Turning Scars into Stars: A Reconceptualized View of Modern University Development in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore[1]

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Abstract   Since the 19th century, Chinese societies, as latecomers to modernization, have prioritized Western learning. Modelled on European and North American experiences, modern universities were created to serve this purpose. Having little linkage to their indigenous cultural traditions, they operate in Confucian socio-cultural contexts, with constant and longstanding struggles with their cultural identity. In recent decades, these societies have progressed remarkably well in higher education. Their experience could be seen as a cultural experiment that is placed highly on their sustainable development agendas. The products of their modern education systems especially at the elite level have demonstrated a grasp of both traditional and Western knowledge, with their very best universities well positioned to combine Chinese and Western ideas of a university in everyday operation. Such a bi-cultural condition contrasts sharply to the still largely mono-cultural (Western only) university operating environment in the West. The integration opens further space for their universities to explore an alternative to the Western academic model that has long dominated world higher education. Based on fieldwork at premier universities in Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei, this article calls for a reconceptualized view of modern university development in Chinese societies. It argues that the experiment enables their top universities to bring back their cultural traditions to integrate with Western values and contribute to inter-civilizational dialogue.

Key words   higher education, Chinese societies, modern universities, biculturality, inter-civilizational dialogue, cultural experiment, Western academic model

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education has developed extensively in most Chinese societies including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. A modern higher education system has been well established in these societies with fast-improving quality and quantity. At the institutional level, their flagship universities are rigorous in setting global standards for the quality of their research performance. Such developments look even more remarkable when compared with other non-Western societies. Yet, assessment regarding the future development of their universities is less certain. To some, the universities are poised at the most exciting phase of their development, leaping ahead to join the distinguished league of the world leaders (Tan, 2010). To others, although the universities have made tremendous strides in terms of the volume and quality of research output, they generally still lag behind the best universities in the West. The notion of 'world-class' status in these societies has been largely imitative rather than creative (Mohrman, 2005). Financial and other resources, combined with some innovation

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[1] Chinese societies here refer to those where ethnic Chinese constitute an overwhelming majority of their population, including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Macau was not included in my research project due to its small size. I understand Singapore is constitutionally a multicultural society. It is the only country outside Greater China with a majority of ethnic Chinese population (76.2% in 2015) well represented in all levels of the society politically and economically.

strategies, can make progress go only so far. A kind of "glass ceiling" is expected to be reached soon with feet of clay (Altbach, 2016).

The two contrasting views dominate the interpretation of university development in Chinese societies. Neither of them, however, has been able to fully capture the dynamics, complexity and difficulties encountered in the development. Furthermore, studies of higher education in Chinese societies have been overwhelmed by the powerful influence of economic and political realities. The literature focuses on the ecomnomic and social functions of universities in the development of the societies (Min, 1991; Jacob, 2006; Li, *et al*., 2011). With a few exceptions (e.g., Hayhoe, 1996; Hawkins, 2013; Yang, 2016), a cultural perspective that gives weight to the impact of traditional ways of thinking on contemporary development has been lacking. There has also been a serious mismatch between Western theories and higher education realities in the societies (Wang, 2010). It is necessary to note that both of the aforementioned views cite cultural traditions as their reason. It is also necessary to notice that extreme views are expressed usually by external observers. Yet, researchers within the societies have also failed to theorize how their university development differs from that in the West, despite their evident pride in the idea that their universities are not willing to assume that Western models define excellence.

Modern universities in Chinese societies are foreign transplants (Hayhoe, 1996). Forging their identity has always been an arduous task. While universities are by nature cultural institutions, their historical role and cultural mission have often been ignored, leading to incomplete, inappropriate and even misleading assessments of their contemporary and future development. Reporting findings from a recent study funded by the Hong Kong Research Grants Council, this article proposes that combining the seemingly contradictory Chinese and Western ideas of a university is increasingly likely. With empirical data collected through fieldwork at premier universities in Beijing, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei,[2] it points out emerging signs of hope and argues that the integration is globally significant and historically unprecedented. It holds that the conventional binary positioning of Chinese and Western traditional ideas of a university in the literature needs to be rethought. Finally, it calls for a reconceptualized view of modern university development in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

Review of Literature
Higher education development in Chinese societies is fundamentally about the relations between Chinese and Western cultural values. Whether or not the societies can fulfil their long-desired integration between the two value systems is the true meaning of and biggest challenge for their higher education development. The strikingly different traditional cultural roots and heritages have led to continuous conflicts between indigenous and Western higher education values. On the one hand their establishment of modern universities has been based almost exclusively on Western values. On the other hand, there exists an informal (non-institutionalized) yet powerfulsystem supported by traditional culture. The two systems often do not support each other. Instead, constant tensions between them reduce the efficiency of university operation. Since modern times, operating Western-style universities in Confucian socio-cultural contexts has never been easy for Chinese societies. Due to their divergent historical trajectories, they have adopted different approaches to encountering the West. This gives particular meaning to comparisons between them. Yet, there have been few such comparative studies due to the politics of representation and authenticity placed at the core and the heavily West-dominated

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[2] An earlier article based on the data collected in Beijing was entitled "The Cultural Mission of China's Elite Universities: Examples from Peking and Tsinghua" in *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(10), 1803-1808.

intellectual mind of higher education researchers both within and outside these societies (Hwang, 2016). Discussions of university development in Chinese societies necessarily touch on a wide range of issues in higher education.

'World-class' universities are increasingly high on the agenda of various stakeholders across the globe (Huisman, 2008). Countries wish to have 'world-class universities' and higher education institutions wish to be seen as 'world-class' (Altbach, 2004). All Chinese societies aspire openly to elevating some of their universities to 'world-class' status. In Mainland China, striving for 'world-class' universities has been designated as a key policy position. Committed to strategically promoting a few universities with the potential to rapidly enter the 'world-class' league, the government has invested heavily. Major policies included Projects 211 and 985 (Yang & Welch, 2011) and the Double First Class University Plan, with substantial resources allocated by central and provincial governments (Peters & Basley, 2018). In Hong Kong, the government has urged its universities to place heavy weight on research performance by international standards. Since the 1990s, universities benchmark themselves strategically with key institutions in major English-speaking countries (Deem, Mok & Lucas, 2008). In Taiwan, there has been a strong push from the government to establish closer ties with the best performers in the world. During 2000-05, major policy initiatives were launched every year to target at 'world-class' status for selected universities, with large government investments (Song & Tai, 2007). In Singapore, there has been much policy foment to develop its best universities to be comparable with world renowned ones, with steady and robust support from the government (Gopinathan & Lee, 2011).

