

Perils of Academic Competition, Past and Present

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It is common these days to observe that we live in an age of unprecedented globalization, not only in the realm of trade, but also in the realm of higher education. And in fact these two realms, of international business and higher education, are themselves increasingly interconnected. Perhaps nowhere in the world is this trend more visible than in China, where a host of high-profile international programs demonstrate impressive levels of both domestic and international investment in higher education: NYU-Shanghai, Ningbo-Nottingham, Duke-Kunshan, Liverpool-Xi'an Jiaotong, and many more. These initiatives often involve substantial support from tuition-driven universities in the US and UK, as well as from local governments in China. They are intended to be not only educationally innovative, but also economically productive and profitable. As a result, they compete with one another for “market share” of the global trade in higher education.

The business models that underpin contemporary experiments in globalized higher education are in many respects far removed from the Christian Colleges of Republican China with which this conference is concerned. That earlier experiment in higher education was driven by Western religious institutions and was funded in large part by contributions from American, English and European church congregations through their mission boards. Today's process of globalized higher education is propelled not by churches seeking converts, but by governments seeking to promote economic growth and by universities seeking to improve both revenues and rankings. And the instigators of these efforts are no longer confined to the West, but are diffused across the globe.

Despite the very different motives, mechanisms and scale that separate past and present efforts at globalizing higher education, there are I believe some instructive parallels. Most fundamental, perhaps, is that both endeavors – like

the process of globalization itself – raise profound questions about the intent and outcome of academic competition within and between universities and countries. International relations specialists often debate the impact of *economic* globalization on the likelihood of world war or peace. It is also worth considering the impact of *educational* globalization on the prospects for international cooperation or conflict.

Most of us probably feel that, while conflict is bad and should be avoided, cooperation is generally good for educational progress and should be encouraged. And we may also be inclined to welcome global competition as a spur to such progress. After all, competition among universities to attract the best students, and competition among countries to foster the best research universities in the world, would seem to serve everyone’s interests. Globalized education, we are often told, is essential for the cultivation of world citizens who are informed by the best available knowledge. But experiments in the globalization of higher education, both past and present, suggest that academic competition can also have a less benign side. Without meaningful standards of scholarly and pedagogical excellence, competition in the realm of higher education may lead to wasted resources and even conflict, rather than to the advance of either global citizenship or global knowledge. Let me illustrate this proposition with two examples, first one drawn from the past (which I will discuss in greater detail) and then one from the present (which I will touch on only briefly).

I’d like to begin with the case of Cheeloo University (or Shantung Christian University as it was known in English) and its connection to the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI). There is an article on exactly this topic by Professors Tao Feiya and Liu Jiafeng of the Shandong University History Department, published in 1999 in the journal *文史哲*.¹ Professor Liu apologized when he shared this article with me last year, explaining that he was only a graduate student when he helped to conduct the research for it, but no apologies on his part were necessary. It is an excellent article. Since reading the article, I have had a chance to examine the

¹ 陶飞亚与刘家峰, “哈佛燕京学社与齐鲁大学的国学研究” *文史哲* (1999年第1期): 97-103。

files on Cheeloo University held in the archives of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. The contents of the HYI archives are consistent with the article by Professors Tao and Liu. Professors Tao and Liu note that the HYI was important in promoting Chinese studies (国学) at Cheeloo, as at other Christian colleges in China. But they also observe that, due to the very different academic and cultural contexts in China and America at the time, there were significant differences in perspective between the HYI and Cheeloo University which resulted in considerable friction over the course of their cooperation. For all the many positive things that HYI did for Sinological studies at Cheeloo, they conclude, HYI was never able to appreciate the importance to Cheeloo of its academic competition with other universities. As a consequence, HYI's own policies – of stressing undergraduate education over advanced research – could never be fully realized.

