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China's Top 2 Universities Try for 'World Class' Status

New money improves facilities and attracts foreign talent, but curriculums remain rigid

BY JIANG XUEQUIN



RICKY WONG FOR THE CHRONICLE

Min Weifang of Peking U.: "The goal of creating world-class institutions is to reflect China's level of progress."

BEIJING
LI LIANG, a clean-cut, middle-aged psychologist, makes a quick inspection of his new \$200,000 laboratory on the third floor of Peking University's psychology center. Smiling, he dashes from one immaculate room to the next, pointing at the imported equipment. "This is better and bigger than either Queen's or the University of Toronto has to offer," he says, referring to the two Canadian institutions where he worked before accepting Peking's offer two years ago to return to his alma mater. "When I first came, the test rats were stored on the stairways."

An hour earlier he was negotiating with contractors, and a couple of hours later he has to board a plane home to Toronto, where his wife, who doesn't want to return to China yet, just had a baby. "The support system just isn't there, but I feel I'm a pioneer, and I'm building the basic foundation to attract new talent," he says.

Peking University is betting on that spirit. China's largest and oldest liberal-arts university hopes that by recruiting foreign-educated talent like Mr. Li, it is taking one step toward becoming a world-class university. Three years ago, Peking and Tsinghua Universities conceded that they lagged far behind the world's top universities. With special financial support from the Ministry

of Education, as well as donations from individuals, corporations, and alumni, the two universities have embarked on a spending spree to spruce up their campuses, improve faculty salaries and benefits, and attract new blood.

DISAPPOINTING RESULTS

Three years later, however, some students and scholars are disappointed. They complain about waste, citing Tsinghua's new \$12-million, three-story cafeteria as the most concrete example of extravagant spending that isn't improving education. Little has been done about students' main concern, the quality of teaching. Critics are also frustrated at how little transparency there is in university finances—a murkiness that easily leads to the misappropriation of funds, a common problem among China's top universities. Ministry of Education officials decline to answer questions about finances, but Chinese journalists often report on construction money that is siphoned off by university officials for personal use. University officials admit a problem exists but say the corruption was not that severe to begin with and is fading.

Others believe that a fundamental change in philosophy is needed before Chinese universities can compete internationally. "Tsinghua's main problem is that it's too fo-

cused on money-making and not enough on academic research," says Liu Xila, chairman of the engineering departments at both Tsinghua and Shanghai's Communications University and one of China's most distinguished academics. "It has received a lot of money now, but it just doesn't know how to spend the money properly."

Peking and Tsinghua are universally regarded as China's two best universities, and they are both in the university district of Beijing, China's equivalent of Cambridge, Mass. Founded in 1898, Peking has 17,000 faculty and support-staff members and 37,000 students. It likes to think of itself as China's Harvard. Ninety-year-old Tsinghua, which compares itself to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has 20,000 students and 7,100 members of its faculty and support staff.

"With their long history and prominent alumni, Peking and Tsinghua are the top universities in China, standing well above the rest," says Gerard Postiglione, director of the Wan Ching Center of Research on Education in China at the University of Hong Kong. He believes that both institutions must work on university management as well as quality assurance, but says both have great potential.

The Cultural Revolution devastated the two institutions, because in that period, stu-

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INTERNATIONAL

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 dents were admitted based on their political background, not their academic ability, and professors were leading targets of Red Guard members, who tried to destroy anything elitist and intellectual. As Deng Xiaoping introduced his economic reforms in the late 1970s, the Communist Party began loosening its control of universities, and in 1992 it cut back on education subsidies, trying to make the universities more self-sufficient and putting them at the mercy of the evolving free market.

China's top universities quickly embraced capitalism, opening their own information-technology and real-estate corporations and letting professors become business executives. In one celebrated incident in that freewheeling era, Tsinghua's business school sent two professors who were supposed to be securities specialists to play the Shanghai stock market with the university's own money.

They became rich and never came back; Tsinghua learned a hard lesson. Critics charged that universities had turned into profit-oriented conglomerates, and the perception persists: In a recent government survey, 42.2 percent of respondents said that pedagogy had taken a back seat to many universities' businesses.

In the early 1990s, both Peking and Tsinghua tended to compare themselves with institutions in other socialist countries, refusing to enter into truly global competition. That changed on Peking's 100th anniversary, in May 1998, when China's president, Jiang Zemin, called for the university to become a "world class" institution. In what is known as the "98-5 Project," a name that refers to the year and the month when it was started, the Ministry of Education has allocated \$225-million over three years, an unprecedented sum in Chinese higher education, to improve Peking. The project has since expanded to include eight other reform-minded Chinese universities.

GLOBAL COMPETITION

"All of the world's advanced nations have leading universities, so for China the goal of creating world-class institutions is to reflect China's level of progress," says Min Weifang, Peking University's vice president in charge of the 98-5 Project. The university "already has an important impact on the national development, spiritual, and cultural life of China, but in objective terms, we have many shortcomings, such as our faculty profile." He was referring to the fact that many faculty members at Peking lack sufficient training, do not publish enough (if at all), and are not regarded as good teachers.

To deal with those deficiencies, Peking has spent its money in four areas. The most important has been faculty development—raising salaries and benefits for professors and using incentives and subsidies to attract new ones. Peking has spent



Hu Haoji, a senior at Tsinghua U.: Facilities are getting better, "but the quality of research is not improving."

\$12-million to attract 1,000 new Ph.D.'s, one-third of them Chinese citizens who did graduate work abroad. For example, with a promise of a \$250,000 research grant, a \$15,000 annual salary, and free housing—enough to be comfortably middle class in Beijing—Peking lured Mr. Li, the psychologist, back into its fold, even though he holds coveted permanent-resident status in Canada.

