

Thoughts on the Importance of International Academic Exchange

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I would like to begin by extending warm greetings to everyone attending this year's Beijing Forum on Higher Education, in particular Beijing University President GONG Qihuang, Professor JIANG Guohua, Vice Provost and Acting Dean of the Graduate School. I would also like to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak today. I am very honored and pleased to have this opportunity to address colleagues from China and from around the world, and to offer some thoughts about the importance of academic exchange between China, the United States, and all the countries represented at this year's Forum, with the theme, "The Harmony of Civilizations and Prosperity for All—Inheritance and Mutual Learning."

The value of mutual learning is obvious to everyone who has attended this year's Forum, which is the twentieth such gathering on Beida's historic and beautiful campus. It is a theme of great personal significance to me. Over forty years ago I came to China for the first time as a student, when I spent a year at Liaoning University in Shenyang. Conditions were good, but they were basic, and the country was still just coming out of the Cultural Revolution. 改革开放 (Reform and Opening up) was a relatively new slogan in 1982, and we were all still learning what it meant. Life for most people was pretty hard. The beginning of the 清除精神污染运动 (Campaign against spiritual pollution) during my time at Liaoda was a clear indication that the path forward would not be in a straight line, and would not be easy.

So there were challenges, to be sure, but we did not shy away from those challenges; we embraced them, and found a way to move ahead and to learn from each other. Even if it was not always easy, my year in China then was one of the most important of my life. The studies I did at that time, and then a few years later as a graduate student at Renmin University, lay the foundation for my career as a historian of China, a subject I have been teaching at Harvard for many years now. I have made many, many visits to PKU and to other great Chinese universities and institutes over the decades, and the benefits I have derived from extended interaction with academic colleagues in China are too numerous to mention; it is enough to say that I owe them all a great debt, not just for their support, guidance, and friendship, but also for their criticism, of which I have received a fair amount. Thus to say that it has been all about “harmony”（和谐） would not be truthful. But it has all been about the mutual pursuit of truth.

I like to think that this exchange, this mutual learning, has made me a better scholar and a better teacher. That, and understanding the inheritance from past generations, has made it possible for me to make whatever modest contributions I have been able to make to our collective understanding of the Chinese past, and the way that past affects China's present. Decades of mutual learning in China have also benefited me in my current role as vice provost for international affairs at Harvard. In this position, not only do I oversee all of Harvard's foreign academic engagements but I also provide support to the community of international students and scholars at the University. This is a very large community, with over 10,000 people from all over the world, including over 2,300 just from China, the largest group from any single country, including probably hundreds from PKU. I never tire of telling people that it is the presence of so many outstanding people, so much talent drawn from every corner of the world, that helps to make Harvard the great university that it is. I know that for Peking University, international education is an important priority as well.

My career in China studies has coincided with what we now might look back on as a time of ever-improving relations between the United States and China, a period of optimism, in which we tended to think, rightly or wrongly, that things would continue to get better, that relations would continue to get closer, and that the conditions for academic research and

collaboration would keep on improving. As we are all aware, however, this is not what has happened. Though as a historian I should not be surprised, since I know perfectly well that history does not move in a straight line, and that “progress” is to a considerable extent a 19th-century invention. Still, I am disappointed. It is thus with real dismay that I note that in recent years, policies have been proposed or implemented in the United States – often in response to legitimate national or economic security challenges - that directly affect international academic exchange. Some of these policies, if not thoughtfully crafted, may broadly discourage Chinese students and scholars from coming to the U.S. and may interfere with legitimate academic exchange and collaboration.

At the same time, I note also that some government investigations have had a chilling effect on U.S.-China academic relations. Arrests of prominent scientists for alleged illegal activities, some ethnically Chinese, some not, have heightened anxiety on all sides. A number of recent surveys have shown that students and scholars of Chinese origin in the United States report feeling less welcome and experiencing growing professional challenges, including the increased scrutiny of their academic work. Likewise, scientists at American universities who have hosted Chinese students or worked with partners in China are nervous about what these collaborations might mean for their futures.

Scientific collaboration in any field comes with risks, which can and must be managed. However, I am deeply concerned about the potential for overreach, which could harm the collaborations that benefit all of us. Rafael Reif, former president of MIT, has written recently of his concern for the future of US-China research collaboration. At Harvard, we believe that the fundamental basis for good science is an open environment for research, free of interference from politics, ethnic prejudice, or any special interest. At the same time, like any university – whether in the United States or in China or anywhere else – we are also mindful of national security concerns. Our firm conviction is that it is perfectly possible to maintain the correct balance between scientific openness and security. This requires full compliance with existing laws, regulations, and institutional policies governing research funding and technology transfer. It also requires respect on all sides for well-established norms, such as transparency, honesty, and objectivity, governing collaboration and sharing of information among university

scientists engaged in basic research.

Our view is that American universities should continue to remain open to Chinese students and scholars and that truly reciprocal research collaborations between international academic teams must continue to be supported, lest damage be done to the U.S. higher education enterprise and to global science. We believe that this goal is consistent with our responsibility to protect American security interests and that it can be achieved without fueling racial or ethnic bias or adopting damaging nationalistic policies. We also believe that Chinese partner institutions can help optimize this relationship for all involved. I would like to take a few minutes to explore this issue in more detail.

