Tensions within the Changing Chinese Higher Education System

The processes of “massification” and systemic change in the Chinese higher education system are closely related. Of the two, systemic change has far deeper implications.

Comprised of four academic papers, this special issue of *Frontiers of Education in China* might be seen as a condensed version of a research project led by Professor Ruth Hayhoe, and presented in the book *Portraits of 21st Century Chinese Universities: In the Move to Mass Higher Education*. It might also be seen as an alternative portrait of China’s university sector. What is my reason for saying this? Although the authors of the book and the authors of this set of four articles are basically part of the same research group, the roles they have played differ considerably. The book was researched and written by four scholars living outside of China’s mainland. The special issue of this journal, on the other hand, is mainly the work of four mainland-based academics. For reasons of background and proximity to the institutions being researched, the impressions and critiques of China’s progress towards higher education “massification” by scholars from China’s mainland as against overseas scholars are somewhat different. Actually this interaction between the two distinct groups of scholars was part of the project’s original intention: a juxtaposition of “insider” and “outsider” viewpoints, which could provide a picture of China’s move to mass higher education that is both objective and relatively complete. In fact, the authors of the book and the authors of the articles for this special issue are largely in agreement with regard to the factual analysis of change, while the authors from China’s mainland have added some additional insights on the basis of the empirical findings of the case studies. Nevertheless the points of view of the two groups diverged somewhat in the way they interpreted the factual analysis and its theoretical implications. If the reader has a chance to read both the book and the articles in this special issue, an interesting comparison can be
made. From my personal point of view, the book adopts a long-term approach to the subject. It lays out some broad observations of the Chinese higher education “massification” process, in relation to global and historical change, and is written in a stimulating and open-ended way. The articles, by contrast focus more on the shorter term, providing a look at the constraining conditions and chosen strategies of various universities, investigating the interactions of the case universities with government authorities and other social organizations. They tend to be rather concrete and expressive of tensions that have arisen in the change process.

In all the four articles in this special issue there is a clear sense of tension, and this tension is a genuine reflection of the development of Chinese higher education, especially the process of institutional change. Gong Fang and Jun Li’s case analysis of Chinese key comprehensive universities reflects tensions between enhancing quality and expanding access, between responding to the demands of national authorities and meeting local needs. Zhou Guangli and Qiang Zha’s analysis of key polytechnic universities and Li Mei’s analysis of normal or education-related universities, reflect respectively the difficulties and dilemmas in the process of transformation from specialized institutions with a focus mainly on teaching into comprehensive and research-oriented institutions. In their analysis of the private university cases, Yan Fengqiao and Jing Lin reflect the tension between the market system and the principle of education as a public good, the contradiction between a traditional idea of civil society and the forms of commercial civil society now emerging in China. Even though these four types of institution appear to show different kinds of tension in the institutional change they are undergoing, the core or common tension they all face can be summed up in terms of a clash between tradition and modernity, realism and idealism, autonomy and responsibility, stability and change.

If we make a comparison between Chinese higher education reform and Chinese economic reform, the reader is likely to conclude that higher education reform entails greater difficulties and uncertainties. Although economic reform followed a path and rhythm determined by Deng Xiaoping’s appeal for caution, “feeling for stones as one crosses the river,” the direction of reform and openness was maintained and has become progressively stronger (Zheng, 2010, p. 4). In the transformation from a planned to a market system, from a closed to an open economy, the reform was confirmed by way of a combination of practical experimentation and theoretical research (Chen, 2009; Zhang, 2010). In future, China’s economic development and modernization still needs to be further oriented towards the market, internationalization, democratization and the fuller development of the legal system. But in respect to higher education reform and development, we cannot look to past success in a parallel way, and draw out a clear set of policies for the next stage of development, nor is it easy to evaluate