

The New Silk Road: Implications for higher education and research cooperation between China and Europe

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Closing remarks by Simon Marginson

What an excellent day, and what important issues these are. Our world is changing very rapidly. What is modernity but continuous transformation? 'All that is sold melts into air'. But we also crave order, stability, manageable risk. Well, we are not going to get them.

The rise of China in general, and in higher education and research, challenges the imaginative landscapes of all of us, but more so, those of the societies in which we are embedded. Professor Dr Marijk van der Wende, with her sense of what is important, and what is interesting, and what is changing—as valuable for a social scientist as any other methodological tool—has given us a project structure in which to consider the issues, and populated that structure with a fine set of agents. There were great contributions today.

- We began with Sybe, who gave us Pliny, with his complaint about the moral associations with the global silk trade. How often the Romans of the 100 BCE to 200 CE period seem to think like us. And how valuable it is to return to that period, as Foucault found in the final three years of his lectures at the College de France.
- Bill gave us a brilliant history of 20th century China and its higher education, more brilliant because it was visual, and showed us that this is not just a country but a civilization. A civilization with a continually hybrid culture—one that teaches us all to learn from the other, so the other is no longer the other, but the self is still the self.
- Frank pointed to the character of One Belt One Road (OBOR) as a slogan and a signifier of not just dynastic power but regime power.
- Philippe said that the EU was prepared to cooperate with China, provided that common principles were observed. That was an important statement. It was reciprocated later.
- Wim explained how and why to cooperate, usefully. And made the potent argument (for me, at least) that 'China offers many intriguing research questions'.
- Nian said that China is ready to cooperate with the EU (that was the reciprocation), that this was an excellent time to do it; that Chinese characteristics are a help rather than a hindrance in that cooperation; and that we who work specifically in higher education research also need to cooperate more.

- Charles reminded us that you need openness and academic freedom for that cooperation to be effective.
- Marijk pointed to the great strength of China's research performance in physical sciences STEM, and the discipline imbalance that accompanies it.
- Peter posed a run of sharp questions about science, ecology, rationality, politics and the crisis of democracy. 'How does the new silk route guide the direction of modernity?' he asked.
- Jie traced the evolution of CFCS policies in China and discussed how the protocols for regulating foreign partnerships will shape high education's development in the Belt and Road era.
- Marcus said that the point is not to interpret the world or to change the world, the point is to change the interpretation, and then interpret the resulting change ... (I joke). I especially liked his paper, one that said what I think, but better than I could say it. He reminded us that we share a common humanity, which is more important than any differences in cultural starting points. Indeed, it is our shared humanity, which includes our common academic values (for as Amartya Sen remarks, we have many affiliations) that enables us to have a seminar like we have had today. Perhaps the Confucian notion of *Ren*, humanity in its large sense, is one that we could usefully explore together.

All of the conversation today has underlined the extraordinary achievement that is China's development of education and science. Belt and Road is likely to be equally transformative. I do think it's very likely to be more than a slogan. It is possible that I'll be proven wrong by events, but already the signs are there in major infrastructure investments in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, and of course Africa, which has been happening over a longer period.

Transformative in the 60 Belt and Road countries. Transport, communications, water, industrial agriculture, city development, energy, and then perhaps, manufacturing. And higher education and science, perhaps. It's hard to see how higher education and science could stay out of it, in the longer run. At present the impact of OBOR policies seems to be confined to scholarships for Belt and Road country students to study in China. But it might come to mean Chinese universities setting up branches in the Belt and Road countries, and it might mean new universities being developed, on the basis of a China model of university.

One Belt One Road is for many a new and different mode of modernization. There's more than one kind of modernization at work in the world, as Martin Jacques pointed out, in his incisive though badly titled book *When China rules the world*. In this form of modernization, the market does not rule. The state is front and centre. But perhaps this is not entirely new.