This analysis is certainly plausible, and it is also consistent factually with what I found in the HYI archives. But I would like to put forward a slightly different interpretation. While Professors Tao and Liu suggest that the urge to compete with other universities arose on the Cheeloo side, I would propose that the HYI bore as much or greater responsibility for stoking this competitive inclination. And while Professors Tao and Liu portray this competitive urge in a positive light, I have a somewhat less favorable evaluation of it.

It is true that HYI, like the United Board, encouraged a division of labor among the Christian colleges in China. But in the eyes of HYI this was not really an egalitarian arrangement, but rather a hierarchical one in which Yenching University towered at the top of the pyramid while the other Christian colleges were encouraged to admire and emulate it. When HYI requested that the other Christian colleges submit their annual reports to the Harvard-Yenching Research Office on the campus of Yenching University, rather than directly to the Harvard University headquarters in Cambridge, MA, Shantung Christian University readily agreed to the request, explaining that “While institutional jealousies are not entirely absent, even in China, all of our colleges have learned to recognize that each one has its own specialized field, and naturally look to others for leadership elsewhere. Everyone recognizes, for example, the leadership of Nanking in Agriculture,

Cheeloo in Medicine, and Yenching in Chinese Cultural Studies.”² This sounded like a reasonable and equitable division of labor among the Chinese Christian colleges, but because funding from HYI was intended primarily to support Chinese cultural studies, and because Yenching University was viewed as the leading Christian college when it came to that field, an inherent ranking system developed in the view of HYI.

To be sure, all the Christian colleges in China recognized the value of developing Chinese studies as a means of enhancing their acceptability and respectability in local society. In the case of Cheeloo University, its Sinological Research Institute – funded by HYI – developed important collaborations with the Shandong Provincial Library, the Shandong Archeological Society, the Shandong representatives of Academia Sinica, and other prominent institutions and intellectuals in the province. The core research of the Sinological Research Institute focused on the historical geography of Shandong Province, and the origins of Qilu culture and its contributions to Chinese civilization. James Menzies, the Canadian Presbyterian missionary and Cheeloo faculty member who was a distinguished collector and scholar of oracle bones, reported appreciatively to HYI in 1936, “The University is in a much better position than it has ever been in the eyes of the Chinese public, and the work of the Institute has won the warm approval of the educational circles.”³ The local Chinese community, he wrote, “realize(s) now that Christian universities are interested in understanding the culture of the Chinese nation and in training their students in the best modern methods of understanding and appreciating it.”⁴ Professor Menzies noted that the Mayor of Qingdao, Admiral Shen, had contributed \$1,000 Mexican toward the establishment of a small museum on the Cheeloo campus intended to heighten interest in studying ancient Chinese history by modern archeological methods.⁵

² “Shantung Christian University, 1929-1937” in Harvard-Yenching Institute archives, p. 77 (November 8, 1933).

³ November 18, 1936 report from James Menzies of Shantung Christian University to Dr. George Chase, Chairman of the HYI Education Committee, in *ibid.*, 97-101.

⁴ “Sixth Yearly Report of the Sinological Research Institute at Shantung Christian University (1935-36),” in *ibid.*, 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

In the minds of missionary-scholars like James Menzies, advanced research on Chinese culture was a way to win over the local elite – no small concern in a place like Shandong, where memories of the Boxer Uprising were still fresh. But according to the ranking system of the HYI, Shantung Christian University was not a leader in Chinese studies and therefore must concentrate on building up its Chinese studies by focusing on undergraduate teaching, rather than conducting advanced Sinological research. According to HYI, among all the Christian colleges in China only Yenching University offered “world-class” graduate training in Chinese cultural studies. As the Educational Committee of HYI concluded, “In the postgraduate field [of Chinese studies], Yenching stands alone.”⁶

