Introduction

The why and how of this book

When I taught at Shenzhen University (SZU) from 1988-1994, I explained to my students in research writing class that writers try to define their intended audience before putting words to paper. I tried to stress that my own students' audience should not be me, the teacher, but rather they, themselves, the writers. This was a bit idealistic, they objected, since I was the one handing out grades. Nevertheless, with the writer as primary audience, I argued, he or she should be true to self. This translates *inter alia* as honest analysis, no plagiarism, and the best job that can be done given all the constraints that the writer faces.

Of course, a monograph like *Educational Disengagement* is not a term paper. It should enjoy a wider audience of scholars and academics and perhaps even readers from the general public. But concerns for integrity and honesty still apply. Honesty, however, must be understood in the context of the ramifications it may produce. No bystanders, so-to-speak, should suffer because the research becomes public. Thus, in order to lessen the negative impact on individual informants in participant-observation research, sources are usually disguised, personal names withheld, or mis-identified. In many cases, the identity of the subject itself—in this case Shenzhen University—would be disguised. This book adheres to the first practice but rejects the second.

In terms of individual sources, several hundred students, staff and teachers related their personal stories to me over the six-years I was part of the SZU community. Their stories *are* the university. They provide human faces to the institution. To recount the history of Shenzhen University without revealing the richness of their lives would do an injustice both to them and to the school itself. Certain aspects of my research are extremely sensitive. These include discussions of university politics, the Communist Party, corruption, as well as certain academic and managerial practices. Experience has taught me that my analysis is not appreciated by some people associated with the university, and I fear that anyone who can be identified as helping me could be ill-treated, indeed punished, as the result of the publication of my research. Thus, to hold these informants harmless, neither their real names nor any identifying traits are presented. That is not to say, however, that individuals in positions of leadership—*lingdao* in Chinese—are not named or referred to in a factual manner that identifies them. Their words—in their statements to me or from published sources—are quoted, and their names are not changed.

For the most part, the personal stories appear as chapter preludes in *italics* font. These ethnographic accounts are written as either first or third person narratives; sometimes they are integrated within chapters. When ethnographic sources are referred to in the text, they are *always* mis-identified or referred to in such a vague way that no reader will be able to pinpoint their identity. The information in the narratives is taken from my notes or recollections, but the individuals themselves are fictitious. In other words, the people telling their stories are composites, not real individuals. The reason for taking what might be considered a generous "writer's license" is to protect individual informants. This scholarly work should not be used as fodder in settling old scores or continuing personal vendettas.

While educational anthropologists generally agree that individuals should not be identified in ethnographic studies, even if they request that their names be used, the issue of whether to use SZU's actual name proves more problematic. Academics have debated whether institutions which are the subjects of academic studies should be identified by name. In some published academic articles (in both China and elsewhere) I have on occasion disguised SZU. A piece on foreign teachers that appeared in a Mainland China journal did not include the university's name.[1] In an article on corruption published in a European law review, I identified SZU only as "Southern Tertiary."[2] As I started to write this book, however, I realized it would be pointless to disguise the university's name without also disguising the name of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The Shenzhen SEZ greatly influences many aspects of the university and its culture. To refer to SZU as something like "Leechee University" in the "Leechee Special Economic Zone" is easily accomplished: a global search-and-replace in the word-processor.[3] Yet, this provides but a nominal ruse, for academics in the field of Chinese education studies, both in China and abroad, are well aware that my decade of research has focused on one individual institution, SZU. My misgivings about identifying SZU by name stem from the possibility that the research may be misused, as noted above. Also, although the SZU story is far too complex to enable one simply to cast some participants as gods while others are designated as devils, this is often how the story has been told. Facts, figures and even analysis may be used out-of-context and interpreted in such a way as to damage the university's reputation. My writing could diminish the value of degrees held by alumni or the status of positions held by staff and teachers. That is not my intent. My purpose in telling the SZU story is academic, practical, and personal. Academic in that scholars in China studies and comparative education, through a detailed case study, may better understand the systems that make up a Chinese university. Practical in that educators in China may learn lessons from SZU which will help them improve educa-

tional quality and management in their own institutions. Personal in that the students and staff of SZU deserve to have their stories told.

