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Pursuing my Chinese and American Dreams: Studying Abroad and Returning Home

Chien Wen Yu

Studying abroad was the admirable pursuit and dream of Chinese students and young people in the 1980s. Returning to China years later, reminiscing in their original homeland, and contributing to their country's development is their hope, as well.

Back in 1981, I decided to fulfill these ambitions myself. In December 1977, I took the college entrance exam, which was held in major cities throughout in China for the first time since the Cultural Revolution. The exam was open to anyone regardless of age and education background, and in March 1978, I was admitted to Beijing Foreign Studies University in the "Class of '77," one of the first groups of Chinese college students to pass through the exam system. In November 1981, after graduation from Beijing Foreign Studies University, I came to the United States with the first group of Chinese college graduates studying abroad to pursue my American dream.

Nearly 40 years later, in December 2017, I returned to China as a member of the 2017 Winter Overseas Talents Delegation to Zhongguancun. The host organizations welcomed our return to China to participate in a marketing and recruiting event in Zhongguancun Science Park—in their words, to experience the great mass fervor of entrepreneurship/innovation and Chinese dreams.

The 40 years I have lived in China and the United States span China's Opening and Economic Reform. China has rapidly developed from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The country I grew up in has now become the second-largest economic

power in the world after the U.S. Back in 1978, scientists and engineers from research institutes and universities in Zhongguancun followed the call of the China Science Congress initiated by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, and started their privately owned businesses. This phenomenon, during which Zhongguancun Electronic Products Street was being formed in the 1980s, was called "Going to Sea." In 2009, Zhongguancun Science Park was officially approved by the China State Council and strategically positioned as China's First National Innovation Demonstration Zone. After almost 20 years, Zhongguancun National Innovation Demonstration Zone has expanded in size to 88 square kilometers and 16 parks in Greater Beijing. It is currently ranked as the second largest entrepreneurship and innovation hub in the world after Silicon Valley. These economic and technology changes in China are astonishing and the material and structural contrasts between the United States and China are becoming smaller and smaller.

A Red China Student Pursuing an American Dream

In 1981, the concept of studying abroad while being funded by a foreign university scholarship was incomprehensible to Chinese students. I,

too, had not heard of it or believed it until I applied for a scholarship from Davidson College in North Carolina. I still remember the day in summer 1981 when my college classmate and roommate Wang Yang ran up to me with an admission telegram in his hand and yelled out loud: "You got admitted to Davidson College. Heck, you even got offered a full scholarship." Just getting back to campus from a summer English tour-guide assignment, I could not believe my eyes and ears. I grabbed the telegram to read it again and again, at least 20 times. I felt I was the happiest person in the world, and did not sleep a wink that night. Davidson College is among the top liberal arts colleges in the United States. In the past three years, it has become better known in the United States as well as in China because of NBA star Stephen Curry, who studied and started his basketball career there.

Despite the good news of a full scholarship, I was confronted with a serious problem of purchasing my airplane ticket to the United States. My father's monthly salary in 1981 was 89 RMB (\$52 at 1981 exchange rate of \$1.00=1.70 RMB) and my mother's salary was 49 RMB (\$28). This income was average for Chinese families, and sufficient to support a family. However, there was little savings left after food and utilities. The airplane ticket cost around 9,900 RMB (\$5,823), which was an enormous figure for any family in China. My parents were trying to borrow money from family and friends, but nobody had that kind of money, let alone the ability to lend it to other people. Even my close relatives refused to pitch in. My parents were upset with our relatives and even more desperate for ticket money. Out of despair came a smart idea from my father, an editor by profession. With a book contract in hand, my father asked his publisher for a cash advance on his book royalties and used it to pay for the ticket. It seemed like a miracle that he could persuade the publisher to advance the money.

That was my life-changing ticket to the United States.

Before leaving for the United States, I rode my bicycle around Beijing doing errands in preparation for my trip. I passed through Zhongguancun of Haidian District where my university was located. Everything was slow there. There wasn't much to see except a cluster of university campuses and a lot of farmland. Beijing was nothing compared to cities like Washington D.C. or New York, which I had seen in movies and read about in books. My hopes for study at Davidson were high and my dreams for life in the United States were big.

