Reflections on the Case Studies for China's Move to Mass Higher Education Prof. Ruth Hayhoe (OISE/U of Toronto)

Our research project on China's Move to Mass Higher Education: Implications for Civil Society and Global Cultural Dialogue has two major components: The first phase is a policy study of the decision-making process, and of the empirical process of rapid expansion of higher enrolment over the period from 1990 to the present. The second phase is a series of twelve case studies, where we wish to explore how different types of institutions have experienced the move to mass higher education. In looking at the experience of these twelve institutions, we hope to address our three main questions:

- 1. What kinds of cultural resources are the case universities drawing upon from their own civilization, and how will these inform their activities, as they move onto \(^{\subset}\) a global stage?
- 2. How has the move to mass higher education stimulated civil society and the emergence of forms of democracy shaped by Chinese civilization?
- 3. How has the move to mass higher education affected the diversity of the system and what have been the consequences for equity of access and provision?

Why Case Studies?

In his classic text on case study methodology, Robert Yin notes how the case study is a research approach "whose unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews and observations." (Yin, 1989, 20).

Yin goes on to note that case studies are not generalizable to populations or universes, but they are generalizable to theoretical propositions. (Yin, 1989, 21)

Yin makes a distinction between case studies intended to answer the questions of what, why or how. Case studies oriented towards the question of "what" might be defined as "exploratory" case studies, while those addressing the questions of "why" and "how" could be seen as "explanatory" case studies.

For the purposes of our study on China's move to mass higher education, our broad goal is to "identify emerging cultural features of a new Chinese university model, and interpret those features in relation to China's philosophical heritage," (Program of Research, p. 15) We are inspired by the way Flexner defined the spirit of the German university of the 19th century, and Kerr developed the concept of "multiversity" to depict the American university in the 20th century.

We could thus say that our case studies are exploratory in the first instance. We do not wish to impose one or several theories from the international literature, but listen attentively to the ways in which Chinese university leaders, faculty and students define their priorities and their most significant achievements over the recent period, and reflect on these views within an interpretive framework of Chinese civilization – both Confucian epistemology, broadly defined, and the institutional culture of traditional Chinese scholarship.

We also plan to observe the campuses of our case institutions, and reflect upon how their organization of space and their architectural styles express their emerging ethos. In this context, we will ask university leaders, faculty members and students to tell

us which building on their campus is most expressive of their identity, and why. We will then photograph these buildings as illustrative material for each of the case studies.

Our case studies are thus exploratory in the first instance, and within the broader goals of our project, as expressed in question one above. At the same time, there are also explanatory elements, particular with reference to questions two and three.

Question two uses the concept of "civil society" and puts forward the proposition that the move to mass higher education in the Chinese context is likely to stimulate democratic change in Chinese society. As the number of young people participating in higher education increases rapidly, a more highly educated generation of youth is finding employment not only in government, but in independent economic and social entities that are proliferating within the "socialist market economy." This more highly educated cohort of youth will demand greater accountability from their political rulers at all levels.

Various terms have been used in the western literature on civil society, including "the public sphere" (Habermas, 1989), "social capital" (Putnam, 2002), "popular participation and civic mindedness" (Almond &Verba, 1965). It is our intention through these case studies to seek understanding of the link between higher education expansion and democratic change in the Chinese context, through listening to the views of university leaders, faculty and students about participation in decision-making, individual and group rights, and responsibilities within the university and in the wider society. We hope thus to develop explanatory propositions which adapt theories drawn from the Western literature to the Chinese context, and to identify concepts within Chinese discourse for the process of democratic change that is taking place.

Finally, our third question addresses structural and organizational features of Chinese universities under a mass system. Have they become more diversified, as has tended to happen in the move to mass higher education elsewhere, or less diversified? What have been the consequences of expansion for equity and access of provision? This question is addressed in both the policy study and the empirical study of system changes, but we plan to address it also within the case studies. We will seek to learn from each institution what have been the consequences of expansion for equity of participation and representation in faculty and student ranks by gender, socio-economic background, geographical region and minority status. How far has expansion benefited all groups within Chinese society, or given greater opportunities to those already in more advantaged positions? How do the case universities regard inequities that may be developing and what steps are they taking to deal with them?