The first thing to say is that American universities take seriously claims about the illegal activities of some countries as well as concerns about the welfare of some students and scholars after they have returned home who are being questioned about legal activities they may have engaged in while studying abroad. Such claims should be investigated in accordance with the law. It is also true that American universities are routinely subject to cyberattacks from sources outside the U.S., and that these efforts to illegally access information held by institutions of higher learning are very harmful, and weaken trust. They make it harder to keep the channels of academic exchange open. Nonetheless, we suggest that to keep a proper perspective, it is vital to give sufficient weight to the benefits that so many Chinese students and scholars – and international students and scholars generally – bring to our universities and to research discoveries and innovations that benefit our institutions, our nations, and indeed the entire world.

Our universities depend in many ways upon the talent, creativity, and hard work of Chinese students and scholars on our campuses. In the U.S., where Chinese students comprise around a third of all foreign students, it is evident that their contribution is a significant one intellectually, culturally, and economically. Their presence contributes to the diversity of life experience that our students tell us they value highly; their discoveries as graduate students push the frontiers of knowledge. In addition, giving Chinese students and visitors access to American colleges and universities opens a pathway to mutual understanding: those coming

from China can experience what academic life in the United States is like, and they get an up-close look at American society and politics, with all its many imperfections. At the same time, American-born students and faculty have more chances to understand the China where their classmates, students, and colleagues grew up and where, in many cases, their families still live.

I hasten to add that the achievements of Chinese-born scholars and scientists trained at U.S. universities help not just America, and not just China, but everyone in the world – research advances made during the pandemic are just the latest evidence of these long-term benefits. Many of the Chinese scientists who have been leading the way in research on COVID-19 were trained abroad or have spent time abroad. This includes Professor ZHONG Nanshan, who led a partnership between the Harvard Medical School and the Guangzhou Institute of Respiratory Health that allowed us to research the novel virus before it had reached the U.S. These partnerships will continue to be important as we work to identify and respond to variants of concern and pursue other pathbreaking discoveries in other fields of science. I will note that Professor ZHONG did his medical studies at Edinburgh at around the same time I did my studies in Shenyang.

In this connection, let me point out that research collaborations between American and Chinese universities have flourished in the last decade. This highly transnational pattern conforms to what we know about how scientific research is carried out today. In contrast to twenty or thirty years ago, at leading U.S. research universities international teams of investigators are publishing an ever greater share of co-authored papers. Repeated studies confirm this trend across every field and show that it is intensifying with time. Chinese scientists are frequently key players on these teams because they are good scientists, motivated, like scientists everywhere in the world, by a commitment to hard work, to teaching and research, and to advancing their fields.

In a world where global research collaborations dominate, it follows that competition for partnerships is itself intensifying. And with so many pressing issues such as global health and climate change clouding our joint future, limiting the ability of university researchers

to participate in these collaborative open networks is to shackle our scientific future unnecessarily. For our own good and for the good of the whole world, we need to see more academic exchange and more mutually beneficial research collaborations, not less. The data show that open science is strong science, and that open universities are strong universities.

Indeed, these principles were explicitly recognized by many top Chinese universities (the C9) in the Hefei Statement of 2013. That statement, which was also endorsed by the Group of Eight Australian universities, by the League of European Research Universities, and by the American Association of Universities, spells out the ten key characteristics of the research university. Among other things, these include a commitment to excellence, to research integrity and its associated ethical obligations, to academic freedom, to tolerance of competing views, and to transparent university governance. Looking at the language in the preface to that document, which emphasizes the importance to all our institutions of the maintenance of a common research environment in which these principles are embedded, I would say it may be time to reaffirm these principles. Such a reaffirmation would go a long way toward strengthening the ties between our schools – and by extension between our countries – and would make the world a better place for us all.

Let me conclude by repeating my belief that American universities like Harvard are strong because of a commitment to unbiased inquiry, because of an openness to talent from all parts of the world, including from China, and because of a commitment on the part of our scholars to working in common purpose with like-minded colleagues regardless of what passport they may hold. A constant consideration in evaluating our international engagements should continue to be whether they will enhance or detract from free inquiry of the full range of academic topics and whether they will, as a paramount concern, advance knowledge and support the pursuit of truth. Within these bounds, we welcome international students and scholars and we will continue to foster international collaboration.

As I have said, collaboration facilitates scientific discoveries, particularly in response to global challenges, such as pandemics, climate change, clean energy, and food security. To ensure

the success of these collaborations, they should be structured so that they are reciprocal, with mutual benefit of joint work. Indeed, reciprocity should be built into the overall framing of academic exchange in all fields, while at the same time ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place in areas implicating national security. It's pretty simple: if my libraries and research facilities are open to you, yours should be open to me, too. In all this, I believe that Chinese universities themselves have a critical role to play. My many years in the China field and extensive experience with Chinese higher education persuades me that it is not hard to find reliable and trustworthy partners of first-class ability, scholars who are equally dedicated to the noble principles set forth in the Hefei Statement. So long as we can agree on those principles, we have a bright future ahead of us.

Finally, I would like to repeat to this audience the important point that Chinese students and scholars bring enormous intellectual and creative strength to American universities and to the research enterprise. A blanket rejection of Chinese students and scholars risks weakening American higher education and research and undermines not only our national interests but global science. We at Harvard are determined to keep making the case for academic freedom and openness. I hope that everyone attending this year's Beijing Forum will agree that a recommitment to these values, which everywhere characterize excellence in higher education, will make our institutions stronger and will revitalize the collaborations and connections that bind us together. We need more, not fewer, meetings like the Beijing Forum, that give us the opportunity to listen and to learn from each other and to think collaboratively about how we can work together to make a better, safer, greener, and more equitable world.