Policy implementation in these societies differs. While top universities in Mainland China and Taiwan are approaching 'world-class', Hong Kong and Singapore have established Western-style academic systems. They have built Western universities on their own soil by hiring many non-local academic staff, using English, and copying Western norms of academic organization and management. Singapore has strategically invited some foreign universities to open branches and has given them significant financial incentives to do so. Taiwan has relied in part on convincing Western-educated Taiwanese to return home to improve key universities that have been given extra support. Mainland China's efforts have been the most impressive: a combination of significant infusion of funds to universities identified as top performers, mergers to create institutions with both high quality and economy of scale, and efforts to create an academic environment that rewards productivity (Altbach, 2010).

Although the goal of 'world-class' status is clear, the definition of 'world-class' status is not (Mohrman, 2008). Altbach (2004) suggests some characteristics of 'world-class' universities including excellence in research, academic freedom and an intellectually stimulating environment, internal self-governance by academics over key aspects of academic life and adequate facilities and funding. Salmi (2009) lists abundant resources, high concentration of talent and favorable governance as essential factors for establishing 'world-class' universities. Mohrman, Ma and Baker (2008) propose eight characteristics of 'world-class' universities: a mission transcending the boundaries of the nation-state, research-intensive, new roles for faculty members, diversified funding, new relationships with stakeholders, worldwide recruitment, greater internal complexity, and global cooperation with similar institutions. Based on Western traditions, these definitions do not differ as widely as they seem. Since the Humboldt teaching-research model in 19th century Germany, later adopted in the United States, there has been a world leading model of the research university that shapes practice everywhere else. The

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dominant model is Anglo-American currently, although with the potential to evolve elsewhere and in different directions (Marginson, 2008).

While the Western model has not been tolerant towards other alternatives, the awareness of alternative university identities has been increasing. Husén (1994) observed that universities in Africa, Asia and Latin America were often established according to European models. The 'Eurocentric' system of university education had hampered universities in those countries in releasing endogenous creativity and seeking their cultural roots. There were tensions between the orientation towards indigenous values and problems on the one hand and addressing global problems on the other. The call for alternatives to the Western model is more vocal in non-Western societies. Van Wyk and Higgs (2007) and Akomolafe and Dike (2011) urge African universities to embrace indigenous African worldviews. Having not really 'de-colonized' in higher education, Asian societies have equated 'internationalization' with 'Westernization' even 'Americanization' (Mok, 2006). The concepts of 'world-class' universities are defined by the Anglo-Saxon world (Deem, Mok & Lucas, 2008). Yet, calls for the Chinese idea of the university have long been put forward, most recently by Li (2012) and Zha (2011).

The definitive feature of autonomy and academic freedom in their strict sense do not exist in Chinese higher education traditions, despite the fact that Taiwan and Hong Kong have achieved much more in comparison with the other two. Even in Taiwan and Hong Kong, a Western-style state-universities relationship has not yet taken root. In contrast to a healthy tension between truth and power (Bové, 2000), Chinese higher education traditions rely heavily on their relations with the ruling elites. Dong Zhongshu (179-104 BC) in China began to combine education and the state and made imperial power supreme. This legacy of strong alliance between education and politics has survived dramatic social and cultural changes remarkably and remains deeply rooted among Chinese people. There was no institution in Chinese tradition that could be called a university (Hayhoe, 1996). Ancient Chinese higher education institutions differed strikingly from their Western counterparts: teaching staff received government salaries; students aimed at becoming officials; and major classical texts of the Confucian school constituted the curricular content (Ebrey, 1999). Instead of speaking truth to power, Chinese traditional higher education emphasized working with and even for government.

Recent university development in Chinese societies has been impressive. The societies also have rich indigenous intellectual and higher education traditions. Many questions, however, remain. Partially due to the aforementioned shortage of a widely agreed definition of 'world-class' universities, assessments of university development in these societies vary strikingly. The former President of Yale University, for example, often talked about the rise of Chinese universities (Levin, 2010). Marginson (2011) has coined the "Confucian model" to describe the "effective" way to fund elite universities mainly in Chinese societies. According to Morgan (2011), the "Confucian model" puts the universities in Chinese societies at the cutting edge. Others are not so impressed. They see many remaining obstacles on the way to 'world-class' status (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). The struggle will require not only resources but also changing deeply entrenched academic practices. A kind of "glass ceiling" is to be reached soon for universities in Chinese societies (Altbach, 2010). Even Levin (2010) acknowledges that the concept of 'world-class' university is still defined by the strongest American and British universities. He warns that Chinese societies face great challenges as traditional Confucian pedagogy prevails, and that changing pedagogy is much more difficult than changing curriculum.

While there is fast-growing confidence in the universities in Chinese universities, few people can theorize how the universities have developed differently from those in the West. Puzzlement

remains regarding significant features of the universities, such as the close alignments in Chinese societies between universities and government goals, and a resulting level of government support that few Western universities are seeing nowadays (Jaschik, 2011). Identity-building is doomed to be an arduous task for universities in Chinese societies. Echoing the general discourse on 'world-class' universities, what has been lacking in the debates is empirically-based studies that take cultural values and their actual impact seriously. The deep-rooted cultural heritages have led to continuous conflicts with the dominant Western culture that underlies successful operation of modern universities. Meanwhile, both extraordinary achievements and enormous difficulties in the university development in Chinese societies are sufficiently substantial to challenge existing understandings. People wonder about how to come to terms with the current and future university development in Chinese societies and their implications especially for other non-Western societies.

