

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Ferrara, M. S. (2015). *Palace of Ashes: China and the Decline of American Higher Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 206. Price: 29.95 USD (hardcover).**

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This book is a case study of higher education (HE) in the US, or rather two studies, as developments in the US are compared with developments in the HE sector in China. While the focus is mainly on the last 30 years the study goes back to the very beginnings of higher learning both in the West and in China, which helps one's understanding of the different roots and traditions of what much later became known as "higher education." Although he is no higher education researcher, the author is well qualified to undertake such a study as he is familiar with both countries, having taught and lived for several years in China (as well as South Korea), is familiar with the Chinese language, and has traveled widely in China as the director of the Chinese Exchange Program at Drake University. A professor of English, he currently holds a faculty position at the State University of New York.

Ferrara's main argument is that, while China is massively investing in education and in universities in particular, universities in the US are losing their position as world-wide leaders in higher education due to major cuts of public budgets for higher education and, partly as a consequence, the adoption of a neoliberal agenda—i.e., of corporate values and organization. The list of Ferrara's complaints about the decline of US higher education is long and includes: the erosion of academic freedom through the loss of faculty governance; the disappearance of tenured professors and their replacement, on the one hand, by poorly paid and disposable lecturers, and, on the other, a growing class of overpaid administrators; and rising tuition, which makes higher education unaffordable for many students or puts them into debt for years after graduation. Similarly, the author bemoans the disappearance or significant reduction of the role of the liberal arts, and generally the "vocalization" of higher education programs at the expense of the humanities and social studies.

This list is neither new nor unfamiliar, since many books have been published over the last ten years or so in the US on the "crisis of the university," most of them written by faculty members like Ferrara or other university insiders (e.g., Derek Bok, former Harvard president, who published *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher*

*Education*, in 2003). What is new and original, however, is his juxtaposition of the two largest higher education systems in the world, belonging to the two biggest economic powers.

Describing the Chinese system, Ferrara does not idealize it but points out several major flaws that are keeping it from ascending to real academic excellence and becoming a world model. The most important of these is the lack of academic freedom of faculty members because of the tight control by the Communist Party and the state authorities. Likewise, the massive clampdown at Tiananmen Square against student protests in the spring of 1989 is mentioned as an example of a tightly controlled higher education system, which is at odds with the Western ideals of free and critical thinking and freedom of (academic) speech.

The author's comparison of the two systems gives China just one, but an important advantage over the US: the recognition that education and academic research are the most important elements of modernization and competition in a global market and that, therefore, they must be recognized and financed accordingly.

Although the book's subtitle "China and the Decline of American Higher Education" seems to suggest that China's massive investment and build-up of higher education infrastructure and capacity has a direct or indirect effect on developments in US higher education, this is not substantiated in the book. However, Ferrara asserts that there is global competition for resources, students, scientists and specialized, university trained personnel and that China (as well as other Asian countries) is making strategic investments in universities that the US is failing to make and will therefore succeed in winning the worldwide competition. Ironically, the author remarks, this is happening as the American research university is the leading world model (as evidenced by the leading positions of US universities in the international league tables).

In spite of being stimulating to read and including partly well documented discussion, this book has several shortcomings. One of them is the lack of any serious quantitative analysis of the two university systems that would back up the author's contention that China invests, overall, more in higher education than the US.

There are a number of other flaws that diminish the overall value of this study. One of these is that Ferrara idealizes both the US and the pre-World-War-I German higher education systems. Higher education in the US after 1945 was not an uncontested bastion of academic freedom and liberal arts, as he suggests, but was also an instrument whereby the US was trying to gain or keep an advantage over the Soviet Union and Communist ideology during the cold war.

Likewise in Germany, the *Technische Hochschulen* (technical colleges), established in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to conduct industry-related research and to train specialists were, in that respect, not unlike the land grant colleges in the US; they were not places of independent research, liberal thought and academic freedom, but rather an instrument to help key industries to develop strategic competition with other industrialized European powers, especially the UK.

Similarly, the author makes statements about the Bologna process that are partly true but partly not. An example of the latter is the claim that neoliberalism is pervasive and has led to higher tuition in the Bologna member countries. While this is true for some countries, notably the UK, he overlooks that other countries, for example Germany and Austria, which had introduced tuition fees at the beginning of the century, abolished them

a few years thereafter as a consequence of student protests and political pressure in favor of a public and universally accessible system of higher education.

There are also some inconsistencies in Ferrara's argumentation, for example when he decries "cultural imperialism" but wishes that the US research university remain the "world university model." Likewise he is critical of the fact that China and other Asian countries "equate internationalization with Westernization – particularly Americanization – which has encouraged them to adopt Western pedagogies and a new consumer orientation" (p. 145) the lack of which in China he had criticized earlier.

In sum, the book is well worth reading for comparative education researchers and higher education policy analysts, as it provides some very interesting insights into recent developments in both China and the US. Canadian readers might be particularly interested, as some developments similar to those in the US can be observed in Canadian universities even if there is little feeling of an actual major crisis of Canadian universities, unlike in the US where some 90 percent of adults and senior university administrators believe higher education is in crisis. Certainly, developments in both China and the US are of interest as both will affect Canada in one way or another. 🍁