In November 1981, I took my first international flight to the United States and tasted airplane food, consisting of cold sandwiches with cold drinks. I was used to our Asian lifestyle of warm cuisines and beverages served hot. The airplane landed in San Francisco after 12 long and sleepless hours in the air. Getting off the plane, I followed the crowd of American and foreign passengers to the customs terminal. As soon as we walked out the exit door, all the American and foreign passengers

seemed to disappear into thin air. Unable to figure out the direction signs, I was left alone and lost in this foreign land. No airline representative or flight attendant was present to assist or direct me for the transit flight to North Carolina. Gazing around for help, I saw a Chinese-looking airport employee standing behind a kiosk and approached her as if she were my savior and country folk: "Comrade, could you tell me where to go for the flight to Charlotte, North Carolina?" She stared at me with no sincerity in the least and said impersonally: "We don't say 'Comrade' here, we say 'Miss' or 'Mister.' If you go to the domestic terminal, you will find your boarding gate." I was disappointed with her curt and vague answer. But in the evening I got on the flight to North Carolina and arrived late at the Charlotte airport only to find that my luggage had gone missing during transit and my pick-up person was nowhere to be seen in the luggage area.

I was told I was the first Chinese student at Davidson College and one of the first five Chinese exchange students around the city of Charlotte. According to my college roommate, Tony Dick, the Dean sent a letter to the



Author Chien Wen Yu at Davidson College, 1981 (Photo credit: Anderson Scott, The Davidsonian).

whole campus for volunteers to room with me, a new student coming from "Red China." Tony volunteered to be my roommate and wanted to help me because of his grandfather's influence and stories as a medical missionary to Zhejiang, China in 1930s and 1940s. To this day, we have been good friends for 37 years. Still, my American life had a difficult beginning and I wrote an article for the *Davidsonian* student newspaper about my experiences. The black-and-white photo above is the same one taken for the article.

Despite a tough beginning and some twists and turns later, my life in America has been going in the right direction step by step. In three and a half years, I finished Davidson College and went on to graduate management studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. My first professional career started in the North Carolina Department of Commerce as international trade specialist for Asia and Latin America under Governor James Martin, a former Davidson College professor. Following the state and public service, my second career was in private industry in the capacity of international sales manager for the Ashland Chemical Company and export manager for the Bobcat Company. Teaching as a management professor and coordinator of the Asian Studies Program at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts is my third,

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present, and final stage of my career. It is also my most enjoyable and favorite one. I feel fortunate to have realized part of my American dream, thanks to the kind help and generous support of my colleagues, friends, and families, especially Davidson College classmates Tony Dick and Sarah Patterson. The Pattersons became my American host family.

Since those early days, I have traveled to China many times for business and pleasure, however, the 2017 Winter Overseas Talents Delegation to Zhongguancun was special, rewarding, and challenging for four reasons. First, it was my first time to return to Zhongguancun Science Park on an official visit as an expatriate Chinese and to see with my own eyes the great changes that had taken place after many years of studying and working abroad. Secondly, I returned home to see my aging mom, and sick dad in a nursing home, who worked hard for me all their lives. Thirdly, being both a management professor and entrepreneur is challenging but possible. I would like to have an entrepreneurial business opportunity as part of my American and Chinese dreams. Finally, entrepreneurship and innovation are major teaching topics and research interests for business professors. I would like to study the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem of Zhongguancun and find out an answer to my own question: will Zhonggauncun surpass Silicon Valley as the number one entrepreneurship

and innovation hub in the world in the next 5–10 years?

Zhongguancun: A Fertile Land of Entrepreneurship and Innovation

In December 2017, 140 successful professionals and entrepreneurs from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Japan and other countries gathered in the International Conference Center of Zhongguancun Z-Park. We shared overseas entrepreneurial experiences and discussed potential innovative projects and cooperation with partners. According to the report and statistics compiled by Zhongguancun Development Group, since January 2001, Zhongguancun has organized similar activities and delegations, attracting overseas professionals to China to establish startup companies in the Science Park. A number of high-tech companies have successfully found their homes in Zhongguancun and include 65 “unicorn” firms such as Lenovo, Baidu, Tencent, Xiaomi, 163.com, Meituan-Dianping, Didi-Kuaidi, Sina.net, and Netease. (A unicorn firm is any tech startup company that reaches a \$1 billion USD market value through private or public investment). These companies represent half of the Chinese unicorn firms, three of which exceed \$10 billion USD in estimated value. In terms of their number and size, Chinese unicorn firms are second only to those in Silicon Valley.