We are also interested to understand how the case universities find themselves positioned within the expanded higher education system, and what strategies they are adopting to overcome institutional disadvantages which may arise from geographical location, historical development characteristics or curricular focus. Two key questions may help us understand how the leadership in each case is positioning their institution within the overall system.

The first relates to the issue of merger. In a context where national policy strongly urged mergers orchestrated from above, some case institutions went along with national merger plans, others rejected merger and retained their original historic identity, while a third group selected their own merger partner(s). Understanding the reasons for these

different responses to the opportunity or threat of merger will help us better interpret the differing characteristics of China's 21st century universities.

The second question relates to the issue of creating "second-tier colleges" which offer hugely expanded access to students of lower academic achievement in a privatized higher education environment. Some case institutions have embraced this opportunity, while others have chosen to focus on their academic responsibility to those "regular" students who meet their core admission requirements. We will be interested to learn the reasons behind these different choices and directions.

In setting criteria for the selection of our 12 case universities, we recognized the importance of differences as well as commonalities, and selected nine public universities and three private universities. The public universities are within the top 38 that have been identified for priority funding, as these are the institutions that have the resources to become global actors and bring China's cultural resources onto a global stage. Similarly, we have chosen three private universities which are well established and in the forefront of the movement for private higher education. They are thus among the few private universities that the government has recognized for the granting of state-recognized academic degrees.

Our twelve case universities are all leading institutions, yet there are important differences among them. There are institutions from the Northeast, Northwest, Southwest, Central China, East China and North China and they are located in twelve different provinces. Among the public universities, most are comprehensive universities in their curricular orientation, but there is also one normal or teacher education university and there are two science and engineering universities. Historically, six of the public

universities go back to the pre-1949 era, while three were founded after 1949. One was established as a private university in the 1920s, becoming public in the 1940s. The three private universities are all comprehensive in curricular coverage, yet have their own unique curricular emphases.

While our cases are all drawn from the top stratum of higher education in China, they illustrate different possibilities and choices for leading Chinese universities in the 21st century. In addressing our three broad questions, and sketching out the emerging ethos of Chinese universities in the 21st century, we will attend to some of the distinctive features that characterize each institution's ethos and character, while seeking also to identify common features, rooted in Chinese scholarly culture. Recognized as legal persons since the reforms of 1993, Chinese universities have a considerable level of autonomy, which is reflected in the increasing diversification of their funding sources, and the differing institutional profiles they are developing.

Four major types of data will be used:

- Documents such as the institution's mission, strategic plan and institutional history
- Base data which provides a profile of change over the period from 1990 to 2005, including enrolments, faculty profile, funding sources, curricular change and degrees awarded.
- Interview data, from interviews with university leaders and focus group discussions with selected faculty and student groups
- 4. Observation data including photographs of the campus

One of the main concerns of this paper is to consider the inter-relation among these different types of data, and particularly the relationship between our interview questions and the data we have collected in documentary form, and in the base data tables for each institution. It is important that our interview questions should take into account information from documents and base data, while at the same time addressing our three broad questions, relating to culture, civil society and structural change.

In order to ensure that the case studies which we construct are recognized as authentic by members of the case universities, we are inviting full participation by a scholar within each university who has experience in higher education research. This collaborating scholar will work with us in developing the base data, participate in all of the interviews and focus group meetings, and be one of three co-authors in writing up the chapter about their university for our planned book, *Portraits of 21st Century Chinese Universities*. There will thus be an internal voice contributing to the development of each case study, alongside of two core members of the project from the North American side.