Naturally, Yenching University was eager to promote this image of its own superiority, and thereby garner the lion’s share of HYI funding for Chinese studies. Sensing competition from Cheeloo’s newly established Institute for Sinological Research, President John Leighton Stuart of Yenching stated at a meeting of the HYI Board of Trustees in 1933, “the most unsatisfactory situation was probably at Shantung Christian University, where the favorable rate of exchange had resulted in a surplus which they were using on a program of expansion that is leading to questioning within the institution as to whether the policy is wise.”⁷ President Stuart was suggesting that Shantung Christian University already had more money than it knew what to do with: In other words, additional HYI financial support to Cheeloo was unnecessary and unwise; the funding could better be directed to his own Yenching University. Professor Serge Elisseeff, the first director of HYI, made a visit to Shantung Christian University in the spring of 1937 which reinforced this judgmental assessment; as Professor Elisseeff put it, “The courses at Shantung are still given in the old-fashioned way, and they can be improved only by some modern-trained Chinese scholars. The situation there is the same as at the other universities, with the exception of Yenching, where they have Professor Hung.”⁸

⁶ Ibid., 124.

⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸ Ibid., 168.

In fact, Cheeloo's research in Chinese studies was hardly substandard. During the wartime period, the Sinological Research Institute of Cheeloo – relocated in Chengdu – employed three of China's most distinguished Sinologists: Gu Jiegang, Qian Mu, and Lv Simian (who worked for the Sinological Research Institute in Shanghai). Gu Jiegang had previously been a member of the Harvard-Yenching Research Office at Yenching University, but with the outbreak of war he had left Peking for Kunming. Gu later became the director of Cheeloo's Sinological Research Institute in Chengdu, but this did not change HYI's view that Yenching University remained the premier place in China for Chinese studies. In commenting on the quality of research being conducted at Cheeloo's Sinological Research Institute, Elisseeff criticized its scholarly publications for lacking method, lacking originality and for being "old fashioned" and "not worth publishing." He stressed that Shantung Christian University needed a leader like Professor Hung at Yenching to provide guidance in modern methodology, and he recommended that Cheeloo send a young scholar for at least a year of study with William Hung at Yenching University. Then, if the Cheeloo scholar was deemed outstanding in the eyes of Professor Hung, he would be offered an HYI fellowship to continue his studies at Harvard University, which in Elisseeff's estimation was the world's premier center for Chinese studies.⁹

In Chengdu, the HYI encouraged the relocated Shantung Christian University to join together with the relocated University of Nanking and Western China Union University to offer a common undergraduate curriculum in Chinese studies. The Institute frequently expressed displeasure with the large amount of funding being spent by Shantung University on research, rather than on teaching. Elisseeff questioned, for example, why Lv Simian was receiving a special research fee of \$6,000 – almost as much as his high salary of \$7,000 – when he remained in Shanghai and did no teaching for Cheeloo.¹⁰ The Institute also insisted that the three universities give up plans for separate academic journals in Chinese studies, and publish only a single journal with HYI support.¹¹

⁹ "Shantung Christian University, 1938-1945," in Harvard-Yenching Archives, pp. 22-43.

¹⁰ December 4, 1942 letter from Serge Elisseeff to President Liu of Shantung Christian University, in *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

HYI's treatment of Shantung, Nanking, and Western China Union universities was in stark contrast to its treatment of Yenching University, which published its own 燕京学报 (the Chinese equivalent of the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* published in English at Harvard) with generous HYI funding. The other Christian colleges in China were also not permitted to use the Harvard-Yenching name, again unlike Yenching whose campus hosted the Harvard-Yenching Research Office in Peking. On one occasion, Serge Elisseeff exploded when he received a letter that referred to Gu Jiegang as "Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute at Cheeloo." Elisseeff fired off an angry retort, "The Harvard-Yenching Institute is a corporation situated only in Cambridge, MA. In China it has an office only, in Peking, and an Executive Secretary, and this name should not be used by the affiliated universities."¹²