Methods
What this article reports is the major findings from a research project that focuses on the quest for world-class universities in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. A case study approach was adopted due to our recognition of both the complexity and the context (Punch, 2009). Each of the eight universities in this investigation is a case study: Peking University (BJ) and Tsinghua University (QH) in Mainland China; The University of Hong Kong (HU) and The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (KU) in Hong Kong; The National Taiwan University (TU) and The National Tsing Hua University (TH) in Taiwan; and The National University of Singapore (NSU) and The Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. They were chosen to be representative of different types of universities (comprehensive and technological) in the four selected societies. Cross-case analyses were undertaken to identify common themes and major differences within and between them to build an understanding of rapidly evolving policies on higher education in a context of globalization.

The sampling was purposive. It involved the selection of particular societies, particular universities, and particular participants within individual institutions. The four societies (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) were chosen based on the following reasons: First, all of them are mainly of Chinese settlement, and share to a great extent Chinese cultural identity that influences both social elites and masses in new, popular or other varied forms (Rozman, 1991). Second, they have been under considerable Western influences with different historical trajectories. Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore all had a history of colonization. Although China was never a colony, Western models have had immense prestige in mainland China. Third, their rapidly improved economic situation allows and even requires them to begin to change their frame of reference in higher education policy. By creating 'world-class' universities on their own soil, they embrace international norms in the top layer of their universities (Marginson, 2006).

Within each university, participants were drawn from both administrators and grassroots academics. Initial approach was made to the administration through contacts in each society. Then, by 'snowball' sampling (Punch, 2009) administrators were asked to identify other participants for the study. In each university, both administrators (the president, other senior executive leaders, and administrators working in international programs) and academic staff members from various faculties of the humanities and social sciences, natural sciences and engineering were invited to participate. Institutional participants were selected to obtain a range of seniority from assistant to chair/full professor levels and to include both males and females.

All participants were required to have at least five years' experience in the university in order to obtain a sense of the changes in each institution over the time period under study.

The research used two instruments to gather the reported data: document analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews. For each university, a series of high level policy documents relevant to the push towards world-class status, from institutional mission/vision statements, strategic plans to leaders' speeches, were collected, reviewed and interrogated to analyze the context for policy on building world-class universities (O'Leary, 2004). They were also used to examine the localized context and specific policies on becoming world-class in each case study university prior to the collection of interview data. In-depth semi-structured interviews were scheduled flexibly to encourage participants to talk as much as they pleased on different issues as they arose, with 'core' questions asked at each case to make comparisons and contrasts for triangulation purposes between different localized sites. They were conducted in either Mandarin or English depending on the interviewee's preference and lasted normally for an hour, with the shortest for thirty-two minutes and the longest one hour and forty minutes. All interviews were taped and later transcribed.

There were two stages of analyzing the data set. Stage one identified important themes in answering the research questions, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach. Stage two used the themes for cross-case comparisons. Documents at both societal and institutional levels were collected and analyzed to identify key features of the policy on the world-class university for the society and universities. Collection of the empirical data occurred in May 2014 in Beijing, May 2015 in Taipei, July 2015 in Singapore and Hong Kong. A total of 71 interviews were carried out, with 19 in Beijing, 15 in Hong Kong, 17 in Singapore, and 20 in Taipei. Analysis of interview data was then conducted, followed by the triangulation of data from documents with interview data within and between the cases.

Major Findings

This section presents some basic findings from the project. It is organized along two threads. One is vertical, centered on the relations between the traditional and the modern or Western. The other is horizontal focusing on the nexus between the global and the local. It is important to note that on most of the themes, case-specific issues are rich and interesting especially from policy and practical perspectives. For instance, Respondents from Singapore and especially Hong Kong generally care much less about the possible loss of cultural traditions. One senior professor and former Pro-Vice-Chancellor expressed openly that "We don't care (about cultural identity), as long as we can survive" (HU-3). Similarly, a world-renowned social scientist at the National University of Singapore remarked, "Singapore has always been strategic. We don't classify things into East or West. Not even the local or the global. If they are useful, we take them and see them as Singaporean" (NSU-4). Among the respondents in Taiwan, generational gaps are considerable, with younger ones showing much less knowledge of and commitment to Chinese traditions. While generational gaps are also noticeable among those in Mainland China, they take a different shape with some elites born in and after the 1970s starting to demonstrate a growing grasp of both Chinese and Western traditions. Despite such lively differentiation, this section focuses on the commonality that emerged prominently across cases and societies due to the limited space allowed here.

A Dilemma between Global Competition and Local Commitment

Traditional explanations of scholarly relations between developed and developing (not accidentally non-Western) countries are located within a historical context of colonialism (Altbach, 2001). Resulting from historical factors and enhanced by globalization, there exists a powerful yet unequal international knowledge network: a few countries are the center retaining extraordinary academic power, while the rest of world is the periphery and semi-periphery. This is the basic condition for university development in non-Western societies.

Knowledge by nature is international especially in an era of globalization. Yet, in the present international higher education equation real knowledge is only Western. There is a global asymmetric structure in which certain institutional and intellectual "centers" give direction, provide models, produce research, and in general function as the pinnacles of the academic system. At the opposite end of the spectrum are universities that are peripheral in the sense that they copy developments from abroad, produce little that is original, and are generally not at the frontiers of knowledge. Universities located in non-Western countries are strongly dependent on the institutions located in the centers (Altbach, 1998).

For the peripheries, there is an urgent need for their academic systems to lean toward the centers in order to become members of the international knowledge network so that they can access the knowledge produced by the centers and also the knowledge that they produce would have the chance to be recognized in the system. Major universities in the periphery are thus on the horns of a dilemma: while they enjoy their enormous prestige domestically and play a crucial role in national and local economic and social development, they find themselves at a disadvantage in the global knowledge system. This was well said by a sociologist at the University of Hong Kong:

> We have colleagues who are well-known intellectuals in Hong Kong who publish in local newspapers and Chinese language books as best-sellers. This is one of the reasons why we have bad RAE result, because these works would probably be ranked as zero since they are in Chinese. But we actually had influence in Hong Kong through those people who are engaged in the local community. It's a problem. I noticed that some of our lecturers (in the lecturing track, not professors) are very active in magazines and local societies, however for all of us on the professorial level, we don't have time for doing that much so we only write for the major English publishers. (HU-2)

The problems of looking outward and inward at the same time are substantial, particularly when combined with immense pressures to contribute directly to national/local development and to participate in the international system. This is a predicament felt especially by the top-tier universities in all the Chinese societies almost on a daily basis. The situation becomes much more serious when English increasingly dominates science, scholarship, and instruction as never before with the exponential growth of the Internet.