Lessons from Burton Clark's higher education case studies

At this point, it may be helpful for us to reflect on the work of a master scholar in higher education, who has made extensive use of case studies to explore and explain recent higher education developments in an international context. This is Professor Burton Clark, of University of California in Los Angeles. His book *The Entrepreneurial University*, first published in 1998, was followed by *Sustaining Change in Universities:*Continuities in case studies and concepts, published in 2004. The Entrepreneurial University provides in-depth case studies of five northern European universities,

identified as entrepreneurial. *Sustaining Change* follows up on the development of these five institutions, demonstrating how their new entrepreneurial model has been sustained. It then used the same framework of analysis to look at three more universities, Makerere in Uganda, the Catholic University of Chile, and Monash University in Australia. It also gives brief vignettes of five American universities whose entrepreneurial spirit is described as "genetic."

Clearly, the purpose of our case studies of Chinese universities is quite different from that of Burton Clark's case studies of entrepreneurial universities. Nevertheless, there may be valuable lessons we can learn from the approach Clark used in these two books. It is also useful to remember that *The Entrepreneurial University* was translated into Chinese by Professor Wang Chengxu of Zhejiang University and has had considerable influence among Chinese university leaders.

The first point to reflect on in *The Entreprenurial University* is Clark's choice of institutions for this study. All five universities are in European settings, where higher education systems are almost entirely public, and closely regulated by the state. Clark read widely and took advice from higher education scholars and leaders to identify five institutions which had distinguished themselves by a self-initiated transformation that caught the attention of those interested in higher education innovation. He then proceeded to study these five institutions through the collection of documents about their development, both historical and contemporary, and visits which allowed him to carry out interviews of the leadership at various levels, as well as observe administrative practices, curricular and research innovations and initiatives whereby the institutions were responding to a local and regional public.

Clark made a strong point in introducing his work that he was not interested in national higher education policy for the four nations concerned (the United Kingdom, Holland, Sweden and Finland), nor was he interested in the broader features of their higher education systems, except as a context within which to understand and interpret the five cases. (Clark, 2004, p.2) After immersing himself in institutional documents, observations of practice and interview data from the five institutions, he came up with what might be described as a grounded theory, or set of propositions, about the conditions that nurtured these entrepreneurial institutions:

- A strengthened steering core, whereby the institutions' leadership had organized themselves in ways that made them remarkably effective in initiating and supporting innovation.
- An enhanced development periphery, whereby research and development units
 normally having a low profile become stimulated into taking important initiatives
 that bring in funds as well as opportunities for academic enhancement and
 diversification.
- 3. A discretionary funding base, with a shift in most institutions from near total reliance on state funding to diversified funding sources whereby state funding makes up a far less significant portion of the whole.
- 4. A stimulated heartland, whereby mainstream academic departments become energized to offer new programs with greater potential for application and local relevance and some possibility of income generation.
- 5. An entrepreneurial belief a change in the institutional culture towards valuing openness and change over tradition and classical academic culture.

While Clark finds this framework helpful in explaining the emergence of an entrepreneurial spirit in all five institutions, the detailed content of his case studies shows his attention to differing factors in each case which may have encouraged change and opening up. He also tends to identify and highlight distinctive initiatives, which have been crucial in the development of an entrepreneurial profile in each case.

Both historical and geographical factors played a significant role. Thus in the case of Chalmers University, the fact that it had been founded in the early 1800s as a private institution dedicated to technical education, and only much later incorporated into the public higher education system in Sweden was important. The history of Strathclyde university in the Scottish context was also significant, since it had been founded in 1796 by a Scottish professor in protest against the academicism of the University of Glasgow and with the determination of emphasizing "practical arts for practical students." (Clark, 1998, p. 61). Geographical factors were important in the case of Twente in the Netherlands, established as a new technological university in the 1960s in a relatively remote eastern part of the country, far from the urban centres of the major academic universities. Similarly, Joensuu in Finland is located in a fairly remote region on the eastern side of the country, and was established in the 1960s for the specific purpose of teacher education.

Another factor which was characteristic of most of the "entrepreneurial universities" was the fact that their curricular profile was not that of the traditional academic comprehensive university, rather more oriented towards a specialist arena, mainly industrial or technological fields, in one case teacher education. Warwick

University was the only one of the five with a more traditional academic curriculum in its early years, founded as one of seven "new" universities in UK in the 1960s, and setting its goals as being both "discipline" led and relevant to industrial needs in its early years (Clark, 1998,p. 14).

