

The Necessity of East-West Educational and Cultural Exchange in an Era of Risk and Challenge¹

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the necessity for educational and cultural exchanges between China and the West - and especially with the United States. As the title indicates, these exchanges are both risky and challenging, and I will discuss both the risks and the challenges. In Part One I briefly indicate the primary risks facing the international community: war, abject poverty, and planetary collapse. In Part Two I argue that the spirit of cooptation - competition within a larger spirit of cooperation - is needed to manage these risks. In Part Three I consider the challenges involved in preparing leaders and citizens to embrace the spirit of cooptation and the essential role of higher education in disseminating that spirit throughout our societies. In Part Four I focus on China's recent higher education reform. The major challenge is that the traditions of humane learning in both the West and China have been practically abandoned. Working together, and finding inspiration in their joint efforts, educational leaders and scholars from China and the West must now restore and re-vitalize these traditions.

Keywords: East-West education, liberal arts, cultural exchange, risks, cooperation

¹ This invited paper was based on a talk prepared for the 6th China Education Innovation Expo, and it has been revised and expanded for publication.

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Part One: The Risk

I start by talking about the pressing risk we face—the risk of armed conflict between China and the West. This risk is sometimes called *Thucydides trap*. This term derives from a statement by the historian Thucydides that the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta had been *inevitable*, due to Spartan fears of the growth of Athenian power. The term has been extended to refer to the tendency toward war when any emerging power threatens to displace an existing great power. It is used today specifically to describe the potential of war between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (Allison, 2017).

Now, we know that China’s economy is going to continue to grow relative to the USA. China already challenges the USA on many fronts - technological, economic, military, and cultural - and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future (Elegant, 2021; The World Bank, 2021). So how will the US and China resolve this tension? Will they fall into Thucydides trap?

There have been 16 previous instances of rising powers threatening to take the place of existing superpowers. Twelve led to a shooting war and 2 to Cold War. Only 2 managed to sustain a

negotiated peace (Allison, 2017).

We all know about Cold War. We have seen the image of Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the table at the UN, and thundering “We will bury you!” when addressing Western ambassadors in Moscow in 1956 - leading the ambassadors to storm out of the meeting. After banging his shoe on the table, he said, “that was so much fun.” Khrushchev’s conduct is a dramatic example of Cold War belligerence.

Now, China has vowed to take a very different approach. Chairman Xi Jinping (2014) stated that,

The argument that strong countries are bound to seek hegemony does not apply to China. This is not in the DNA of this country, given our long historical and cultural background. China fully understands that we need a peaceful and stable internal and external environment to develop ourselves. We all need to work together to avoid the Thucydides trap - Our aim is to foster a new model of major country relations. (Valencia, 2014)

And we had better find a new model, because the world’s problems are simply too great for the two great powers to be locked in belligerent conflict. Only by