Some of you will have seen Valerie Hansen's recent book *The Silk Road: A new history*. She visited seven archaeological sites on the historic Silk Road, including Samarkand in Uzbekistan, six in North West China, Niya, Turfan, Khotan and so on, and Xi'an, Chang'an, the great city of the Han and the Tang. There's a chapter about each site, and what has been found there, with its surprises, and what it can tell us. And then there's Hansen's concluding chapter, which is almost another surprising discovery for her. We think of the Silk Road as a trade-driven space, she says, because that is today's values. We imagine commerce as the driver of innovation, spilling out from under the dead hand of the state. And yet—the dating techniques of archaeology show that the Silk Road was alive in only three periods. Under the Han, under the Tang and under the Yuan when the Mongols ruled across Eurasia.

At these three times, the state provided law and order, it protected the passage of people and goods along the Silk Road routes. More to the point, there were vast caravans of military supplies travelling from China to the troop concentrations in central Asia, with rice, hides for tents, military equipment, weapons, clothing and so on. In and amongst the bulk goods procured by the military the caravans carried expensive luxury goods, small and light, for the enrichment of those leading the caravans and no doubt, the commanders on the frontiers. Remarkably, bills of sale and other documents have survived. Those are the cultural goods that turn up in the Silk Road sites today. Geo-political transformations of the Belt and Road type foster global economic activity, as well as vice versa.

When we discuss East Asia, we have to put the state in the middle of the picture. This is a tradition in which politics has always been in command. It still is. It leads the merchants, it leads the cities, it leads the professions, it directly shapes education and science. They are not positioned (at least for most of the time) in a fecund civil society, as in the United States, they are part of the state, though a part in which devolution policies are habitually employed. The configuration of state, society and university is different in China, compared to North America, or again much of Western Europe. In Nordic Europe the state is equated with society, and as comprehensive in its role as the East Asian state, but university and autonomy and academic freedom are demarcated with a firm set of protocols. So, the challenge is different. In North America and Europe, the challenge is on the university side, to retain the attention of the state, to ensure that funding keeps flowing. There is tension around state interference, but mostly, state and university keep to their separated domains. In China the challenge is on the state side, to provide university and science with enough room to move on their own behalf—for to flourish, they must be able to take initiatives.

One geo-political strength of Europe that it can interact with China and East Asia on three different scales at the same time. It can interact as the EU, as the global bloc; it can interact in terms of national systems; and it can interact as many diverse individual institutions.

China will need this capacity to operate in a devolved manner on different scales at the same time. It maximizes the combined impact. It combines top-down and bottom-up effectiveness. It will need to be able to do what Nian did at Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2003 when he started the Academic Ranking of World Universities—a bottom-up initiative at global level which succeeded brilliantly, and which the Ministry later supported, because it benchmarked Chinese universities so as to drive their improvement.

That brings me to my concluding remarks and back to Bill's question, the key question of the day: 'Will China lead' in higher education? Will the university with Chinese characteristics succeed? That depends on two factors.

First, China has a long history of devolution policy, going back to the Song, in which there is much scope for decentralised initiative, while central control over policy is maintained—partly through control over the selection of the leading personnel at devolved level. Higher education and intellectual life are spheres that need autonomy to flourish. Institutional autonomy in higher education, all over the world, is always partial, relative. The harder edged point is about academic freedom. Scientists make the best decisions about scientific knowledge, historians about history, poets about poetry, artists about art. For those of us working outside China, solidarity with university autonomy and academic freedom in China is always essential, as it is in relation to any country in the world. But we must let our colleagues in China call it. It is for them to say what constitutes academic freedom (China has a somewhat different tradition, to the tradition of negative freedom in the United States). And it is for them to say what constitutes the necessary state-university relations, in which responsibility to the state, and day-to-day operational autonomy, are both essential.

Second, all disciplines are essential in the modern Chinese university, and to its global relationships. This is Marijk's point. If China is to lead in higher education, it will need to build social sciences and humanities, on the basis of both its vast scholarly tradition and the appropriation of the modern world, better than it has done so far. But equally, we will need to learn Chinese language and culture on the same scale that China has learned the languages, culture and science of the West—if the multi-discipline university with Chinese characteristics is to achieve its potential by contributing fully to global conversation. We will need to understand China's social science and humanities on their own terms.

We will need to engage with China in the full way in which China has already engaged with us. In that respect, the universities of North America and Europe will help to determine if China's universities succeed, whether China can lead in higher education. Global society is relational. This project will make a difference. We again thank you Marijk, for what you have done, in bringing us together, and look forward to further developments!