In depicting how each of these five universities rose from rather marginal status within their national systems to institutions that could claim high regard for their academic profiles, as well as their innovative orientation, Clark tended to highlight one or two major initiatives. In the case of Warwick, it was their project to attract a large number of highly qualified research fellows in different fields, who should be drawn by excellent conditions for research through a widely competitive international search process. This initiative brought a large cohort of talented young scholars who raised the university's research profile to a remarkably high position within national rankings. In the case of Strathclyde, it was a vigorous program of applied research oriented to local and regional needs, with the particular success of a Drug Research Institute, which not only brought in significant income but developed into an international network with links to many developing countries in the development of an environmentally sustainable approach to the use of plant materials (Clark, 1998, p. 74).

In the case of Twente, the initiation of structured relationships with small and medium size companies led to a very successful approach to technology transfer and the creation of new knowledge intensive companies in a nearby science park which became widely emulated in Europe. A privatized business school contributed to further international influence, as well as a Center for Higher Education Policy Studies which became an international leader in higher education policy research. Chalmers in Sweden

adopted a new model of organization, as a foundation university, which receives some base funding from the state yet is quasi-private in the high degree of autonomy it enjoys within Sweden's public system. Finally Joensuu in Finland, moved from being a poorly resourced local teacher education institution to a comprehensive university with a strong faculty of forestry, significant research in basic sciences and a flourishing interinterdisciplinary program in local Karelian culture.

In Clark's case studies, significant and transformative initiatives are highlighted in ways that give concrete expression to the unique features of each case, while also bringing out that which can be discerned as common to the transformation of each of the five institutions. Clark's focus is on the concept of "entrepreneurship" in higher education, and his cases both "explore" the emerging concept and "explain" the changes in management, organizational structure and financial provisioning that have made it possible. They also illustrate the variety of initiatives and forms of academic innovation that have resulted, showing that entrepreneurship is not limited to fields such as business, technological development and applied scientific research, but can also be found in arenas such as higher education and regional cultural development.

For the purposes of our twelve case studies of Chinese universities, Clark's approach has some valuable lessons. First of all, it is important to listen and observe carefully rather than impose one's own pre-conceived theories or hypotheses. Clark was seeking to understand one central concept, that of entrepreneurship in higher education. Likewise, we are focusing on the emerging ethos of 21st century Chinese universities and those qualities of spirit and culture which they may have in common, and which can be interpreted in relation to their roots in Chinese civilization. Here the philosophical

literature on the contemporary relevance of Confucian thought to a global move "beyond the Enlightenment" will be relevant, including works by William Theodore de Bary (1996), David Hall and Roger Ames (1999), Tu Wei-ming (1998) and Yu Ying-shih (1994).

Moving from exploration to explanation, Clark was seeking to develop a grounded theory that would explain the process of becoming entrepreneurial over a ten to fifteen year time period. The parallel in our case is a search to understand how dramatic expansion of enrolments is affecting Chinese universities with reference to civil society or democratization in the context of China – we expect to find greater independence, as universities take advantage of their status as legal persons and as students and faculty demand greater participation in decision-making. It will also be interesting to see what differences emerge between public and private universities, hinterland and coastal universities, science-oriented and comprehensive universities in this regard. We are searching for some overall patterns of change that can be seen in all twelve cases and relate broadly to the concept of civil society, as well as distinctive pathways expressing different possibilities in the differing contexts. Relevant literature for interpreting this material includes that by scholars working on civil society internationally and in the Chinese context. (Frolic, 1997, He, 1997a & b, Ma, 2006)

Thirdly, we want to understand issues of structure, diversity, equity and participation at the institutional level. We will try to assess how far China's universities are experiencing parallel effects of massification that have been identified in the international literature (Bereday, 1973, Birnbaum, 1983, Clark, 1996, Geiger, 1996, Hayhoe, 1995, Rhoades, 1990, Trow, 2006) and what measures they are adopting to

deal with them – including issues of equity of participation and representation, changes in pedagogical approach in response to larger and more diverse student bodies, issues of the employment of graduates etc.