> This is a main trend in the context of rapidly developing countries that need knowledge in different areas compared to post-industrial countries. In general, universities in Greater China are now more engaged in the development needs of industries and responsive to government. But the cases differ within. (HU-4)

We have great difficulties striking a balance between global and local agendas. The quality assurance framework the Ministry of Education has for us, their criteria are somewhat different from ranking criteria which have a very strong emphasis on citation, bibliometrics and so on. Whereas the Ministry doesn't really care how many papers you publish, they want to make sure that our graduates are employable by society, and are useful to the nation. So there are some tensions. But of course being a university we know we have to satisfy both stakeholders and we try our best to satisfy both. (NSU-1)

In sociology, the people who only do surveys on Singapore don't get very far. People like me get far because we didn't care about Singapore half the time, and when I do write about Singapore, I actually address political conceptual issues. Singapore is just incidental information. Colleagues do surveys on health conditions of Singaporeans and all these. First of all, it's difficult to publish internationally. And if you publish locally, you are doing government policy work. The university doesn't recognize it. So that's why I am saying "unfortunately." Everything is geared toward the so-called international standards. And these international standards are really driven by American institutions. It doesn't recognize differences in cultural conditions, differences in historical conditions, differences in the national needs and national issues. (NSU-4)

It is necessary to point out the differentiation among Chinese societies on this issue. The two case study institutions in Mainland China have been identified by the government to bid for world-class standing. For them, locally-oriented issues are allowed to be less prioritized, although this does not mean they are encouraged to be out of touch with the social and economic development in the society. On the other hand, the sheer size of the society demands solutions that are usually unprecedented in human knowledge. Therefore, global and local agendas are reconciled for them in this sense.[3] A similar situation applies largely to the two universities in Taiwan. In contrast, the tensions between the local and the global are much more serious for Hong Kong and Singapore.

It is also important to point out the differentiation among disciplines. While many participants, especially those in the humanities and to a less extent social sciences, complained about the tensions between local and global orientations, some, especially those from the technological sciences, are in a very different situation. The following comments are by a participant from engineering at the University of Hong Kong. They are in an advantageous position due to both the high level of economic development in the region and their disciplinary background.

I am a professor and an engineer. We always try to engage with the society. In this region (Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area), we can achieve a sound cycle of development between academic research and industrial needs. (HU-5)

In this sense, pursuing international impact could be a double-edged sword that has to be managed with great care, a broad and long vision as well as a strong sense of responsibility. However, it appears that many premier universities in Chinese societies are likely to be able to

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[3] However, still a few participants in Beijing, such as BJ-6, BJ-7 and QH-1, raised the issue.

move beyond the long-term quagmire of local-global tension, as expressed by Professor Tan Eng Chye, the Deputy President and Provost of the National University of Singapore:

> I think we do have this sort of dilemma. But so far we managed to strike a very good balance. I guess our geographical position forces us to do a lot of such things. (NSU-6)

Self-Assessment and Global Positioning

Intellectuals and universities have traditionally enjoyed higher social status in Chinese societies. This leads to society-wide concerns about the international prestige of their best institutions, and has been fueled further by global university rankings. It was one of the most frequently mentioned topics during interviews. Since all the case study institutions sit on the very top of their university systems, there was a common embarrassment about the gap between their domestic and international reputation.

Current evaluations, both global ranking systems and those expressed by interviewees, concentrate mainly on institutional basic infrastructure and academic achievements as the necessary first step towards world-class status especially stressed by Mainland Chinese interviewees, as shown by the following remarks:

> You have seen our new buildings including the library, many of them. They were all built recently. This is a necessary part of our world-class movement. (BJ-3)

> Our innovation has been accelerating because we've got the money and the people (needed), plus the culture we have, we'll certainly develop further. (BJ-2)

For those based at technology-oriented universities, the impact is even more evident as their work is usually lab-based (QH 2, QH-5 and QH-8). However, there was a general lack of sufficient thought about the longstanding development of their institutions, and even less about culture and modernization of their societies and related developments in politics, economy, culture and ideologies, as shown by the following remarks:

> In terms of hardware including research facilities, quality and output, the gap (between Tsinghua and the world's best universities) is becoming very thin. In terms of real matters, such as Chinese characteristics and Tsinghua style, we've got lots to think and do. (QH-3)

Across the Strait, a respondent who was also a dean at Tsing Hua University in Hsinchu expressed his strong opinion about the shortage of essential values:

> Our higher education system has been colonized for too long by the West. We need to find a balance (between Chinese and Western traditions). This is what we need, also what we want. It can't continue this way! (TH-2)

On the other hand, based on the remarkable progress made within recent decades, university leaders in Chinese societies are gaining growing confidence. This is unprecedented since Chinese societies were forced to learn from the West in the 19th century. One participant from

Tsinghua University in Beijing said, "It won't take too long for China to have Nobel Prize winners" (QH-10). The confidence was confirmed by Xu Zhihong, former President of Peking University in the following words:

> Building a world-class university takes a long time. We've got plans to become a world-class university as soon as possible. We know clearly what we're going to do. Our aim is to make our university more competitive and attract excellent academics and students. Our objectives are based on international standards. (Long, 2004, p. 52)

Similar confidence was consistently expressed by the interviewees across cases and societies, but particularly by those in Beijing, as shown below:

> A "glass ceiling" might exist. It might be 10 meters high. We are not there yet, perhaps only 2-3 meters high. Once we are there, we might find some cracks in it, or we can see whether it's thin or thick. We might find ways to get through or avoid it. Our world-class universities will take some time to achieve, but we will get there. (BJ-6)

> We need to do well by some hard indicators in order to be acknowledged internationally as world-class…Our future looks bright. We have built up our hardware. We will succeed. But it's not the time yet to claim a comprehensive win. (BJ-7)

