

A new campus as Utopia – Wenzhou-Kean University

Jennifer Marquardt



The Wenzhou-Kean campus building Courtesy: Wenzhou-Kean University

AS A SCHOLAR AND FICTION WRITER, I am interested in utopian narratives and the ways that places designed upon an ideal can influence the population that inhabits them. So it isn't surprising that I classify Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU) as a type of utopia. Our university is utopic, not in the sense that it is a perfect place, but in that our community was conceived of as a remedy to educational issues, such as China's alleged education system that tends to prioritize memorization over the development of problem-solving skills with real-world application and Chinese students' lack of preparation in developing global citizenship.

Sociologist and utopian expert Ruth Levitas writes "utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living".¹ The utopic solution in this case is a seemingly simple one: provide a western education in a western language. Campus buzzwords are critical, creative, and English-only. Students are promised an education that builds these skills and provides preparation for further education and employment abroad. Our course curriculum is the same as that of our home campus

in New Jersey and our pedagogy emphasizes student-centered learning, a contrast to the passive learning of power point-centered lectures that most Chinese students are used to. But these are only superficial techniques emerging from a larger, philosophical desire to shift the student from a consumer of knowledge to a producer of it.

Like traditional utopias, ours is rather isolated, situated at the foot of a mountain in the outskirts of Wenzhou, a city that has incorporated western business models and is known for its economic and industrial development, but is slow to accommodate western culture. This can be limiting; unlike Tier 1 cities that host a large population of foreign experts, our students' access to English-speakers is restricted to those they find on campus. But the isolation of the campus is also one of the benefits. It is a blank slate where what is needed can be created. When students and faculty expressed the desire for coffee and a café-culture, rather than ask the canteen to provide coffee we invited students to submit business proposals for coffee shops. The winning team now operates Social Dog, a coffee shop on the fifth floor of our campus building and where they know just how I like my Americano. Similarly, we recognized the need for heightened verbal interaction and built the necessary elements into our introductory speaking courses. Groups of students interrupt classes (with an ok beforehand from the professor) to shout a line or two of poetry or a song. We term this 'song

bombing' (my personal preference is to be 'bombed' with lines of Whitman). This can get competitive, with classes keeping records of who 'owes' who. The process may seem purely ludic, but it incorporates the elements of gamification, a growing field in western education. Students are not only practicing pronunciation, they are developing identities as proactive members of a community.

Developing more sophisticated levels of interaction, WKU has worked to make debate central to our campus culture. Fostering the students' debating skills increases participation and builds analytical skills. Students who were once shy now argue aggressively and persuasively with one another – and sometimes their professors. While aggression may not always be desirable, it is an overcorrection that will eventually balance out. More importantly, this willingness to engage is a mark of the successful global personality that our students desire to embody.

This atmosphere of engagement has developed further community-building. While faculty and staff organize lectures and activities, students have developed a debate club, a salon society, a finance club, and a host of other clubs as well as a media club to document and celebrate these clubs and their accomplishments. They are no longer passive observers, but people who shout lines of Whitman or Szymborska to one another, debate me in the hallway, and who are capable designers of the space they inhabit now and the spaces they will inhabit in the future.

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References

- 1 Levitas, R. 2013. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society*. (Kindle ed.) Palgrave Macmillan.

The Global University model – NYU Shanghai

Joanna Waley-Cohen

NYU SHANGHAI is a research university that includes a comprehensive four-year liberal arts and sciences education. It rests on the premise that, in the 21st century, active and substantive internationalization of learning is crucially important if we are to fulfill our commitment as educators. The city of Shanghai and the new business district of Pudong invited NYU to create the first Sino-US joint venture in higher education, in partnership with East China Normal University (ECNU), with a view to offering a possible model for the transformation of higher education in China. So NYU agreed to plant its third degree-granting campus (after New York and Abu Dhabi) in this rising global city, with the mission of uniting the intellectual resources of NYU with the multi-dimensional richness of China. From whole cloth it created a university with a highly international faculty; a university where research is peer-driven, not directed from the top down; where the curriculum is dynamically geared to our changing world; and where students learn in deep and lasting ways to become effective in a multicultural setting.