In the development of questions for our interviews with university leaders, and focus group meetings with faculty and students, we need to reflect on the ways in which the questions relate to documents being collected for the study, and base data sets for each institution. The questions for university leaders and faculty/student focus groups (below) will be organized in the three categories of culture, civil society and structure and equity, with reference made to documentary and statistical information relevant to each question in square brackets beside the question.

In crafting each of the case study chapters, we want to give attention to findings that relate to each of the three major questions and then develop a holistic and contoured picture of each institution, that reflects elements of Chinese culture and civilization while also highlighting diverse and unique initiatives or emphases that characterize particular cases. As artists as well as scholars, we want to be able to be able to present these twelve portraits of 21st century universities to the wider scholarly world in such a way that people will say, "Oh, those are the qualities of China's scholarly culture that we have heard Tu Wei-ming or Yu Ying-shih talk about, but we have never seen in a concrete way before!" We also want them to say, "How interesting to see the diversity of initiatives and approaches that have arisen from Chinese scholarly culture. This is quite different from the conformism, hierarchy and top-down control we have always associated with the popular stereotype of state Confucianism."

A Questions for University leaders

Culture

- 1. Please explain to us the vision and mission of your university. How have they been developed, and who have been involved?
- 2. What important figures and significant events in your institutional history have had an impact on the ethos and culture of your university?
- 3. Two thousand years ago the *Great Learning (Daxue)* and the *Classic of Learning (Xueji)* had already begun to theorize the Chinese experience of higher education. China also has a long tradition of higher education institutions, such as the Taixue, Guozijian and Shuyuan, and systems such as the civil service examinations. Do any of your recent innovations come from this heritage of Chinese education? If so, please tell us in what ways.
- 4. What foreign universities does yours have significant cooperation with? Do you pay attention specifically to one or two of them, in order to learn from them and draw on their experience to improve your own development?
- 5. When the world is moving towards "dialogue among civilizations", do you believe Chinese civilization has something to offer to the global community? If yes, in what aspects? In what ways is your university doing something to facilitate Chinese culture's move into the global community?
- 6. How does the spatial organization of your campus communicate your ethos, and which building do you consider most symbolic of the ethos of your university?

- 7. What are the most significant curricular changes which you have initiated over the past fifteen years, and how do these express the key elements of your emerging ethos?
- 8. What other innovations or new developments are you most proud of and why?

 Please identify two to three most important examples (in order of priority). How

 are they linked to your ethos and mission? Who would your recommend we speak

 to on your campus in order to get a better understanding of these developments?
- 9. How do you envision your university 20 years down the road? What does it mean for you to become a world class university?
- 10. [For private universities only] As a private university, how do you see yourself as different from a public university?

Civil Society

- 1. What does it mean for your university to have the status of "legal person" and how important has university autonomy been for your recent developments? What kinds of relations and communication go on between your university and government?
- 2. Would you please explain the major changes in your funding resources over the period from 1990 to 2005? What differences have these changes made to your leadership work?
- 3. Can faculty and students in your university participate in decision-making? If yes, in what ways?

- 4. Does your university encourage faculty and students' involvement in community service, artistic activities or other independent special interest groupings on campus?
- 5. How do you view your university's responsibility for and obligation of serving economic development and environmental sustainability at both national and local levels? In what aspects in particular?
- 6. Do you think the expansion of enrolment allows your university to be more involved politically, culturally or socially in local development?
- 7. The Chinese government is advocating a "harmonious society" and a "harmonious world". Do you think it is a way of having "democracy with Chinese characteristics"? How do you interpret the term "civil society"? How can universities contribute to the development of civil society in China?

Structural and Equity Issues

- 1. How do you envision the position of your university within the wider Chinese higher education system? How have you responded to the government's policy on mergers in higher education and why? What have been the outcomes for your university?
- 2. How do you view the government's decision to encourage the development of second-tier colleges on a private basis? Are there any second-tier colleges in your university?

