

Opportunities for Higher Education in the Age of Globalization

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Good morning and good evening! I am honored to have the opportunity to address you this morning at the opening here in Beijing of the Third Higher Education Planning in Asia Forum, and to be speaking simultaneously to the Society of College and University Planners by video link to Hollywood.

It is always a pleasure to be here on the Peking University campus. Beida has played a very special role in my life, and I welcome every opportunity to return.

Today and tomorrow you will be discussing a range of important questions that confront those who are responsible for planning at institutions of higher education – from risk management to budgeting to analytics to integrated planning. Each of these topics is crucial for any university that wants to be effective as it deploys scarce resources in pursuit of its fundamental mission: **to prepare students for lives of satisfaction and contribution, to extend our understanding of the human condition, and to serve a larger community.**

In my remarks this morning, I will be focusing on that fundamental mission itself. I will first talk about why it is appropriate to describe the time we are living in as an “Age of Globalization.” I will then talk about how, in this Age of Globalization, the skills that best enable one to live a life of satisfaction and contribution have expanded from what they were when I was young. I will talk about how that expansion has altered what

it means to fulfill our mission. And finally I will talk about how institutions that deliberately incorporate into their planning processes an updated understanding of our mission's implications will discover that they have new opportunities to distinguish themselves in the twenty-first century.

So let me begin with the proposition that ours is an Age of Globalization. When I speak those words, I expect most of you will find the proposition easy to accept. Everyone here is aware of the explosion in international trade that has taken place over the past four decades. Before 1970, exports and imports accounted for less than 30% of the world's collective gross domestic product. Since 2010, exports and imports have accounted for more than 60% of global GDP.

Trade is undoubtedly a key element of why it makes sense to refer to this as an Age of Globalization. The exchange of goods and services across national boundaries increases global interdependence. Trade enables everyone to enjoy higher standards of living by specializing their production according to principles of comparative advantage. And it is addictive. Once people begin to enjoy higher standards of living, they don't want to see them reduced. They begin to see people in other countries as necessary partners in trade. This phenomenon does not turn foreigners into friends, but it makes it harder to see them as enemies.

When I describe ours as an age of globalization, however, I am thinking about more than just the exchange of goods and services. In addition to trade networks, I am thinking about cultural and political networks. I am thinking about the increased flow of ideas across national borders, the more frequent conversations, the greater extent of cooperation, the deeper sense of identification, the enhanced sense of fellow-feeling that people hold with others whom they might once have perceived only as distant strangers.

About ten years ago, researchers at the university known as ETH in Zurich, Switzerland, developed a new measure of globalization. It is called the KOF Index, and it measures globalization along economic, social, and political dimensions. Naturally it measures flows of trade and of capital along with restrictions on those flows. But more significantly,

it also measures personal contacts across borders, information flows across borders, and something it calls cultural proximity. Moreover, it also measures countries' participation in international politics and governance through embassies, treaties, international organizations, and the like.

The KOF index has been calculated for the period from 1970 to the present. You can view it online, and I commend it to you for your exploration. According to the index, economic globalization has proceeded most quickly during the period since 1970. Over this same period, the index suggests that social and political globalization have also increased significantly. Admittedly, they have increased more slowly than economic globalization. But the increases described are substantial.

According to the KOF Index, the world we inhabit is very different from the world we were born into. Forty years ago, the things we touched and the people we interacted with generally came from close by. Our sense of society was national, or perhaps regional. Our many networks were, to a very significant extent, bounded. Today we feel much more globally connected.

At the same time, it is critically important not to overstate what has happened. The fact that we are so much more connected with one another does not mean that national borders have become irrelevant. Being in China is different from being in South Korea. Being in South Korea is different from being in North Korea, which is different from being in India, which is different from being in Japan.

These differences partially reflect different choices that different national communities have made about their political systems and about their economic systems. Such choices have a tremendous impact on the tone of everyday life.

But the differences also reflect matters of language and culture. Being Chinese is different from being Korean, which is different from being Indian, which is different from being Japanese. And all are very different from being American.