Borrowing a Buddhist metaphor,[4] Professor Hong Hocheng, the President of the National Tsing Hua University, made the following comments:

> Looking back historically, higher education can't be separated from wider cultural change. Ever since the Opium Wars, Chinese culture has been struggling to adjust itself to rise to Western challenge. Our development is like the three-stage Buddhist practice. The initial 50 years was our (National Tsing Hua University's) first stage when we followed the West every step. …We are moving from seeing hills are no longer hills to seeing mountains are mountains again. We are in a transition between the second and third stages. (TH-T-5)

Such extraordinary confidence was echoed by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, former Provost of the National University of Singapore who made the following comments in November 2010:

> I believe that Asian universities are at the most exciting phase of their development, and that the future for Asian universities is very bright. Asian universities nevertheless face several challenges in their development into world-class

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[4] The Buddhist metaphor to describe levels of life realm is: 看山是山，看水是水 (Mountain is mountain, no matter how long you eye them, water is water, no matter how hard you watch it); 看山不是山，看水不是水 (Hills are no longer hills, even you keep looking at them, stream is no longer stream, even you keep staring at it); 看山還是山，看水還是水 (Mountains are still mountains, when you observe them closely, water is still water, when you behold it carefully).

institutions. Asian universities need to make a big shift from highly specialized education models to more broad-based ones. Universities need to develop strong global education programs. Asian universities need to develop research peaks which are among the leaders in the world.[5]

During my fieldwork, participants were asked whether they were optimistic or pessimistic about their quest for world-class university status. They tended to express their optimism openly and firmly, including those who complained much about their social, political and institutional environments. Interestingly, their complaints and confidence appeared to be somewhat contradictory across cases and societies: strong optimism with clear inability to substantialize their differences from the experiences of Western universities. Stressing cultural tradition and identity was common among the participants across the Taiwan Strait, as shown by a mid-level administrator and professor based at the National Taiwan University: "We have gone far beyond initial imitation stage. We cannot blindly follow the 'global' tides as we should maintain the uniqueness of our own culture" (TU-7). However, neither the leaders of the case study universities nor researchers in higher education have come out with anything of real substance about how their universities differ from or can be different from their Western counterparts, conceptually and practically.

For instance, despite the strong confidence expressed by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan when he was interviewed by *Korea Times* in June 2014, he was confident enough to explore "different" paths to the success of his university but failed to deliver anything substantial that could be a solid basis for the difference he intended to achieve:

> What we are doing is not just take what is being done in Yale, but building a different model. We don't have to follow the same patterns that are happening in the West. …we should be doing different things and trying different models. (Jung, 2014)

Such a response was confirmed repeatedly by the interviewees who were major scholars and/or university leaders throughout the societies. At least two factors explain this seemingly paradox. First, since their cultural encounters with the West in the 19th century, Chinese societies often regard their cultural traditions as the reason for being 'ignorant and backward' in a context of Western prestige (Schwarcz, 1986). Meanwhile universities in the West are deified to the extent that it is often beyond the imagination of the universities in Chinese societies to think of any problems of their Western peers. Secondly, as Chinese societies continue to develop well and engage with the West, people gain growing confidence in their own traditions and become more knowledgeable about the West. Their attitude to and knowledge of cultural traditions have also changed, with a better understanding that their traditions could have a positive role to play. Confidence in their traditional culture is resuming across the societies, as illustrated by the following remarks:

> It's a matter of time (to achieve world-class status), but hard to say when. We need to wait and we are all hopeful. Once we reach certain level, we will have our own features accumulated through a long time of development. (BJ-2)

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[5] I understand that Asia here referred to East Asia including Chinese societies together with Japan and Korea.

Still, very few could link strong confidence well to actual higher education development in a more defined theoretical manner. This is mainly because modern universities in Chinese societies have little linkage to their traditional roots. A participant from Tsinghua University in Beijing made the following analysis:

> We need to have our own understanding of civilization to support our work and life. Don't always focus on catching up. Catch-up mentality is utilitarian, not scientific. Our research planning shouldn't be dominated by such a mind-set. With our development today, we need to rethink the future of our civilization. Otherwise, we will be bogged down in a quagmire of low-level competition. (QH-9)

Without specializing in higher education, it was understandable that most participants did not provide an intellectual foundation for their confidence. Yet, their confidence is well based on the rich roots of Chinese culture. Such confidence was most evidently expressed by the participants in Mainland China. It was also common among those in Taiwan. Comparatively, it was less voiced by those in Singapore, while those from Hong Kong expressed the least.

The Chinese Idea of a University

Modern universities are uniquely European in origin and characteristics (Altbach, 2001). Today, the direction of change of universities in all Chinese societies is still heavily influenced by their elite Western counterparts. As foreign transplants, universities in Chinese societies are patterned after the Western model without integrally linking to their indigenous cultures (Altbach, 2007). The universities in Chinese societies therefore have a different cultural gene. For over a century, their central purpose is to combine Chinese and Western elements at all levels of their operation. However, the combination has never been fully achieved. In a context of global dominance by the Western model (Jaschik, 2011), it has proven to be extremely difficult. All participants stressed this in one way or another. The following comments by a Taiwanese respondent serve as an example:

> We need to have our own identity, and become strongly and fully based on our local society. It's not easy, but we must have our own ideas. We should examine our copying strategies. If we only follow others, although we may look good in rankings, we will lose our identity. (TU-6)

With the great difficulty, there have been various approaches, which have differentiated Chinese societies in their dealing with the two different yet often incompatible value systems. The easiest way is to take the Western concept of a university only for its practicality. Although this has been criticized, and no society would openly acknowledge this, it has been largely the case across the societies to one degree or another. Singapore and especially Hong Kong due to their colonial history decide to a great extent not to try to combine the two traditions, but chose the Western only. In contrast, Taiwan and especially Mainland China have endeavoured to reach an integration with limited success so far. Therefore, an overwhelminmg majority of Mainland respondents stressed the importance of Chinese cultural traditions. Most Taiwanese participants agreed, as shown by the folloing observations:

