

8. Conclusion: misadventure in education

The history of Shenzhen University shows an increasing degree of disengagement from education on the part of teachers and students. This phenomenon is illustrated in the personal stories presented throughout this volume. To the outside observer, student Xie (story 9) and student Yang (story 12) might appear to be extreme cases of disengagement. In reality, their liberation from concerns for study that have characterized traditional students' involvement in education was commonplace at SZU. Even good students, as illustrated by the wife member of the bankers Deng (story 3), had little positive regard for SZU's standard pedagogy. Teachers also disengaged. Teacher Niu (story 4) and teacher Li (story 7) both went overseas for doctoral study; after completing their degrees, they remained abroad to pursue academic careers. Generally, teachers hired during the university's first five years were considered qualified. They cared for their students, often inviting them in groups into their homes for informal gatherings. This type of teacher started to disengage from teaching duties in the late 1980s. Many felt forced to moonlight in order to earn enough money to meet the downpayments of flats that were offered for sale. One-third of SZU's teaching staff, not including retirees, left the university's employ during the school's first dozen years. They were replaced by teachers who were perceived by the university community as less qualified because they were often hired on the basis of relationships rather than credentials. The earlier hired teachers had faced much competition (some 10,000 applicants for the first 200 positions). Many of these teachers grew disappointed when it became apparent in the early 1990s that SZU would not be teaching graduate students. Of course, not all teachers hired after SZU's first employment wave were of low quality. Teacher Zhang (story 8) was a rising star when he arrived at SZU. He, too, disengaged, choosing to work for a SZU-run enterprise rather than pursue a career of scholarly research. Teacher Han (story 5) was by domestic standards a competent scholar. Yet, he lacked a mentor who could instruct him how to teach; in response to his students' dissatisfaction with his pedagogy—the traditional “talk and chalk” variety—he turned away from students and devoted his full energies to his own interests. In general, teachers at SZU became dissatisfied with the quality of student intake. In terms of entrance examination scores, over 70% of the *benke* class admitted in 1989

scored over the threshold required of the province's key universities. By 1996 this figure had dropped to 33%. Teachers were forever commenting on the poor quality of their students. Not many SZU teaching staff I knew actually enjoyed teaching. For most of them teaching was merely a job from which they gained little satisfaction. This frustration was compounded by the fact that many of them were forced to teach training classes with low-quality students whose entry was not regulated by exam.

Students disengaged from study for various reasons. Many, especially those in the natural sciences, business and foreign language fields, found the traditional pedagogy stifling. Students from the late 1980s realized that they did not need good grades to get a good job. They perceived relationships to be more important than grades. In addition, they questioned whether what they learned would be relevant to the workplace. Some students were tempted by the opportunities the SEZ provided. During the Luo administration some students channeled their energies away from the first classroom into part-time jobs and extra-curricular activities. The doors to these second and third classrooms were closed by the Wei-Wu administration. From 1990 some students became engaged in economic activities such as home-tutoring, but it is not accurate to suggest that most students were preoccupied with business. Required to be in the classroom for 30 hours a week, students had only limited free time. Some studied on their own, but overall students curtailed reading. Per capita library circulation dropped from a high of 80 books/year in 1991 to a low of 40 books/year in 1993.¹

Student and teacher disengagement was complemented by the changing nature of the university, as it moved away from being primarily about education to becoming a place where politics was in charge. This complex phenomenon is only briefly mentioned in this volume; it is the subject of a separate monograph.² Teacher disengagement was in part a response to perceived mal-administration by post-Tiananmen leaders who were seen as self-serving and corrupt. The affairs of Shenzhen University were tightly controlled by a small group of men and women, who included the top-level leaders (president, Party secretary), their immediate deputies and department heads. Ordinary teachers had little say in the running of their academic departments; ordinary staff had little control over decisions made by their superiors. Once the flats-for-sale scheme had been arranged, many teachers and staff started behaving as if they were no longer stake-holders. They left decisions entirely to the leadership. SZU's reputation began to plummet in the 1990s, and this decline in public approval further encouraged teachers to disengage. On more than one occasion I was told: "I'm only teaching here to

get my housing.” By the 1990s teachers were required to do little more than show up for classroom teaching and attend staff meetings several times a month. University leaders lacked the respect of rank-and-file staff. All this created a vicious circle. Teachers’ disengagement gave more control to leaders. Leaders became more corrupt and self-serving. New staff were hired by department heads on the basis of relationships; factions formed throughout the university.