Please let me be clear. On almost all the really big, really important things, when it comes down to the deep value questions, I do not believe that cultural differences matter at all. People are people. They want to avoid physical and emotional pain; they want to enjoy pleasure; they want to love and to be loved. In every culture, people are not supposed to hurt each other. And people are supposed to be honest and follow the rules.

But different cultural traditions matter enormously when it comes to the question of how people are expected to show respect for those really big value questions while they go about living their daily lives.

A very interesting psychological literature has documented how children who start out the same can develop different cognitive patterns by growing up in different cultures. They can actually perceive things differently, because when they were growing up, they were taught different answers to the question, “What matters? What is important in this situation?”

Interest in this field of research was accelerated by the publication ten years ago of the book, The Geography of Thought by Richard Nisbett. The book is filled with provocative examples, drawn from rigorous psychological experiments. And these examples give powerful support to the following proposition: that people from Asian cultures tend, in their observations of the world, to focus more on characteristics of objects that relate them strongly to their context; while people from Western cultures tend to focus more on those characteristics that do not change if the object moves to a different context.

Let me give you another example of a culture-based difference, one that I stumbled on accidentally in the course of my work in China. The example has to do with how Americans and Chinese people deal with units of time.

If you were to ask an American what day tomorrow is, most of them would say, “It’s Wednesday.” If you were to ask a Chinese, most of them would say, “It’s the 26th.” For Americans, the most important time interval is the week. For Chinese, it is the month.

So if one of my Chinese colleagues says to one of my American colleagues, “Why don’t we get together for coffee on the 28th?” the American will probably respond, “Do you mean Friday?” And if one of my American colleagues were to say to one of my Chinese colleagues, “Why don’t we get together for coffee on Thursday?” the Chinese will probably respond, “Do you mean the 27th?”

I love this example because neither culture attaches any moral significance to which period of time you use most. Once people understand the difference, it is easy to overcome it. Americans can learn to frame things according to the day of the month without any emotional anxiety, and Chinese can learn to frame things according to the day of the week in the same way.

But other cultural differences are more difficult: they have value judgments attached to them. To a Chinese person it might be disrespectful to express a disagreement directly, especially to someone who is in a position of authority. To an American it might be disrespectful to fail to express a disagreement directly, especially if the situation is one where the authority figure really wants to know whether others disagree.

To be sure, we must be very careful not to exaggerate cultural differences. Educated people today react skeptically to the suggestion that culture – the way people are raised from birth until adulthood – can shape the way they perceive and think about their environments. Terms like “national character” can be easily abused.

Speaking for myself, I find Nisbett’s evidence for how culture can influence perception, cognition, and values to be very persuasive. It resonates with my own life experiences. What is perhaps even more important, however, is a question that Nisbett does not address – the question of mutability. How much can these cultural differences be modified by new experiences: especially new experiences between the ages of 18 and 25 years old?

For this morning, I ask you to join me in two assumptions: First, that the intellectual outlooks of 18-year-olds have been shaped in significantly different ways by differences among the cultures in which they were raised. And, second, that those differences can be meaningfully altered

by their experiences in college. I ask you to think with me about what those assumptions might imply for our work.

One implication is that cultural differences offer us an enormous potential benefit, waiting to be tapped. In a world where technology makes it easier for people to work in diverse teams, across great distances, there is a tremendous opportunity – for businesses certainly but for the non-business aspects of society as well. Culturally diverse teams have the possibility of seeing issues in more complex, subtle, and accurate ways because the members of those teams would bring different perspectives to every problem, and the group could integrate those different perspectives in ever more powerful ways.

But this tremendous benefit comes inseparably joined to a tremendous problem. I have assumed that this culturally diverse group of individuals can come together and transcend their differences to produce a richer, more subtle group analysis. But that assumption will be manifestly false if members of a diverse team are unable to work together because of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

In the years ahead, I believe that one of the most valuable skills that any person can have is the ability to help culturally diverse groups to work well together, to recognize cross-cultural misunderstandings and help the team to get past it. That set of skills is what I call. “the skills of the bridge person.”

