Higher Education in China
Zhou Ji
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Written by China’s Minister for Education, this is an authoritative account of the aims and achievements in the development of China’s system of higher education. It has a long history, starting with schools 3000 years ago and running up to the present headlong rush to achieve internationally reputed centres of higher learning within a few years of reaching the third millennium.

From his quotations of early Chinese philosophers to statements about the present, the aims have been both for personal development, including character, and to serve the needs of society, but with the latter becoming dominant since 1949. The flavour of this can be read in statements such as that if China is to sustain its development ‘it must count on science and technology and high calibre constructive members of society’. ‘That is why the Chinese government places education as a priority in its strategies—to rejuvenate China through science and education and to make it prosperous by cultivating talent’. Later in the book, China’s educational system is described as unhesitatingly designed to help attain the government’s development goal of turning China into an ‘all-round affluent society by 2020’ (p. 276). Universities continue to be required to develop the character of their students. In western societies this would, I suppose, mean trying to improve morality, encouraging ethical behaviour, honesty, tolerance, and so on. The nearest most universities get to this would be in courses on moral philosophy where such issues would be discussed. In China it seems to focus more on patriotism, obedience to the State, the study of Marxist doctrine and support for the Communist Party. The relevant courses are politics, Marxist theory and history of the Chinese revolution.

Like all numbers for China, those for higher education are astronomic and their growth spectacular. The gross attendance rate for 18–22 year olds soared from 3.4 million in 1990 to 19 million in 2004. Yet in 1952 there were only 190 000 students. The attendance rate in 2004 reached 19%, up from 9.8% in 1998. All this despite the shattering effect of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which scattered faculty, maltreated scholars as traitors and deprived a generation of Chinese of any worthwhile education. (This gets a very brief mention on p. 8 but does not figure in the otherwise comprehensive index.) But by 2004 the percentage of the age group in higher education was comparable with many industrially developed nations, with much higher per-capita incomes. Well aware that such rapid expansion can mean dilution of standards, China has taken various steps to deal with that problem. Some of these are outlined later in this review.
One major development was the extraction of many institutions of higher learning from the Government Departments where they were previously located. For example the Ministry of Finance was responsible for many institutions that trained students in accounting and finance, and many were found jobs in the Ministry. The same was true of most departments from agriculture to iron and steel. From about 1998 onwards, most universities were transferred to the Ministry of Education or to the governments of the provinces. Much reorganization, closures, mergers, and redistribution took place to provide a better geographic balance, improve efficiency and to allow easier access for students across this vast country.

China shows no squeamishness about selection of students and institutions for favourable treatment and extra funding in its pursuit of excellence. The State Council launched Project 211 in 1995. Out of over 1000 universities it aimed to produce 100 schools of higher learning with high standards in teaching, research and administration. Then, in 1999, Project 985 was initiated with the aim of producing a small number of world-class universities with internationally recognized research. Peking and Tsinghua were the first to be backed, but followed soon after by Fudan, Shanghai Jiaotong, Nanjing, Zhejiang, Xi’an Jiaotong, the University of Science and Technology of China, and Harbin Institute of Technology. They have been given extra resources to recruit excellent staff from home and abroad. They have hired prestigious professors and established special chairs.

The system remains highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education laying down detailed criteria for the recognition of ‘Key Academic Programmes’. These include having good development prospects, an important bearing on science and technology and on economic, social, and cultural development, or national defence. Also they should have a good academic leader with global influence, or at least be publicly recognized in China and with a well-structured team of teachers and researchers. Such a programme should be ranked highly for the number and quality of its doctoral students, and so on. It should have at least one research project of major significance. Its teaching and research conditions should be at an advanced level compared with its domestic counterparts. It should have a strong academic atmosphere and be active in both domestic and international academic exchanges. In 2002, the Ministry ratified 964 such programmes. The evaluation of quality and rewards for attaining higher standards are a key objective in China’s higher education policies today. Criteria are laid down for attaining grade promotion for staff, for courses, departments and universities. National prizes and awards are available for outstanding professors. What is not described in the book is who judges which professors and programmes meet the criteria.

The book is divided into 10 chapters covering the history of change from higher education in the imperial period to modern times, the current system and how it operates, how it attempts to improve quality, how research and out-reach are promoted, students from admission to financial assistance and job placement, adult education and life-long learning, ethnic diversity (catering for the minorities), information technology, international cooperation, and a final chapter on prospects for higher education in China.

For anyone who wants an up-to-date picture of China’s higher education, this book is essential reading. For a critical assessment, they must look elsewhere.

Alasdair Macbean
Lancaster University Management School,
UK