The two universities have also built more faculty apartments near their campuses. "Professors are much happier than before," says Zhou Xing, a Peking sociology professor. "They've fixed the basic complaints of low salaries and not enough housing."

Tsinghua has followed a similar reform model, but it has recruited foreign as well as Chinese talent. In October, it hired three American professors and one Hong Kong professor, all in engineering or scientific disciplines, paying each \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year for three years. One of the most prominent of the new hires is Gavriel Salvendy, a professor of industrial engineering at Purdue University and a specialist in ergonomics, who will become dean of Tsinghua's industrial-engineering department. In five years, Tsinghua plans to have at least 50 foreign professors on its faculty.

In the second area of its four-part approach, Peking has allocated money to improve academic programs through international exchanges and enhanced research. In addition, one-third of the government money went to new facilities, like a science building, and new power and water systems. Finally, students got a share of the pie, with improved dormitories, free Internet access in students' rooms, and new textbooks.

Mr. Min believes that the Ministry of Education will offer Peking

more money this year, but critics say Peking should do some rethinking first. Ira Cohen, the Beijing-based vice president of an education-consulting company, Universal Ideas, explains that grants from multinational and Chinese corporations, gifts from graduates who have been successful overseas, and "astonishing revenues" from business ventures mean that Peking and Tsinghua have incomes comparable to those of many elite institutions in other countries.

"But money in itself does not make for a world-class university," he cautions.

CHANGES MONEY CAN'T BUY

Besides better management, Mr. Cohen says, the universities must be more open about where they get their money and how they spend it, and must ultimately emphasize the students. Although research, he says, "is integral to the perception of being deemed a world-class institution, the true measurement is in the success of a university's graduates."

"China's students have an impressive record of contributing back to society," he continues. "However, these contributions can be enhanced ... through an investment in curriculum development for all disciplines that encourage innovation, creativity, freedom of expression." He refers to the humanities, which sometimes get short shrift in China.

Mr. Li, the psychologist, believes that China's university students, selected from the top scorers on a rigorous national examination, are among the world's best. And many Chinese students go on to graduate work at America's top universities. But despite their strenuous efforts to get into a Chinese university, some students end up doubting if they receive a good education.

"Our living conditions are bet-

ter, but they haven't put any money in pedagogy, just research," says Zhang Huanhuan, a sophomore studying automation at Shanghai's Communications University, which received \$150-million from the Ministry of Education and the Shanghai government as part of the 98-5 Project. "Students are very upset at the quality of the teachers—I would say that only one-quarter of my teachers actually understand the material they're teaching."

While the Ministry of Education has given the universities more autonomy in their finances, it still controls degree requirements. Political instruction courses such as "Deng Xiaoping Thought" are mandatory, and taking formal classes in another major is usually not permitted. Some general electives are available, but they do not count toward degrees. Despite the rigid curriculum, students at Peking flock to the electives that are held at night, and then struggle to keep awake in their required courses during the day.

The degree of freedom of speech at universities is among the highest in Chinese society, but it is still limited. Students can generally say what they want in class but must adhere to the party line in written examinations or else fail. The Chinese government controls scholarly publications and newspapers, so academics cannot usually publish papers that criticize Chinese society and government.

Zhou Haixia, a senior studying biology at Peking, says that "We can't pick our classes, so there's no incentive for the professors to be any good." The new recruits in the biology department, one of the university's best, never teach because they're too preoccupied with doing research, she says.

Mr. Min, the Peking vice president, sympathizes with the students: "We're a public university, so it's natural that the government

should have a say. But for the past 16 years, the government has been loosening control over universities."

CURRICULAR SHIFTS

While progress is slow, Peking is taking steps to ease its curricular requirements. What's more, new textbooks used at the world's best universities and courses taught in English are now widely available. In September, the university began an experimental program involving 80 freshmen: Following the American model, the students may choose courses and manage their weekly class schedules before they pick majors at the end of their second year.

Over at Tsinghua University, Hu Haoji, a senior studying electronics, is pleased with the better living conditions and research facilities. He says he can spend plenty of time on research but doesn't always like what he's doing in the lab. "Research grants have been increasing, but the quality of research is not improving," he says. "Professors obtain projects from companies, like writing accounting software for chain supermarkets, and then make us do them." Mr. Liu, the civil-engineering chairman, agrees that selfish profiteering has damaged Tsinghua's engineering department. He believes that neither Communications nor Tsinghua have spent public funds appropriately, because neither has a clear vision of "world class." "All these Tsinghua officials care about is winning government funds," he says. "But what did they do with the money once they got it? They built fountains and greened the landscape."

Mr. Liu also says that Tsinghua officials have a problem with priorities: "They never bothered to install broadband, so we still have to use the unreliable, slow telephone connection. For the 90th anniversary this April, Tsinghua spent millions building a stage just so performers can dance on it."

Peking and Tsinghua officials' financial choices have drawn fire even from their peers. At a recent conference, Shanghai Normal University's president, Yang Deguang, argued that with so much public money, the two should quit for-profit higher-education enterprises, such as adult learning and distance education.

Even the well-paid foreign-educated researchers grumble. After he signed a contract and landed in Beijing, Mr. Li had to fight hard for promised benefits, such as housing and research grants. He also concedes that Peking has a long way to go. "Peking still lacks talent. I'm not a world-class scientist," he says. "I'm not even third- or fourth-class. Optimistically speaking, Peking needs at least another 20 years to catch up."

But despite the difficulty and challenges, he is optimistic. "There are so many more opportunities in China than in Canada," he says. "I'm unhappy with some things, but I'm happy with the fact that Peking is willing to improve itself." ■