An effective bridge person must have three qualities. She or he must be able to see the world from her or his own culture’s perspective and also from that of a different culture. He or she must be able to engage sympathetically with all perspectives, without rushing to say that one perspective is right and the other perspective is wrong. And finally she or he must be able to explain how the cross-cultural misunderstanding occurred in a way that allows everyone to work towards a solution without feeling that they have lost face.

I submit to you that the skills of the effective bridge person are higher-order skills than, say, the ability to run a least-squares regression. They are important for more than their ability to yield discrete outcomes.

The skills of the effective bridge person are catalytic. They are technologies that drive new kinds of processes. They multiply the force that individuals bring to bear on any given problem.

And that, ultimately, brings me back to the mission of the university.

I would submit that we who are responsible for planning at our universities should be thinking today about what would happen if we were to include the skills of the effective bridge person on the list of skills that our mission asks us to develop in our students. Not just math and science and the humanities and critical thinking and innovation. But also the ability to be effective working in a group where one is not a member of the dominant culture.

Any university that decides its mission requires attention to this skill quickly discovers implications for every dimension of its operations. The decision naturally affects admissions, because a diverse student body makes it much easier to nurture the skill. But that is just the beginning. The students, faculty, and staff who inhabit one’s campus will not become effective bridge people by accident, simply because the community

happens to be diverse. Merely enrolling a class that includes Asians and Europeans, Africans and Americans, is not sufficient to prepare them for the kinds of contributions the twenty-first century will need from them.

To be successful in this domain, an institution of higher education needs to plan more comprehensively. It needs to consider what this kind of change in mission implies for the curriculum, for the pedagogic techniques that are used to teach, for the approach to extracurricular student life, for who is hired to join the faculty and administrative staff, for how the faculty and administrative staff are trained.

We all need to think carefully about how *institutional* culture takes account of *national* cultures. We must develop an *institutional* culture that actively and explicitly talks about *national* cultural differences. Every member of the community must be expected to become more thoughtful about when such differences in national culture are irrelevant and when they matter greatly.

And here is where I think the greatest opportunities exist. Today, right now, there is no simple, easy, agreed-upon way for an institution of higher education to do the things that I have been describing. The research on cultural differences is still developing. Even more importantly, our understanding about how to turn that research into practice is truly primitive.

We need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what cultural differences exist, and how they matter. Even more, we need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what techniques individuals can use as members of diverse groups to interpret and transcend difference and mutual misunderstanding. Finally, we need to develop a pedagogy, a mix of didactic instruction and practice-based experience that will effectively nurture these understandings in people – a way to help them become the most effective bridge people possible. We need to determine how we can best help them become people who are able both to diagnose culture-based misunderstanding and to treat it, people who are able both to recognize the opportunities for deeper multi-perspective-based understanding and to help a group to realize those opportunities.

I have had the privilege of being associated with two institutions that have approached these issues seriously: the Peking University School of Transnational Law, and NYU Shanghai. The first works with a post-graduate population of 22-26-year-olds, and the second with an undergraduate population of 18-22-year-olds. They have taken different approaches to these questions, and I believe they have each been successful in their own way.

To be sure, both efforts are still in their early stages of development. Much difficult work remains to be done to build on their efforts, to develop version 2.0, and version 3.0.

And that is where I see the exciting opportunities. I firmly believe that any institution of higher education which directs itself towards this horizon can be enormously attractive to the next generation of students. That generation will be drawn ever more powerfully to institutions of higher education that are known as the fertile soil in which multi-cultural bridge people are planted, are nourished, and blossom.

The students, faculty, and staff at such institutions will exude understanding of how to make multi-cultural teams effective. As intellectual communities, these institutions can be bridges around the world, establishing the pathways of understanding that will enable the peoples of our planet to work together in close cooperation, using their separate and complementary strengths together to solve the most difficult challenges that face human beings in the twenty-first century.