Sources

Many sources were used in the writing of this book. The university, itself, publishes a wealth of documents. Its yearbooks contain valuable data and opinion; they present the university administration's official views as well as the views of office heads who submit reports to the leadership. Not to be confused with yearbooks in North American schools and universities—the type that contain pictures of seniors in cap and gown—the SZU yearbook more resembles an annual report, whose target audience is the municipal government, the major provider of university funding. In order to manage all these data, the yearbooks were translated into English and input electronically so they could be searched by name or term. The electronic file contained over 200,000 words.

The university also publishes a quarterly in-house journal, *Shenda Tongxun*, which at times has allowed for faculty and staff to express their opinions frankly. This journal is not-for-sale and at times has been considered *neibu*, or internal, just as the yearbooks.[4] Some documents in China which are labeled *neibu* are considered top secret, highly sensitive or confidential. Disclosing their contents is a breach of national security; violations can result in imprisonment. Regarding *Shenda Tongxun*, however, various university officials have over the years assured me that the *neibu* classification did not preclude me from citing the journal's contents, a practice employed by Chinese academics. (I once even published an article in *Shenda Tongxun*).[5] Another information source was the mimeographed *News in Brief* that was issued two or three times a week during the academic year. Starting in 1996, the *News in Brief* even appeared for a few months on the WWW homepage of the university (*http://www.szu.edu.cn*). The website itself provides useful information for a researcher.

1993 graduates survey

In addition to interviews, data on students came from a survey that was undertaken as part of my dissertation research. Each year after returning to school from spring festival [Chinese new year] break, SZU seniors complete their graduation theses and immediately hunt for jobs. Most students are working full time by the date of graduation, which is the third week in June. Over the two-day period before the graduation ceremony, seniors are processed out of school. They are given a form that must be certified (by red stamp [chop]) by more than a dozen departments. For example, the library

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verifies that students have no outstanding books or fines; the housing office certifies as acceptable the condition of dormitory furniture. The academic departments document that the student has completed all requirements for graduation; other school authorities verify that identification cards and rail-way discount passes have been returned.

After making several requests to the university president and vice-presidents, I was given permission to survey graduating seniors in order to obtain data on how they found jobs, my dissertation topic. I suggested that seniors complete a questionnaire as part of the exit procedure described above. This request was not disapproved, although one vice-president objected to my asking sociological and political questions. Most of these, which were not germane to my dissertation's primary research question, were removed, but I especially wanted to leave in a question concerning parents' Communist Party (CCP) affiliation. Fortunately, when the disapproving vice-president was hospitalized with a digestion ailment, I secured the other vice-president's approval. I had the questionnaire privately printed, as none of the officials I was dealing with wanted his office to pay the ¥900 cost (about U.S. $100), and I was reluctant to pursue this issue as it offered more opportunities for others to examine (and delay) the survey.

The Student Affairs Office director, whom I had met only once in an unsuccessful attempt to get his office to set up an alumni data base, agreed to have his staff distribute the instruments to each academic department with instructions that students complete and return them during the exit procedure. His favorable decision was crucial and possibly influenced by three factors. I presented him with a signed note (*kai tiaozi*) from my supportive vice-president requesting the lower official's assistance. Second, distributing the survey incurred little time or effort of the part of his staff. Third, his approval was a sort of compensation for his refusing my earlier requests that his office get more involved in alumni affairs.

During the two days of exit procedure, I sat at the Academic Affairs Office (AAO) table and chopped students' forms after they submitted a completed questionnaire. (I had bought a chop that read *pi zhun*, meaning approved.) I refused to chop forms from those who had not completed the survey; I accepted, however, all completed forms, even those in which respondents had "straight lined" (e.g., "55555" or "44444") attitude responses. (Straight line or other patterned responses (e.g., "12341234") were later recoded as missing data.)

