

China's Princeton



JUST READ THE news that the Westlake University in Hangzhou was recently approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

I had known about the plan for this university before, when its predecessor, Westlake Institute For Advanced Study, was founded in 2016.

As the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology has had an Institute For Advanced Study for over a decade, I was naturally very interested in the founding of WIAS.

What caught my attention was that both WIAS and WU are non-governmental organizations and aimed at the highest international academic level.

WU's focus is on basic and frontier research in science and engineering with the emphasis on interdisciplinary approach and education of innovative first-class talents. Its positioning is "high starting point, small but excellent, research-centric." It will start with only research postgraduate students, but will admit undergraduates in the future, with the total number of students not to exceed 5,000. That's smaller than most US Ivy League universities!

The stated reason for being run as an NGO is to have more autonomy and freedom than government universities. The most prestigious universities in the United States are mostly private (such as Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford); the vision of WU is to be a pilot for a new kind of universities in China that will match the quality of its US counterparts. It's a very ambitious goal but not without challenges.

Being an NGO requires sustained support, and WU has already lined up many donors and corporate sponsors, including Tencent's Pony Ma Huateng. But in mainland China, NGOs still require government support and WU has that from the highest level.

The original proposal was submitted directly to President Xi Jinping, who endorsed it. The MoE approved its founding and also the permission to admit PhD students immediately, which is a significant exception to a long-standing MoE policy.



Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



The local government gave WU 100 square kilometers to build its campus and a 400 million yuan (HK\$498 million) research fund.

MoE approval came in six months, much faster than the 18 months and four years it took ShanghaiTech University and Southern University of Science and Technology, the two most notable recent new universities in the mainland. Even the local existing top institutions, Zhejiang University and Fudan University, have indicated their support by establishing joint-PhD programs with WU.

The background of WU's founding president, Shi Yigong, and his vision to building WU into a Chinese Ivy League-caliber university, has led to some referring to WU as "China's Princeton."

Shi is a legend in the Chinese scientific world.

About a decade ago, at the peak of his academic career, he gave up his Princeton-tenured position to

take up the deanship of life sciences at his alma mater, Tsinghua University.

He then encountered a "culture shock" of adapting to the Chinese academic and research funding system. He co-wrote an editorial to *Science* about the need for reform in the Chinese scientific research system, which probably did not endear him to the establishment. He famously did not get elected to the Chinese Academy of Sciences on his first attempt.

By taking up the WU presidency, he gave up his vice presidency at Tsinghua. He wrote an article after his 50th birthday titled *The place where dreams begin*, in which he stated: "Life is short, why not take a chance and try your best at a new venture?"

That's a very can-do spirit!

To me, WU represents an inflection point in the development of Chinese universities. The top universities in China have been improving dramatically but there are doubts as to whether they can achieve true global excellence while remaining under government control. WU is a bold attempt by a group of experienced academics with global experience. It has as good a chance as any that I can imagine.

WU is an important initiative for not just the Yangtze River Delta region, but for China as a whole.

All of Hong Kong's top universities are publicly funded and governed. Hong Kong should and can start a private university, leveraging on the Greater Bay Area initiative, and our city's advantages. That would be a bold vision deserving of support!