It was not only Elisseeff who bristled at the other Christian universities' efforts to vie for HYI's favor. Yenching University was also unhappy about the challenge posed by Gu Jiegang's (patriotically motivated) move to Chengdu to direct the Cheeloo Sinological Research Institute. As William Hung wrote to Serge Elisseeff, "I have advised [Gu Jiegang] time and again against his branching out into numerous activities, academic and otherwise . . . I thought he ought to return to Yenching in the autumn of 1937."¹³ Hung and Elisseeff were especially concerned about an index to the dynastic histories which Gu Jiegang was compiling with HYI funding, an undertaking that seemed to be in direct competition with the Sinological index project directed by William Hung at Yenching University.¹⁴

In the estimation of HYI, Cheeloo suffered even by comparison with the other affiliated Christian universities. When Shantung Christian University moved to Chengdu in 1938, it was immediately impressed by the University of Nanking's independent research institute of Chinese studies, funded with HYI support. Naturally, Shantung Christian University hoped for similar support. But according

¹² Ibid., 59.

¹³ November 8, 1939 letter from William Hung to Serge Elisseeff, in *ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

to Elisseeff, although Nanking was certainly not at the level of Yenching, nevertheless Nanking had a “well-organized department of Chinese with outstanding teachers” and was therefore prepared to have an independent research institute at the beginning of its affiliation with HYI.¹⁵ By contrast, Elisseeff claimed in a 1945 letter to the Shantung Christian University Board of Governors that “the Department of Chinese at Shantung has not been strong at any time in my experience, even as the resources provided by HYI were ample to achieve this.”¹⁶ Elisseeff insisted that the allegedly poor quality of the Chinese Department at Cheeloo was due to the university’s focus on advanced research at the expense of basic teaching, and he instructed the university to immediately shut down its Sinological Research Institute or risk losing all HYI support.

For a few years, Cheeloo did curtail its research activities in favor of building up undergraduate instruction in Chinese studies. However as late as January 1950, the Dean of Arts at Cheeloo, Professor Chang Hsi-shan (who, despite Elisseeff’s earlier injunction, was referred to locally as “head of the Harvard-Yenching Institute in Cheeloo”), was promoting advanced research as well as undergraduate Chinese studies. One of the foreign professors at Cheeloo, S. F. Drake, wrote to Elisseeff after the Communist takeover of Shandong, “we particularly hope that the Harvard-Yenching Institute will consider it worthwhile to maintain its [research] program in China. I can conceive of few things more important at the present time than the diligent study of the sources of Chinese civilization.”¹⁷ Drake, like earlier generations of Western missionary educators, was optimistic (if naïve) in believing that “there is a gradual swing round towards the study of the roots of Chinese civilization . . . if we can maintain our work steadily for the next few years, we shall find its value once again fully realized and shall be able to see more clearly how great a contribution it is making to the life of the people and the future of the country.”¹⁸ For Drake, as for Menzies before him, the purpose of promoting Chinese studies at the Christian colleges was clear: it

¹⁵ Ibid., 158-159.

¹⁶ Ibid., 160.

¹⁷ “Shantung Christian University, 1946-1950,” in the Harvard-Yenching Archives, p. 76.

¹⁸ Ibid., 105.

was intended to win acceptance for the missionaries' pedagogical and proselytizing enterprise from Chinese society. But of course this hope evaporated when all the Christian colleges were condemned as agents of Western cultural imperialism and were closed down in 1952. Not for another thirty years would the HYI return to China and to Shantung University, under very different circumstances from those that had prompted its earlier involvement.

What lessons should we draw from this early experiment in globalized higher education? For me, while I certainly appreciate HYI's commitment to undergraduate teaching and its emphasis on academic quality, one of the key lessons to emerge from reading the archives of that period is the ambiguous and arbitrary standards used to evaluate scholarly excellence, and the problems surrounding competition based upon such standards. One cannot help but suspect that the close personal, institutional, and financial interests that connected HYI-sponsored Sinologists at Harvard and Yenching universities in the 1930s and 1940s contributed to a smug confidence that theirs were the most "modern," most "original," and most "outstanding" centers for Chinese studies – with little need to explain the actual basis on which such sweeping judgments were being made. The fact that such evaluations carried substantial funding implications, in the form of generous grants from the Charles Martin Hall estate and the HYI, turned self-promoting assessments into self-fulfilling prophecies.