Our cultural roots must become visible with sufficient passion and respect. It is possible that adopting oriental approach can be more appropriate. (TH-4)

Chinese heritages in economic, political, cultural and artistic development and ancient medical development should be strengthened. (TU-8)

Shouldn't Asia define the concept of a university particularly at this time with opportunities?! (TH-2)

However, not all participants were equally positive. One (and the only) Hong Kong-based respondent who was then a professor of European philosophy was highly critical. His following remarks show how much he had turned a blind eye to things quite significant due to his cultural and political bias:

I don't think traditional Chinese culture and Confucian values influence the University. There is nothing particularly Confucian about the University of Hong Kong. …Also, I'm suspicious about the Confucian values in relation to the Chinese society. I've been to China but I don't see anything Confucian about this. What is really Confucian about Chinese society? What's Confucian about Peking University? Not in any significant way. (HU-7)

Despite substantial differences and even conflicts between Chinese and Western approaches to scholarship (Weston, 2004), in the minds of many higher education elites in Chinese societies these conflicts could and should be resolved (Lin, 2005). Their rich intellectual traditions have great strengths and potential to contribute to the idea of the university:

Being conscious of our own heritage and background will help us to better understand the Western culture. We are aware that we need to make progress. That is to say, by connecting the Chinese culture to the West, we can understand where our strengths and shortcomings are from. (TH-5)

In the current globally networked environment, university people across the societies are becoming more aware of differences and variations in their socio-cultural contexts than before. This was confirmed by many participants. Indeed, the 'Idea of a University' is becoming more similar across societies, especially under the pressure of global rankings and competition. It should not be a fixed concept. Instead, there have been changing definitions over time (Marginson, 2008). Systemic and institutional responses to the present scenario of global higher education need to be critical and strategic.

Indigenizing the Western concept of a university has therefore been the most fundamental challenge for university development in non-Western societies. No Chinese societies have ever stopped making such efforts (Yang, 2013). Some even achieved highly in different historical periods. In the early 20th century, Cai Yuanpei combined the Chinese educational spirit, especially Confucian and Mohist character building, with Western systems (Weston, 2004). He synthesized valuable thoughts and ideas from China and the West to make Peking University a center for free and open scholarly thinking. Today, the century-long hard and bitter learning from the West by Chinese societies has begun to bear fruit more evidently. Defining values of the

University have begun to take roots throughout these societies most evidently at the individual level.

While Singapore and Hong Kong are turning more attention to Chinese traditions (e.g., Cheung, 2011), Mainland China and Taiwan have been incorporating the Western idea of a university in a profound manner at various levels. For instance, one participant, who is an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and was once the president of a regional university, said explicitly that "A truly good university must first of all have academic freedom" (QU-6). Mainland China's acceptance of the fundamental value has also been much institutionalized in universities. Even at the highest level of policy-making in higher education, the impact of such values has become more and more evident, as suggested by a senior administrator at Peking University:

> It is neither impossible nor desirable for us to have academic freedom in its absolute Western sense. Our colleagues and (university) leaders treasure academic freedom, and indeed try to protect it whenever possible. There is much to do to strike a balance in reality. …We have very free class discussions here, and the University has strong traditions. As for autonomy in higher education reforms, we need to do it gradually. The government has become very aware of this and more and more tolerant. After all, we share similar goals. (BJ-2)

> We are a Chinese society, still highly Confucian. Yet, we have academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Our academic governance by professors is strong. Presidents are elected and our departmental heads are autonomous. Sometimes we might have too much autonomy to hinder our reforms. (TU-13)

The overwhelming majority of the participants acknowledged growing autonomy granted by the government to their institutions. A participant from Peking University elaborated such encouraging developments:

> Culture really plays a critical role, especially so because of our autocratic tradition. Yet, I'm still optimistic because our society is changing in line with external environments towards one ruled by law. The society is becoming more and more mature. We shouldn't copy Oxbridge or Harvard mechanically. We'll succeed in our own context. (BJ-5)

Two participants respectively from Tsinghua University in Beijing and Hsinchu made the following interesting remarks:

> Academic freedom is certainly important. Without it, we'll never get there (world-class status). Yet, I don't think it's the best part for us to start with. China's issues require Chinese solutions. (QH-9)

> Free thinking and autonomy are indeed necessary. They are very much treasured very much here. We don't always feel them as they are like air. (TH-7)

Participants in all the societies acknowledged growing autonomy granted to their institutions. Even those who were concerned about the negative role of traditional culture and called for "seeking truth and freedom" agreed that much progress had been made. Such progress contributes to narrowing the conventional gap between Chinese and Western ideas of a university. Singapore is often considered as lacking academic freedom. However, according to Professor Tan, such a perception is because people are biased and using inappropriate criteria. To him, 'working with or even for the government' can coexist with 'speaking truth to power' in Singaporean universities. He said:

> It is doable. Even now I think we do have certain disagreements. That could be some policies that would be disagreed. But there is no problem in our faculty members criticizing the government for their policies. That's not a problem. You can see the differences between the two cultures. The West emphasizes a lot on individual. The East, like China and Singapore, emphasizes more on the society. That's why when you asked me about the academic freedom, I talked about individual freedom and activity freedom. The activity is for the society. There is nothing actually preventing different countries depending on the cultural background to interpret, who says the US ones must be the right one. (NSU-6)

Not surprisingly, some participants expressed their strong concerns about some negative impacts of traditional culture on university development especially the difficulties (BJ-5) and obstacles (BJ-8) it has caused. However, it is important to note that even those who emphasized traditional cultural values as problematic and called for "seeking truth and freedom" (BJ-8) still agreed that much progress had been made (QH-10). Such progress contributes to narrowing the conventional gap between Western and Chinese ideas of a university. They interrogate much of the mainstream literature that has predicted an impasse of higher education development in Chinese societies due to a complete lack of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

This issue has a very different meaning for the universities in Hong Kong where only the Western academic model is in operation with a need to incorporate more Chinese cultural elements. Singaporean universities are in a similar situation although their mode of governance has been far more Chinese than Western. Taiwanese universities have been making many interesting experiments to combine Confucian-style tight control by the state with increasing institutional autonomy (TU-2). The efforts have been even more impressive in Mainland China's recent higher education reforms.