An NYU Shanghai education operates on the premise that the world of higher education has changed in the past half century as the result of three major phenomena, namely: the revolution in information and communications technology; the 'new machine age' in which machines do many of the tasks formerly performed by humans; and globalization. A broad and deep liberal education of the old-fashioned kind remains important, but is no longer enough. Today young people need to develop in three incredibly important areas: 1) they need to become completely at home with the tools of the new information and communications technology including developing a basic understanding of algorithmic thinking; 2) their education needs to create the conditions in which creativity, humans' leading edge, can take place, a creativity that requires imagination and often is the outcome of connecting things that are seemingly quite disparate, hence the need for students to gain a broad range of experiences; and 3) they need to learn how to work effectively with people from different cultures in order to function optimally in our globalized world.

At NYU Shanghai half of the student body is Chinese and the other half comes from over sixty countries around the world. Non-native speakers of Chinese must learn Chinese to at least an intermediate level, and non-native speakers of English must learn to communicate effectively in spoken and written English, so that everyone graduates with bilingual capability. Students take a range of courses in social sciences, humanities, and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math), and have the opportunity to explore new interests, so that when the time comes they can choose majors that spark their passions. Every student spends at least one semester studying elsewhere in the world.

Beyond the classroom, in what may be the most educational experience of all, every Chinese student has a non-Chinese roommate and vice versa. Our first cohort of students will graduate in 2017; many have already found jobs in China and internationally, gained admittance to top quality graduate and professional schools such as Harvard and Cambridge, and won prestigious international fellowships such as the Schwarzman Scholarship. The NYU Shanghai project presents great opportunities and great challenges, which sometimes seem almost to mirror one another. One major opportunity is, of course, redesigning a liberal arts education for the 21st century, along the lines outlined above. Moreover an institution without entrenched traditions is more likely to be able to nimbly adjust as needs surface, yet starting a new university inevitably involves missteps; it also can be challenging to convince skeptics, particularly with the demand for a more obviously instrumentalist approach. We have the opportunity to learn by doing what true multicultural effectiveness means in education, in the workplace, and in life experiences more generally, and this is just as true for faculty and staff as it is for students. We have the opportunity to make a difference in China, in both individual and institutional terms. For those of us whose professional lives have been bound up in China one way or another, it can be deeply rewarding to participate in China's extraordinary transformation.

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Students working on their projects in the IMA (Interactive Media and Arts) lab. Courtesy: NYU Shanghai

'The man with the key is not here' – Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

David Goodman

I'M AN ACADEMIC WORKING on social and political change in China. With the dramatic changes after 1978, I increasingly came to think that there would be an advantage in having students learn about China, as well as learning Chinese in China. The approach is one of the lived China experience. At the same time, for myself and other academics, there are advantages to be had from living, working, and conducting research in China. The opportunity to experiment with these ideas came in 2013 when I was invited to help develop a Department of China Studies at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou.

XJTLU is a Joint Venture University (Xi'an Jiaotong University and University of Liverpool are the parents) located in Suzhou Industrial Park, to the east of the old city of Suzhou. Currently there are about 9,500 domestic Chinese students and 610 international students enrolled in 35 undergraduate degree programs and 27 postgraduate coursework programs. Teaching Chinese students in China is great fun. The students are enthusiastic and engaged, determined to succeed. Of course, their approach to China Studies is different to their international peers, not least because of schooling and socialisation. This difference sometimes makes for unnecessary gaps in the learning environment, in both directions, which the department has to provide through short courses and additional activities.

Working in China is of course not without its challenges. Many people outside China, even some of those who have been there in the past, assume that we have no academic freedom, that we are constrained in what we can teach or research, or even that we are told what to do and how to do it. On the whole, such problems are minimal. Of that kind the only real problem is that book suppliers will sometimes act on the side of caution if asked to provide a book to the Library or students. Fear of getting into trouble is their motivator, sometimes without any reasonable basis of thought. I was recently stopped from importing a Chinese language version of Mao Zedong's commentaries on literature and art. It was a book originally published openly in China, where it had been purchased. I am still trying to work out why importation was not permitted.

More serious are the problems of living and working in a society developing from a radically different social system, by importing some of the technologies and practices from elsewhere. As all our students know, mobile phone usage and Internet access require VPN installation. Luckily the market demand is well met by Chinese providers. Office administrative practice usually fails to keep up with the speed of change: functions in the workplace most usually stop when someone with a specific task is on leave or is sick; there is little client service mentality. In the 1970s when I first lived in China we used to talk about "the man with the key is not here" – the phenomenon of the lack of access to something when a request was made. These days it's "I'm sorry, my colleague whose responsibility to approve your emergency need for a replacement computer is away for two weeks."

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