Today the dangers of academic competition driven by arbitrary global standards are that much greater, involving much larger sums of money generated by both public and private sponsorship. Let me conclude with a brief discussion of a contemporary example: the proposed Yenching Academy (燕京学堂) at Peking University. Although its financial sources have not been made public, it seems clear that the Yenching Academy is intended to compete with Tsinghua University's new Schwarzman College, funded by American businessman Stephen Schwarzman and other major US corporations. When Tsinghua's Schwarzman College was announced, it was touted as the most significant initiative of its kind since the inauguration of the Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford University a century ago. Cecil Rhodes – for whom that earlier program was named – is of course

legendary as an unabashed proponent of British cultural imperialism, and the Rhodes scholarships were earmarked for outstanding young citizens of current and former British colonies, including the United States, to send this future “world elite” to Oxford to imbibe “world-class” academic culture.

With Tsinghua University having received a \$300 million endowment for its Schwarzman College, to offer one-year Master’s degrees taught in English to the future “world elite” in fields such as business management, public policy, and international relations, Peking University announced that it would establish an alternative venture rumored to be even better funded by Chinese businessmen, named the Yenching Academy, to offer one-year Master’s degrees taught in English to the future “world elite” in the field of Chinese studies [中国学]. And while Tsinghua’s Schwarzman College would not open its doors until 2016, Beida would beat it to the punch by opening its Yenching Academy a full year earlier, in the fall of 2015.

The Schwarzman College proposal generated little if any public criticism among the Tsinghua students and faculty, but the Yenching Academy proposal sparked vociferous opposition from many students and faculty at Peking University and beyond. Students expressed concern that the buildings for the new, elitist “college within a college” would occupy what many consider to be the most beautiful part of the former Yenching University campus, the Jingyuan. Responding to the public outcry, Peking University wisely retreated from its original ambition to construct a large underground campus in Jingyuan, and soon the criticisms shifted to other contentious issues ranging from the impact of the Yenching Academy on personnel policies for the Peking University faculty to the academic value of a one-year MA taught in English to mostly foreign students in an ill-defined new field of “Chinese studies.”

As is the case with many heated internet debates, some of the discussion concerning the Yenching Academy has been intemperate and inaccurate. For example, there have been suggestions by some Peking University faculty members that the Harvard-Yenching Institute was involved in advocating and

funding the Yenching Academy. This is incorrect; HYI had nothing to do with Peking University's decision to establish a Yenching Academy and is providing no funding for it.

Even though there is some misinformation being disseminated in the course of the debate over the Yenching Academy, I think it is overall a good thing that expensive and elitist programs in "globalized higher education" should attract serious public attention and discussion. Are the frenzied competition and lavish funding directed toward such programs proportionate to their actual academic benefits? Here I have in mind not only Schwarzman College and Yenching Academy, but also Duke Kunshan University and NYU Shanghai, or for that matter the Harvard Shanghai Center in Pudong or even Harvard's glitzy new Allston campus (whose state-of-the-art infrastructure and cutting-edge technology resemble that of China's new "university cities").

These contemporary efforts are part of an intense international competition in higher education, fueled in large measure by the global quest for higher revenues and rankings. We still do not really know what criteria appropriately capture the meaning of a "world-class university" or "world-class Chinese studies" (any more than the Harvard-Yenching Institute in the 1930s really knew what constituted world-class Sinology). In the frenetic race to ascend in the academic rankings (whether HYI's informal rankings in the 1930s or Jiaotong's formal Academic Rankings of World Universities today), we run the risk of compromising the intellectual and institutional diversity and vitality – both among countries and among universities within countries – that is, I believe, our best guarantee of a successful and sustainable system of higher education.