There are strong grounds for combining Chinese and Western ideas of a university. Confucian culture is both supportive of university reforms and in line with the global trends toward a knowledge society. It has a remarkable capacity to accommodate other cultures and absorb some of their best elements into itself, integrating diverse streams of thought into an organic whole, as demonstrated by the introduction of Buddhism to China from India and its integration into Chinese cultural and educational development over a long period. If Chinese societies are to bring into the global community aspects of their rich educational and cultural heritage, which could open up new pathways through some of the current and potential dead ends, the case study flagship universities are the place we are likely to encounter these ideas (Hayhoe, 2005).

The provisional and open perspective demonstrated by people in Chinese societies, which is hard for those personally committed to more absolute faiths to comprehend, offers favorable

conditions for the combination of both Chinese and Western traditions. It allows them to be able to appreciate opposing poles as a driving force and see opportunities in contradiction. The pragmatic approach to life further enables them to use whatever helpful means are available to settle or solve problems or issues (Wong, 2001). Therefore, they do not have to choose between the seemingly contradictory Chinese and Western university models. Instead, they could have ambivalence and flexibility to achieve an integration of both, as a respondent from Taiwan's Tsing Hua University expressed it

> To say that ours are all bad is just not right. I think the two ends can be somewhat congruent, and this will eventually create a new model of education. (TH-7)

Incorporating Chinese values could even bring something more than what people usually expect. An interviewee who was a dean with his Western cultural background made the following points:

> Given my experiences of lecturing in the four societies, it can be said that China's universities have something that Western universities lost maybe 50-60 years ago, which is the concept of respecting each other. Respect is not only a cultural issue here, it is actually intrinsically important to education. If there's no respect for people, knowledge or ideas, how can a teacher teach and how can educational exchange happen? There is something lost in the West over the past years. (HU-4)

A Bicultural Intellectual Mind

Non-Western societies have long desired to integrate their traditions with Western cultural heritages ever since their early encounters with the West. They are confronted with a difficult choice: the dominant Western knowledge on one hand, their strong indigenous traditions on the other, with constant tensions between the two. This has been particularly the case for Chinese societies. However, in comparison with many other non-Western societies, they have demonstrated a stronger bi-cultural mind to embrace the West. Western learning has become the most important part of their modern knowledge system. For example, by the 1930s scholars studying Chinese literature within China had already agreed that a thorough knowledge of both Chinese and Western literature was necessary to achieve innovation in literary research. Fu Sinian (2003) observed in 1919 that "If you are to research Chinese literature, yet never understand foreign literature, or if you are to document the history of Chinese literature yet have never read any of the history of foreign literature, you will never ever grasp the truth" (p. 1492). Similarly, Liang Shuming (1921/1990) remarked that "Chinese people will never gain a clear understanding if they only remain within the structures of Chinese society; if only they first look to others and then at themselves, then they will immediately understand" (p. 50).

As latecomers, modernization of Chinese societies involves necessarily responding to Western challenges. The desire to catch up with the West has always been fervent. Most recently, the drive for internationally competitive universities provides an impetus for their best institutions to follow the lead of European and North American universities and embrace "international" norms. Especially with recent impressive development, top universities in Chinese societies now compare themselves with their prominent Western peers such as Oxford and Yale. Nearly all the participants mentioned major global universities in one way or another and almost no exception those were Western institutions. It was common to hear them mention

major Western universities when they talked about their international networks, strategic collaboration and the positions of their programs in global ranking systems. One participant who was then both a mid-level administrator and a deputy dean at Peking University said, "We are still in a process of catching up. At this stage, our strategic priority is to become the same as Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton and Yale" (BJ-2).

Not everyone was entirely happy with such a perspective. For instance, a Taiwanese participant expressed his strong view that "The current Taiwanese academic community has been completely westernized. We all talk about Western components. There has been limited indigenization in Taiwanese academia. We have become a group of Western slaves." In his eyes, the best universities in Taiwan have a "split personality" and are "culturally hollow" (TU-1). Voiced more calmly with a somewhat more balanced opinion, his colleague explained that "Taiwan initially took over the system from the US. However, we also adapted and created many aspects to suit our society. I feel Taiwan possesses Western efficiency and modernity. Yet, we have also tried to retain our own traditional values. It has been a tough process" (TU-3). Despite their different styles and assessments, they both show the bicultural intellectual condition in a top Taiwanese university.

Some, usually from the social sciences and humanities, had broader perspective including the historical and the foreign. At Peking University, for instance, a mid-level administrator compared the history of Chinese modern universities with Oxford and Cambridge and argued that Chinese universities needed more time to establish their own identities, values and cultures (BJ-2). One dean illustrated how he introduced "Western management" into his own faculty (BJ-3). A mid-level administrator who is a historian by training compared China's encounters with Western culture with Japan's experience (BJ-7). A law professor pointed out some core values that originated from the West and stressed their great significance for China (BJ-8), and his comments were strongly supported by a prominent engineer at Tsinghua University in Beijing (QH-6).

One participant who was then a mid-level administrator at Peking University and scientist by training said "A third-class dean stresses efficiency. A second-class dean pays attention to management. A first-class dean watches for culture" (BJ-5). Here culture, management and efficiency are all a combination of Chinese and Western values. They echo the comments by another participant at Tsinghua University in Beijing who has a background in business and management: "If you observe successful businessmen in China today. They all have Chinese values for conducting oneself and Western values for conducting business" (QH-5). An interviewee based at the National Taiwan University who is also a renowned academic commented that "This is an implementation of Western discipline together with the inclusion of Confucian spirit. That's rather complicated, and can't be achieved in a short period of time" (TU-6).