- 3. Has the move towards mass higher education improved social justice and equity? What social clusters are most of your students from? What are you doing to ensure equal opportunities for all students?
- 4. Do all the faculty members in your university, regardless of gender, field of knowledge or professional rank, have equal opportunities for career development (e.g., applying for research grants, studying abroad, etc.)? What are you doing to address inequities that may be emerging as a result of globalization or other external pressures?
- 5. The massification of higher education has dramatically increased the number of graduates from universities every year. How has it affected the employment of your graduates, and what measures have you taken to deal with related difficulties?
- 6. The massification of higher education has increased dramatically the size of faculty and students. What problems has it brought to the management of your university? How have you dealt with them?
- 7. There is currently a lot of media coverage on a decline in the quality of teaching and learning in Chinese universities since massification. Is this a problem in your university? How are you dealing with it?
- 8. What advantages or disadvantages does your university experience relating to geographical location, curricular orientation or historical positioning? What can you do to ensure its optimum positioning within contemporary higher education in China? What are you unable to do?

B Faculty/Student Focus Groups

Culture

- 1. Tell us about your university's vision and mission, and what it means to you?
- 2. What important figures and significant events in your institutional history have had an impact on the ethos and culture of your university?
- 3. Do you agree that Chinese culture has something to offer to the global community in this period of dialogue among civilizations? How are you or your university doing something about this?
- 4. Two thousand years ago the *Great Learning (Daxue)* and the *Classic of Learning (Xueji)* had already begun to theorize the Chinese experience of higher education. China also has a long tradition of higher education institutions, such as the Taixue, Guozijian and Shuyuan, and systems such as the civil service examinations. Do any of your recent innovations come from this heritage of Chinese education? If so, please tell us in what ways.
- 5. What are your university's most frequent international activities, and how important do you think them to be? How does the spatial organization of your campus communicate your ethos, and which building do you consider most symbolic of the ethos of your university?
- 6. For faculty -What innovations in your university over the past ten to fifteen years make you most proud? For students- What aspects of your university do you feel most satisfied with and proud of? Please pick out two to three, and explain why.

7. How do you envisage your university twenty years down the road? What do you think it means for it to become world-class?

Civil Society

- 1. How do the various interest groups in your university, administrators, faculty, students view the move to mass higher education? What are the main differences for each?
- 2. Do you find a culture of rights, in which students and faculty receive maximum respect is found in your university? Has your university done anything to increase the respect for teachers and students?
- 3. As a faculty/student, do you have any way of influencing policies or events in your university? What channels are there for you to voice your opinions?
- 4. To what extent do civic education and moral education have a role in the university curriculum? How effectively are they taught in your university?
- 5. Are there associations, clubs, interest groups in your university? Who initiates them and what do they try to accomplish?
- 6. What do you think of the term "civil society?" Do you think the university is a part of civil society? Is civil society expanding in China on the whole?
- 7. There are many student groups and associations in your university that contribute to environmental protection, helping the poor or disadvantaged or other social causes. Who initiates them and what do they try to accomplish? Do you think they help students to foster a sense of social responsibility and make them active citizens?

- 8. A front-page headline in the state-run *Beijing Today* went as follows: "Is Super Girl a force for Democracy?" What is your opinion of this phenomenon? Did you participate in voting for any "Super-Girls"? How did you feel about the experience?
- 9. How do the Internet and Information Technology affect your interaction with the outside world, and give you an international perspective? Does information technology increase your capacity to learn and think independently?

Structure and Equity

- In the process of expansion of Chinese higher education, what aspects do you
 believe have become more fair and equal, and what aspects do you think remain
 unequal? Please explain your personal experience of this, and what you think
 should be done about it.
- 2. Are you concerned about students finding suitable employment on graduation? What is the university doing about this and what do you think should be done?
- 3. How do you feel about your university's decision regarding merger?
- 4. What do you think about the creation of "second-tier colleges" by your university? Is it a good idea or not? Why?
- 5. How do you see your university's relation to the overall higher education system in China? Does it experience any advantages or disadvantages and what can be done about them?

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