The data presented in this volume indicate a deteriorating educational quality as measured by inputs, throughputs and outputs. All in all, the academic nature of Shenzhen University was beset by a host of factors that conflated into a virtual conspiracy to undermine the traditional purpose of education: the enhancing of knowledge through teaching, learning and research. With politics in charge at SZU, educational issues took the back burner. So-called reforms such as the credit system and foreign exchange programs did little to improve quality and may, in fact, have taken time, energy and money away from more pressing needs.

The never-ending search for educational identity

One thing which has made SZU a fascinating case for study is the abrupt directional changes it experienced. With each leadership change, the university tried to take on a new identity. The first leaders attempted to create a semi-Western institution. Even the toilets in the teaching block were the sit-down type. The post-Tiananmen regime believed that many aspects of SZU did not meet their standards. They stenciled red encircled numbers on each campus residence building, a common practice in China. Previously, these buildings had only names (e.g., types of flowers/trees for student dorms, birds for staff housing). Another move to establish conformity entailed the erecting of a hundred ankle-high concrete posts that displayed environmental messages (Within several years most of these had been smashed by vehicles). One of Wei-Wu’s most successful changes was replacing the feces-stained sit-down toilets with the hole-in-the-floor type, which proved to be considerably more hygienic. For the first part of the 1990s SZU experienced a severe identity crisis. By the third set of leaders—Cai Delin and associates—the university had lost its uniqueness and the SZU community seemed quite unsure of the future. Cai kept the traditional toilets and Wei-Wu’s political apparatus, and he attempted to resurrect the credit system and other elements of Luo’s educational structure. None of these much improved the quality of education. Cai was more concerned with reputation; he wanted

SZU to play in the big leagues, but the university lacked competent ball-players. He attempted to improve staff quality by hiring so-called dragons (*long*), but many of these, in the eyes of the community, more resembled their homonymic opposites, *chong* (worms). Ordinary teachers, a large number of whom after 1990 had been hired on the basis of relationships rather than merit, were not top notch. They did not produce quality research; many did no research at all. The quality of students, as measured by test scores, had steadily fallen over the 1990s decade. Library circulation showed that students were reading less, at least until 1995 when students were told to take out more library books to impress the SEdC evaluators. SZU's facilities were certainly adequate—among the best in China—but its educational component did not inspire either students or teachers.

The most apparent feature of SZU over its history has been its wealth. The university was rich relative to other Chinese institutions; cash flowed with such ease that accounting was not deemed especially relevant. For those who had good relationships with the leaders, the money well never seemed to run dry. For example, the computer center was under more-or-less direct control of a vice-president. Rather than maintaining computers in the student computer center, the university simply replaced them every three years. In between purchases, maintenance was minimal. It was deemed too bothersome; when Computer Center staff were approached about malfunctioning machines, their standard reply was: "We are expecting new ones; why work on these?" In this regard, having adequate resources may well have contributed to many of SZU's problems. A poorer institution might have been more careful with its finances, more serious about stemming corruption, and more deliberate in weighing costs against benefits.

In their public statements, the leadership of SZU along with Shenzhen municipal officials all concur that SZU provides quality education. This view may well be shared by education officials in Beijing. No less a person than Chen Zhili, a top official at the SEdC, is quoted as saying that SZU's experience in improving its educational environment has been very successful. Chen, who visited the campus in 1997, said that the problems which the university once faced were common to other universities in China. Other state officials have heaped similar praise on SZU.³ Unfortunately, the data and analysis in the present volume do not lend much support to such a positive appraisal.

SZU is making a great effort to receive official recognition as one of China's leading universities. Especially it wants membership into the Project 211 elite. This *fin-de-siècle* national project aims to create 100 world-class

mega-universities in China for the Twenty-first Century. Those selected will be set aside for special funding. The drive for 211 membership was begun by Cai Delin in 1995 and has been assumed by his successor, Jiang Zhong, who took up her duties as SZU Party secretary in mid-1996. Jiang equates Project 211 membership with recognition of what she often calls SZU's exemplary quality. The Party secretary, who is a career Party manager, not a scholar or intellectual, runs SZU without interference from the university's nominal president. She reports that she has been pressured by municipal upper level leaders to "squeeze" SZU into the 211 Project.⁴ Jiang says that the local government should add ¥300 (US \$33) million to ensure entry into the elite project. Putting aside the issue of whether SZU deserves recognition as providing quality education, let's first look at a bottom-line question: what type of university should SZU become? What is the nature of the university?