The advantages of the Zhongguancun entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem are characterized by the number of top universities, research institutes and incubators located there. There are 41 top universities (like Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Renmin University), 206 national academies and institutes (like China Academy of Science and China Academy of Engineering), 122 national-level labs and research institutes, and 60 university and returned-overseas-student science parks. There are also 97 startup incubators and accelerators that claim partnerships with firms such as Microsoft, ARM, Plug & Play, and Trendline.

Our 2017 Winter Overseas Talents Delegation was divided into three groups based on profession: an electronic information group, a bio-tech and pharmaceutical group, and a comprehensive group. The electronic information group visited IBM, China Academy of Science, TusStar Incubator, and Zhongguancun IC Park. The bio-tech and pharmaceutical group toured Zhongguancun Life Science Park, Zhonggauncun Life Science Research Institute, National Protein Science Center, and Zhongguancun Medical Equipment Park. The comprehensive group visited the Science and Technology Park of Renmin University of China, Zhongguancun Lingchuang Space, Zhongguancun Lingchuang Financial, and Zhongguancun Fangshan Park.

The size of the \$10.8 USD-billion science park investment is impressive. Twelve out of Zhongguancun’s 16 “Parks” have been built in a two-million-square meter, high-end working space. There are currently more than 37,000 foreign citizens and Chinese with overseas experience working in Zhongguancun, including 1,188 overseas Chinese scientists recruited by the government’s “Thousand Elite” project. The Science Park has numerous cooperation projects with 20 cities



2017 Winter Overseas Talents Delegation visiting Zhongguancun Science Park (Author’s collection).



and regions in China. Internationally, the Science Park has established Zhongguancun-Germany Sci-Tec Innovation Center and Zhongguancun Silicon Valley Innovation Center. Soon, Zhongguancun Boston Innovation Hub will open too.

One of the last events of the trip was the Introduction and Marketing Event of Products and Projects of Overseas Enterprises. Fifty overseas student startup companies presented their products in a road show: nine of these were members of the 2017 Winter Overseas Talents Delegation. A panel of entrepreneurs and venture capitalists shared comments on the projects and selected the winners. Eighty-five angel and venture-capital firms participated in the event, looking for investment opportunities. Zhongguancun represents 40% of the Chinese angel and early equity investments and 75% of newly listed firms funded by venture capital/private equity in China. Zhongguancun Development Group (ZDG), a semi-government organization, has invested more than \$4.2 billion USD in 1,553 projects. The output of the invested firms is more than \$28.5 billion USD. ZDG is involved in 97 funds with a total fund size of \$10 billion USD.

Four Great Inventions of Ancient China and Modern China

Papermaking, gunpowder, printing, and the compass are four world-changing inventions by ancient Chinese.

In recent years, a number of Chinese technological inventions have been making their moves in the world. Among them, four stand out with a reputation of China's "great new inventions," making the daily lives of citizens more convenient: dock-less shared bicycles, high-speed rail, Alipay, and e-commerce. During the trip, I witnessed the convenience of the four great new inventions and personally experienced riding on the Ofo shared bikes in Beijing. Reminding me of my bike rides of 40 years ago, I fell in love with these colorful bikes that are accessible anywhere and almost free of charge.

The success of the new inventions stems from their unique business models and the Chinese entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem, as well as the Triple Helix Model of University-Industry-Government interaction. In accordance with the Triple Helix Model, Zhongguancun is not a pure Statist Triple Helix, but an improved Statist Triple Helix in which government dominates other spheres with top-down bureaucratic co-ordination. It has a large-project mentality while industry encourages national champions. Universities have become the teaching and research providers under the government. Silicon Valley is a Laissez-Faire Triple Helix. Universities are the basic research and human resource providers and for industry, firms are linked by markets. The government is limited to addressing market failures. It is an individualistic mentality with

Chien Wen Yu riding an Ofo shared bike in Beijing (Author's collection).

heroic entrepreneurs and a bottom-up approach. The private capitalist system stimulates bottom-up initiatives from universities and university spin-offs.

Which Triple Helix Model is more effective? It depends on the cultural and business environment of each country. With the "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" campaign launched by the Chinese government, Zhongguancun Science Park is catching up quickly and likely to be number one in size, entrepreneurship, and innovation in the world. Silicon Valley has been number one in basic science research and innovative products with a long history and vision; however, it lacks the robust government support and massive financial/human resource inputs of the Chinese.

Having lived in China and the U.S., I cannot predict with certainty what will happen in the next 5-10 years. But I am eager to see how it develops and to keep pursuing both my Chinese and American dreams.



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