a manifestation of various kinds of exceptionalism, Eurocentrism or American exceptionalism. In other words, Eurocentrism for Wallerstein is both the all-embracing *Weltanschauung* and an optional western ideology. We may rephrase it as universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism. The Chinese exceptionalism can thus be understood in the same vein, in that current assertions of Chinese exceptionalism constitute both a state-sanctioned ideology and a contested set of presumptions about universal values, which inevitably partakes of the global debate about universalism vis-à-vis exceptionalism. A critique of Chinese exceptionalism as a state-sanctioned ideology and as an integral part of that global debate is much called for, especially for Chinese intellectuals who not only inhabit the Chinese habitus, the system of embodied dispositions, tendencies and ideas, but also produce and reproduce the discourse of Chinese exceptionalism.

Nevertheless, in the face of the formidable commercialization of the university system as well as its political cooptation under the increasing restraints on political and ideological issues, Chinese liberal arts (*wenke*) scholars find themselves stranded at a crossroads that turns out to be a cul-de-sac, an intellectual as well as existential aporia without a plausible way out. Yet the very raison d'être of intellectual inquiry for the liberal arts is to question, critique and debate all that matters to the world and humanity, and to the universe and multiverse. To continue questioning, critiquing and debating these issues is perhaps the best choice and justification for intellectuals or academics in liberal arts (*wenke*) today.

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