Despite comments from many Chinese educationalists who support general education through comprehensive universities, institutions in China for the most part will remain specialized. SZU is a specialized institution. Finance and economics are what the Shenzhen SEZ is about. When Shenzhen requires engineers or specialized *rencai* in physics, math, English and Chinese literature, it can easily find them among the graduates of China's specialized or comprehensive universities. Given the zone's high salaries, the SEZ can recruit the best specialists in China. Thinking along these lines in a 1991 study, staff of the Shenzhen Education Bureau suggested that SZU abandon its attempt to become a comprehensive university in favor of providing a more technical and specialized education. A focus on business-related subjects and applied sciences is, perhaps, an idea whose time for reconsideration has again come.

The knowledge structure of SZU, as described in Chapter Four, defines it not as comprehensive university. It lacks the necessary diversity in professional staff, course offerings, and majors. It does not have the scores of specialties offered by China's comprehensive institutions. In the judgment of the campus community, SZU does business subjects and applied engineering relatively well. Its prestigious majors are in the fields of business (trade, finance, management, and to a lesser extent advertising, public relations and law) and applied engineering (architecture, computers, and to a lesser extent civil and mechanical engineering). Three departments—Physics, Foreign Language, and Mathematics—have their own majors but their more important function is as a service department, teaching students in other majors. If SZU wanted to establish an identity as a business/applied engineering insti-

tute, it could join the approximate 77 finance and economics tertiary institutions in China. Over time majors such as English language, Chinese Language and Literature, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics could be phased out and their teachers transferred to the SZU Teachers College. In 1994 SZU brought the Shenzhen Teachers College under its umbrella and moved this institution onto the main campus. It will get its own building in 1999. This college, which trains teachers for high schools in subjects such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, Chinese and English language, provides the ideal work-unit to transfer SZU teachers made redundant in any shift from a pseudo-comprehensive university to a business college. Staff from some of the engineering majors could be relocated to the existing research institutes. Such staff relocation need not create undo hardship. An external review process could weed out inept teachers and cadres who were not initially hired on the basis of merit. The result of all these actions would turn SZU into the type of specialized institution which Shenzhen city officials had first envisioned in 1983, before staff from the Higher Education Bureau of Guangdong insisted that city leaders should build a comprehensive university.

SZU leaders spend much time on foreign travel to observe how overseas universities function. More relevant models are located much closer to home. SZU most resembles a school like the Guangdong Commercial College, also founded in 1983. With only ten departments with a total of 14 *benke* and *zhuanke* majors, it offers a curriculum similar to the business fields of SZU. Located in Guangzhou, the college accepts about 1,100 students each year, three-quarters of whom are in the *benke* program. Its total student population is about 5,000, expected to rise to 6,000 by the year 2000 and 8,000 by the year 2010. Other Guangdong universities are taking innovative approaches that might be instructive for SZU. Guangzhou University, founded in 1983, operates an international Accounting Major in cooperation with the University of New South Wales, Australia. Using Australian lecturers, all courses are taught in English on the Guangzhou campus. Unlike SZU's twinning programs which have largely served as vehicles for emigration and delegation travel, the Guangzhou program takes place all in China. Its graduates receive a certificate that is internationally recognized, giving them a leg up in getting jobs with joint ventures or foreign-funded companies. The cost of the program, ¥ 35,000 (US \$4,000), is only a small fraction of what SZU's twinning courses with Edmonds and VUT cost. Another approach has been taken by two other institutions in Guangzhou. In 1995 the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages merged with the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Trade to form the Guangdong University of Foreign

Studies. The larger and more efficiently run institution has 1,400 staff and 6,600 students, two-thirds of whom are enrolled in *benke* and *zhuanke* programs. Although SZU lacks the prospects for a merger, the Foreign Studies University case serves as but one of many examples of innovative strategies used by Chinese tertiary institutions, especially those in neighboring Guangzhou, to cope with changing demands by society.