Bicultural situations are also highly visible in the universities Hong Kong and Singapore as illustrated well by the following quotes from participants:

> Hong Kong has historically been a melting pot of East and West, with high mobility of individuals and different values brought together. Everybody is well-equipped to wear different hats and switch between different values while still feeling comfortable and create something unique in the process. Hong Kong is not just a bridge. It's a fusion of cultures with its unique creation. I hope for an effective integration of different ideas and culture and create something truly unique, and

HKU is well positioned to do so given our history and sound knowledge in this social background. (HU-9)

The fact that nearly all participants included Western knowledge in their talks has to be understood in a context of contemporary Chinese society and culture that has been profoundly influenced by Western values, as a consequence of the westernization of the world (Latouche, 1996). According to UNESCO (1998), the world's chief educational practices are Western, as initially conceptualized in ancient Greece, adapted by ancient Romans, limited by the European Middle Ages, expanded by the Renaissance, and rationalized by the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions. While there are variations on the theme and differences in interpretation, it is difficult today to find a widespread educational practice that is radically different from the dominant secular educational paradigm of the West (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2007). Western knowledge has become part of the contemporary knowledge systems of all Chinese societies. It is already impossible for them to talk about formal education without mentioning the West. This is highly visible in the speeches delivered by university presidents, in their strategic plans, and in their booklists and syllabuses. Such a combination is well illustrated by the following observation:

> As for (disciplinary) knowledge, I think Chinese universities should emulate the West. We need at least to have some breakthroughs in certain fields. Such breakthroughs require genuine learning from the West (spirit of seeking truth) with great respect…Our problem is that our traditions have not been activated while our understanding of Western learning is shallow. We have never truly understood Western knowledge. This is why there still lacks an integration of both traditions, although some progress has been made. (QH-9)

Focusing on culture, the above remarks were made by a professor of history based at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He was much echoed by scientists at a top university across the Taiwan Strait with emphasis on science:

> The West has its merits. Western education, particularly in the pursuit of science, is very standardized. On one hand, we need to progress well in science in order to compete or synchronize with the world. On the other hand, we need to maintain our traditions and not to lose our identity. We must seek a balance between both sides. (TU-2)

> The essence of Western civilization is science. We have to use Western science as a foundation and analyze our own tradition and philosophy. We can then construct theory and apply it to the reality. (TU-1)

> The most distinguished element between Western and Eastern systems is the cultural dimension. For the East, we have Confucianism. These ancient factors are very deep. We should strengthen our scientific knowledge from the West and bridge the knowledge to our own culture and society. It's just not good enough to imitate everything. (TU-5)

In an era of globalization, being able to learn from others has become critically important for any society's sustainable development (Cheng, 2007). More specifically, for research on university development in Chinese societies, the combination of the traditional and the Western has some significant implications: firstly, it interrogates seriously the conventional dichotomy of the two in the literature on higher education in these societies and treats these societies and their education and cultures as the Other; secondly, it reminds us of the great extent to which these societies have absorbed Western knowledge in many aspects at individual, institutional and systemic levels; and thirdly, it demonstrates that it is no longer valid to draw a clear dividing line between Chinese and Western ideas of a university.

Discussions and Conclusion
Modern universities are European in structure, organization and concept (Altbach, 2007). Operating in hugely different socio-cultural contexts, the universities in Chinese societies differ greatly from their counterparts in the West in their everyday teaching, research and administration as well as in the ideologies underlying all such work. The four themes covered above as findings are integrally related. Together they point to the critical role of cultural traditions in the development of modern universities in Chinese societies. The findings remind us once again that it is time to bring culture back into the studies of universities. It is indeed theoretically inappropriate and practically misleading to underestimate possible support and restrictions brought by them. Most observers, however, continue to use the same yardstick to measure the experiences of university development in Chinese and Western societies.

Few interviewees showed a desperately serious concern about global-local tensions. This might be due to the prestigious status of their institutions in the society. As scholars in top universities, they set their target at international excellence. In contrast, nearly all senior executive administrators acknowledged such a dilemma especially in Hong Kong and Singapore. For a medium-size society like Taiwan, elite universities concentrate on global agendas while locally-oriented issues are designated to other institutions. This is most obvious in the case of Mainland China. The idea of a university is in a state of change. The US "land-grant" model proved to be extremely successful by combining the Humboldtian emphasis on research and science and the key role of the state in supporting higher education based on the idea of public service and applied technology (Altbach, 2001). When addressing the global-local dilemma universities in Chinese societies are both supported and restricted by very different social, cultural and political contexts. It remains to be seen whether or not Chinese societies can parallel US experience with a fundamentally different tradition.

Self-evaluations by the case study institutions show their pragmatic and short-term global positioning, without sufficient attention to intellectual inquiry and reflections upon their ethos. This is not surprising in consideration of the pressure from local and global forces. It is also historical. Since the 19th century, practicality has been high on the agendas of governments and intellectuals in the modernization of these societies. Western learning has been prioritized while traditional cultural values are marginalized. There is an urgent need for today's university leaders to build up a sound understanding of and a respect for both the Western and the traditional.

The 'Idea of a University' means both challenges and opportunities for Chinese societies, where recent decades have seen remarkable development of their flagship universities. Their progress has formed the basis for the search for a non-Western definition of world-class research universities. Although Chinese societies have a considerable distance to go before their aspirations to create truly world-class universities are fulfilled. Such aspirations require the

integration between their traditional and Western ideas of a university. A university rooted in Chinese educational heritages does not have to reject Western knowledge while providing services to their communities (Reagan, 2000). The efforts and achievements by Chinese societies show real possibility of an alternative to the presently dominant Western model by exploring how they have, and have not, achieved in establishing world-class universities on their soil, and how their experience could contribute to the betterment of the 'Idea of a University.'

The fact that most participants demonstrated both an embracing attitude towards and rich knowledge of the West in their talks needs to be understood in a context of contemporary Chinese societies that have been profoundly Western-influenced. For them, it is already impossible to talk about education without mentioning the West. Such a bicultural condition is fast becoming an advantage in a context of globalization which requires the capacity to learn from others for sustainable social development. Amazingly, few participants expressed their worries about possible loss of cultural identity. Instead, their confidence was confirmed repeatedly. After century-long painstaking learning from the West, Chinese societies are now well positioned to get the cultural mix right. Both traditions are incorporated into daily operation of their elite universities. In this sense they are making a cultural experiment with emerging signs of hope to turn scars into stars. Such a combination is globally significant and historically unprecedented.

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