

INTRODUCTION

University in Turmoil is a case study of Shenzhen University (SZU), a tertiary institution located in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in the southern reaches of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The general *credo* behind this book is the phrase "to seek truth from facts." This slogan is taken from Mao Zedong, who developed it during the civil war years. Later, the protocol became one of the themes in the theory of Deng Xiaoping.¹ In essence, seeking truth from facts is inductive research. Whereas the deductive researcher starts with theories and then looks for scientific evidence to support them, the inductive researcher first collects data and then lets the data produce one or more relevant theories. The data are referred to as "speaking to the researcher." My research might have been undertaken exclusively within either a documentary or an ethnographic framework. The latter would have relied primarily on information provided by informants over my decade of participant-observation. Instead, I chose to collect as much data as I could from both documents and informants; these somewhat parallel information flows complemented each other. All in all, the data spoke to me in very loud voices.

Sources

Many sources were used in the writing of this book. My six-year employment at SZU allowed for extensive ethnographic field research and the collecting of survey data.² Conversations were held with hundreds of informants; notes were stored in computer files that contain several hundred thousand words. In the latter years of the study, advanced technology aided the research. Informants, both in China and overseas, were approached by electronic mail (e-mail). The World Wide Web (WWW) was searched with available "search engines," and each reference to SZU was checked out, resulting in several hundred sources that provided additional information. The university, itself, publishes a wealth of documents. Its yearbooks contain valuable data and opinion; they present the university administration's official views as well as the views of office heads who submit reports to the leadership. Not to be confused with yearbooks in North American schools and universities—the type that contain pictures of seniors in cap and gown—the SZU yearbook more resembles an annual report, whose target audience is the municipal government, the major provider of university funding. In order

to manage all these data, I had the yearbooks translated into English and then input electronically so they could be searched by name or term. The electronic file contained over 200,000 words. The university also publishes a quarterly in-house journal, *Shenda Tongxun*, which at times has allowed for faculty and staff to express their opinions frankly. This journal is not-for-sale and at times has been considered *neibu*, or internal, just as the yearbooks.³ Some documents in China which are labeled *neibu* are considered top secret, highly sensitive or confidential. Disclosing their contents is a breach of national security; violations can result in imprisonment. Regarding *Shenda Tongxun*, however, various university officials have over the years assured me that the *neibu* classification did not preclude me from citing the journal's contents, a practice employed by Chinese academics. (I even once published an article in the journal).⁴ Another information source was the mimeographed *News in Brief* that was issued two or three times a week during the academic year. Starting in 1996, the *News in Brief* even appeared for a few months on the WWW homepage of the university (<http://www.szu.edu.cn>). The website itself provides useful information for a researcher.

Generalizability

As a case study, this research does not purport to be representative of the "average" Chinese university, if one were even to exist. Shenzhen University is unique, but many of its features and systems resemble those of other universities, both in China and abroad. Unfortunately, there have been few academic case studies of Chinese universities and certainly none of the depth of the present volume.⁵ Mainland academics and policy analysts have on occasion raised concerns that SZU is too singular to provide useful lessons for Chinese educators. I disagree. When I presented a paper on democracy in education at an international conference, for example, one staff member of the State Education Commission (China's ministerial level authority on matters of education) dismissed my research as "just a case study," complaining that SZU could not represent the over 1,000 higher educational institutions in China.⁶ My somewhat flippant reply to him was that we need 1,000 case studies. In a more serious vein, I added that only with abundant research can the relevancy and generalizability of individual case studies be fairly assessed.

Translation

Almost all documentary sources used for this study were written in the Chinese language. For this book, their titles and any quoted text have been translated into English. Converting Chinese grammar, vocabulary, and literary style into good English, however, involves much judgment. My translators (especially Simon Young to whom I am greatly indebted) and I, through paraphrasial translation, have attempted to avoid the rather unpleasant English that often results from literal translation of Chinese. We have tried to be faithful to the original texts.

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1. Zhang, *Ideology and Economic Reform under Deng Xiaoping*, 1996, p. 24, p. 213. See Deng Xiaoping, *Collected Works*, v. 2, 1993, pp. 379-82.
 2. The academic aspects of SZU are explored in my companion study: *Educational Disengagement: Undermining Academic Quality at a Chinese University* (1998, manuscript under review).
 3. The *Shenda Tongxun* was labeled *neibu* for its first 12 issues. Issues #13-27 (May 1991-Winter 1994) were issued under municipal license as “Shenzhen News Public Serial #042,” not a *neibu* classification. The *neibu* status was reinstated for subsequent issues, which were licensed as “Shenzhen News Public *Neibu* Serial #003.” At the same time the non-*neibu* #042 classification was transferred to a new bi-weekly campus newspaper, *Shenzhen daxue bao* (*Shenzhen University Gazette*), which was sponsored by the CCP Propaganda Office.
 4. Agelasto, “What is important for improving library quality,” 1994.
 5. Several good case studies appear in Agelasto & Adamson, *Higher Education in Post-Mao China*, 1998. See especially chapters by Maria Jaschok, Greg Kulander, and Bob Adamson.
 6. Agelasto, “Democracy, the individual, and civil society in Chinese higher education,” 1996.