SZU's identity problem is one of several matters that deserved immediate attention when Jiang Zhong arrived in 1996 as the university's new principal. Even more pressing was the need to establish a corruption-free administration and work environment. With the retirement of Cai Delin, Jiang faced a more-or-less blank page. She revamped the university's financial system by placing tighter control over side-businesses and SZU-run enterprises.⁵ She undertook a more serious effort against corruption than had her immediate predecessors.⁶ But in the area of education, however, she left past policies unchanged. By training, Jiang is a manager/politician, not an educator. It is unclear whether she fully understands the issues that I have raised in this volume. The 1997 *Yearbook* which covers the first full year of her leadership, includes not a single educational initiative. The only substantial effort, the further development of the college system, was structural in nature. It is doubtful this is even a step forward.

From university documents, the rationale for the college system remains unclear. SZU is attempting to replicate the model used in other universities: central administration, faculty or college strata, and teaching departments. In a small university like SZU, adding a layer of administration which further separates the teaching departments from the university's administration appears unnecessary. Initially, it was believed departmental mergers would increase efficiency. One specific example was given me by several different staff in 1996. I was told that colleges would combine departmental libraries, which have always been small, and thus add to efficiency. A college would need one librarian, rather than several as is presently the case. Yet, this efficiency has not been realized. Insight comes from the 1997-2000 budget of the College of the Arts. Arts is an amalgam of the Chinese Department and the Foreign Language Department and includes two new departments whose staff came from FLD and Chinese: Public Relations (PR) and Public English Teaching. Arts wants to set up three separate libraries and to accomplish this task is requesting special funding. ¥200,000 (US \$22,000) is sought for the acquisition of foreign language books, ¥1.8 million (US \$200,000) for original foreign publications, ¥500,000 (US \$56,000) for PR books, and ¥300,000 (US \$33,000) for acquiring books, among other things, for a pro-

posed Department of Tourism. This adds up to ¥2.8 million (US \$311,000). It is questionable whether these books will improve teachers' research as most research in the social sciences in China does not use citations or references. Will students need to use these books? Probably not, because students are not required to write original essays, and the university library has proved adequate for their needs. It is doubtful students' graduation theses would incorporate materials from this collection unless teachers are willing to supervise them more closely and guide them through research materials. Building department libraries is a far step from the mid-1980s when Luo Zhengqi specifically refused to provide university funds for departments to stock their own collections. Departments should not have large libraries, he said, because for the sake of efficiency, books should be centralized. The college system, indeed, seems to be a step toward inefficiency, not efficiency. Informants report that some colleges, such as Arts, are plagued with the same sort of mal-administration that has characterized departments, such as Foreign Language. In some cases, inept administrators have moved up from department to college. This advance in administration manifests the Peter Principle—that staff rise to their highest levels of incompetence.⁷ The college system is a structural solution, but for what problem? Certainly none of the ones raised in this volume.

A famous scholar in the field of Chinese education once commented that my research on SZU proves that scholarship cannot be bought. In other words, spending a lot of money, by itself, will not necessarily improve education. This point is apparently not understood by Shenzhen city officials. Somewhere in the neighborhood of US \$1.5 billion has been spent on SZU in its fifteen-year history. The argument made by SZU leaders in 1988 is that the university could be improved, but only with more money. The problems facing SZU are not financial in nature. This book, I hope, has identified some of the university's more troublesome problems. Solving them requires more involvement than merely writing a check. It will not be easy.

-
1. This is discussed in Agelasto, *University in Turmoil*, 1998, p. 145.
 2. See Agelasto, *University in Turmoil*, 1998, especially Chapters Six and Seven.
 3. Favorable comments by Chen and other Beijing officials are referred to in a report by SZU's Party secretary. See Jiang Zhong, "Let's inspire enthusiasm, proceed to the higher stage," *1997 Yearbook*, pp. 37-41.
 4. Jiang Zhong, "Let's hold hands, walk abreast, sacrificing for a common mission, into SZU's next brilliant era," *1997 Yearbook*, pp. 42-7.
 5. A Financial Settlement Center was set up on 18 April 1997 to oversee all uni-

-
- versity-run enterprises. See “Financial Settlement Center regulations,” 1997 *Yearbook*, pp. 279-80.
6. See “Disciplinary Inspection Commission work report,” 1997 *Yearbook*, pp. 97-8.
 7. Peter & Hull, *The Peter Principle*, 1969.