The instrument was originally composed in English and translated into Chinese, the teaching medium of all departments at SZU, except for Foreign Language. It was "back-translated" into English to ensure that the original meanings survived translation. The questionnaire was then pre-tested on

several graduating seniors and on six alumni working in Shenzhen. It became apparent that few students had ever been exposed to a survey instrument. Consequently, a revision included a more fully worded clause promising confidentiality, as well as additional instructions on how to respond to a Likert-type five point-scale for attitude questions, and specific instructions to "mark only one choice" for most questions.

Over ninety percent of graduating seniors completed valid questionnaires, making the "survey" more of a census. Although seniors have several weeks from after graduation to submit a chopped exit form, most seem eager to conclude their obligations with the university as immediately as possible. The completed responses included 549 in the *benke* (baccalaureate track) and 239 in the *zhuanke* (specialized, short-cycle) program. No bias appears to characterize the five or so percent who failed to complete their forms before graduation day. Some seniors had returned to their hometowns; others were too busy in their jobs to return to campus for commencement ceremonies.

The instrument examined 129 variables, of which 35 were attitude questions.[6] The responses had to be coded, then readied for the computer. Six students did these tasks. SZU sophomores and juniors were required to undertake two weeks of "social investigation/practice" (*shehui shijian*) during summer vacation. They had to give the university a form chopped and certified by an employer (*danwei* or work-unit). Many *danwei* in Shenzhen do not want to have SZU students hanging around their offices, and many students cannot get their forms chopped. Thus, this requirement has become subject to broad interpretation. My department head permitted me to use sophomore students for coding if I could find a Shenzhen employer who would chop their forms (thus relieving the department of such an obligation). This task was handled by several of my former students who themselves had access to chops or were able to get their fathers to chop the forms. In total, my six sophomore students took about 300 hours to code the data and ready it for "keypunching." I input the data myself, and thus was able to correct some coding errors.

The following year, in June 1994, I composed a greatly shortened questionnaire for graduating seniors. I again had the questionnaires printed privately. I did not seek university approval, partly because an administrative reshuffle had relocated all the staff who had been so helpful the year before. Thus, out of fear that the newly appointed vice-president in charge of student affairs and others would not approve, I simply deposited the questionnaires with the worker in the Student Affairs Office who had been involved in the previous effort and hoped for the best. During the exit procedure, I occasionally visited but eventually turned the entire process over to the staff from Academic Affairs. Again, I feared that my open involvement might prompt a

veto among newly appointed officials. After the exit procedure, during the time when all university officials were attending the commencement ceremony, I went to the office where the questionnaires were deposited and claimed them, with no protest offered by the lower ranked cadres who, excluded from the commencement ceremonies, were on break in the office.

Translation

Almost all documentary sources used for this book were written in the Chinese language. For this book, their titles and any quoted text have been translated into English. Converting Chinese grammar, vocabulary, and literary style into good English, however, involves much judgment. My translators (especially Simon Young to whom I am greatly indebted) and I, through paraphrasial translation, have attempted to avoid the rather unpleasant English that often results from literal translation of Chinese. We have tried to be faithful to the original texts. In an attempt to improve readability, the italicized ethnographic accounts have been reshaped to conform to a standard style.

1. Agelasto, "Maximizing the effectiveness of western English faculty at a Chinese university," 1993.
2. Agelasto, "Cellularism, *guanxiwang*, and corruption," 1996.
3. Shenzhen has an annual leechee festival, with a parade that includes a float presenting the leechee festival beauty queen. The fruit is a major agricultural export, selling locally for about US $3 per pound.
4. The *Shenda Tongxun* was labeled *neibu* for its first 12 issues. Issues #13-27 (May 1991-Winter 1994) were issued under municipal license as "Shenzhen news public serial #042," not a *neibu* classification. The *neibu* status was reinstated for subsequent issues, which were licensed as "Shenzhen news public *neibu* serial #003." At the same time the non-*neibu* #042 classification was transferred to a new bi-weekly campus newspaper, *Shenzhen daxue bao* (*Shenzhen University Gazette*), which was sponsored by the CCP Propaganda Office.
5. Agelasto, "What is important for improving library quality," 1994.
6. The English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire are appendices to my dissertation, *Social Relationships and Job Procurement by Graduates,* 1998.