

EDUCATIONAL
DISENGAGEMENT

UNDERMINING ACADEMIC QUALITY AT A
CHINESE UNIVERSITY

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To the SZU community,
deserving of the best university possible

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Preface

Educational Disengagement is the most comprehensive study written to date about education at a Chinese university, or for that matter any university. Through considerably rich detail, it portrays the life and times of Shenzhen University (SZU), an institution built in the first years of China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping. The study is the culmination of ten years of participant-observation research and relies on the analysis of hundreds of restricted (*neibu*) documents. Along with the author's companion study, *University in Turmoil: The Political Economy of Shenzhen University*, this volume provides insight into the university's pedagogy and knowledge structure and the foreign influences that have shaped the institution.

Each of the book's chapters is preceded by an ethnographic story, told from the informant's points of view. Stories include those of students annoyed at the quality of education they received and teachers who themselves have disengaged from the educational process. Most teachers at SZU over the school's first decade and a half have lost their enthusiasm for academic life. Many became involved in various types of money-making activities and paid only sufficient enough attention to their teaching and research to retain their faculty positions. Others left the university altogether; teacher turnover exceeded 30%, many departing for overseas study and emigration. Those who remained stopped undertaking scholarly research, which fell dramatically after it had peaked in 1989.

The book starts off with a chapter that puts SZU in perspective. Designed as an experimental institution in China's experimental Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, SZU was initially envisioned by the Shenzhen municipality as an economics college. Educational authorities in Guangdong Province, however, wanted a comprehensive university. Once developed, the university only superficially offered courses in the humanities and natural sciences. The university's focus was on business studies. The second part of this chapter examines SZU's policies on education, which differed substantially under the university's first three administrations. Some of this information presented here necessarily duplicates material in *University in Turmoil*, where politics and governance at SZU are discussed in more depth (the total overlap between the two books is under 3%).

Chapter Two discusses SZU's students and admissions process. Data from SZU's internal journals indicate that students' entrance examination scores plummeted from a high attained in 1989. At the same time the uni-

versity started to focus on short-cycle courses, paying less and less attention to undergraduates who had been enrolled on the basis of their performances on the uniform college entrance test. This chapter explores the differences between the enrollment plans and actual student intake. Government-approved enrollment plans were exceeded so that fee-paying students could be admitted. These self-financed students had lower examination scores than normal students.

The next chapter examines university staff. Initially, through nationwide recruitment, SZU hired the best and brightest among Chinese academics. Some 10,000 people applied for 200 positions. After initial staffing, however, hiring was done on the basis of personal relationships (*guanxi*), and the quality of staff declined. This chapter details policies designed to manage teachers, policies that changed with the school's different administrations.

Chapter Four provides a detailed examination of the university's knowledge structure, giving the reader a tour through each of the university's academic departments. These micro-level descriptions help to provide insight into the profound influence politics played on educational policy, one of the recurring themes in SZU history. They also show how various teaching departments grappled with defining knowledge. Many departments preferred to specialize their curricula rather than provide courses that could build solid foundations for students.

The next chapter discusses pedagogy and examines the drawbacks of the university's standard "talk and chalk" teaching method, especially in terms of its inability to generate creative and critical thinking among students. This discussion brings out the importance of individualism in education. The general absence of attention paid in the classroom to the needs of the individual student had a profoundly negative effect on SZU's educational quality. Students became exhausted as they sat through 30 hours of classes a week, for 18 weeks a semester. Pedagogy was further constrained by the emphasis placed on exams. Virtually no courses had writing requirements; only in the applied sciences of Architecture and Electronics were students prodded to be creative. In general, students undertook little preparation for class; most intellectual activity went into cramming for final exams.

Chapter Six examines foreign influences on SZU. It explores the role of "foreign teachers" as well as the influence of the American credit system. It looks at the attention given to overseas delegation travel and to several of the university's international exchanges. It concludes that these efforts did little to advance the quality of education at the university.

Chapter Seven discusses output. The organizational spine of this book is the input-throughput-output analogy, viz., student and teachers (as input), pedagogy and foreign influence (as throughput) and disengagement (as out-

put). Part of this chapter examines the university's graduates, most of whom work as employees of enterprises or financial institutions in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

The book's concluding chapter describes SZU's history as a "misadventure in education" and with the benefit of hindsight questions the wisdom of attempting to create a comprehensive university as opposed to a business college.

The study was written for multiple audiences. Sinologists will appreciate a solid scholarly investigation, using inductive techniques, that relies on years of participant-observation research and the digestion of over a million characters of *neibu* documents. Educationalists—not just those interested in Chinese higher education—will be attracted to a study that details the inner workings of a Chinese university. Ethnographers will be interested in the dozen or so 1,000-word ethnographic accounts. The general reader who is not an educator or China expert will appreciate a narrative work that tells a story and presents the Middle Kingdom on a very human basis.

The Chinese idiom *pao zhuan yin yu* captures the intention of this study: "toss out a brick in order to attract jade." I am offering my analysis knowing that it is merely a brick, far from perfect, far from precious. I toss it out in the hope that other researchers will follow suit and that their contributions will be of jade quality. If my work encourages in-depth discussion of the issues I raise, then its purpose will have been accomplished.

Many people supported this research and helped me keep afloat against a tide of opposition that came largely from the university officials whose policies I discuss. In my companion volume I have already thanked them, as well as my informants, who must remain anonymous, lest they draw recriminations from SZU's past and present leaders.

Despite all the help I received, any errors, of course, are mine alone. Comments on this volume are welcome. I can be reached by electronic mail at agelasto@hotmail.com.

Michael Agelasto
Hong Kong
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Abbreviations

AAO	Academic Affairs Office
A/V	Audio Visual Center
BBR	big bad record, severe negative disciplinary note
Beida	Beijing University (Peking University)
BR	bad record, negative disciplinary notation
CAD	computer-aided design
CECL	Communicative English for Chinese Learners
CHC	Confucian-heritage cultures
CCP/CPC	Chinese Communist Party, or Party
CS	credit system
CYL	Communist Youth League
ESL	English as a Second Language
FAO	Foreign Affairs Office
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service
FLD	Foreign Language Department
FTE	full-time equivalent
GPA	grade point average
IFT	International Finance and Trade Department
ISD	International Software Development Company
MIS	management information system
MOE	Ministry of Education
PE	Physical Education Department
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSB	Public Security Bureau
SAO	Student Affairs Office
SC	Student Council
SEdC	State Education Commission
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
Shenda	Shenzhen University
SO	(SZU) Security Office
SSDC	Student Self-Disciplinary Committee
SU	Student Union
SZU	Shenzhen University/ <i>Shenzhen daxue</i> , or Shenda
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
VUT	Victoria University of Technology (Melbourne)

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